

The New York Times

E.U. Will Let Countries Decide Whether to Use Daylight Saving

By Milan Schreuer

Aug. 31, 2018

BRUSSELS — European countries that have observed daylight saving time for generations may soon put an end to it, European Union officials signaled on Friday, saying that they would drop a rule that member countries must abide by the “spring forward, fall back” ritual.

This summer, the union invited residents to fill out an online form giving their opinions on daylight saving, or summer time. The millions who responded were overwhelmingly in favor of abolishing it, Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, told ZDF, a German public broadcaster, on Friday morning.

“I will recommend to the commission that, if you ask the citizens, then you have to do what the citizens say,” he said, standing in front of Château du Luc in the Belgian town of Genval, where the commission is on an annual retreat. “The people want it; we will do it.”

Mr. Juncker, however, is known for going off script. At the Brussels headquarters of the commission, which is the organization’s executive arm, officials made clear that his pronouncement was premature, and that changing European Union regulations was easier said than done.

The change was likely to take place, they said, but several steps needed to be taken first.

“That is his way of expressing the fact that there will no longer be an obligation for the changing of the clocks twice a year,” the commission’s deputy chief spokesman, Alexander Winterstein. The union, he said, will “let member states decide.”

In the coming weeks, the commission will make a proposal to end obligatory daylight saving, officials said. The European Parliament and the member states would then either agree, reject or change the proposal — a process that is expected to last at least another year.



Since 1996, all 28 European Union member states have set their clocks one hour forward on the last Sunday in March, and one hour backward on the last Sunday in October. Most European countries had long used some form of daylight saving; the rule was primarily about harmonizing the dates when clocks were adjusted, officials said.

In recent years, however, opposition to regular clock changes has grown. Several member states, including Finland, Poland and the Baltic States, have expressed a desire to abolish them. Earlier this year, the European Parliament voted 384 to 152 in favor of a resolution calling for a re-evaluation of the system.

The European Union's online "public consultations" might or might not reflect public opinion — people choose whether to reply, and most do not — but the question on daylight savings received 4.6 million responses, the most ever, the commission said, though the number still represents less than 1 percent of the European population.

Officials said that 84 percent of respondents wanted to end daylight saving, and three-quarters considered it a "negative" experience, expressing concerns about health impacts, increased traffic accidents and a lack of proven energy savings.

Members of the European Parliament "received letters from citizens saying 'we don't like it, we have medical problems,'" said Peter Liese, a German member of the Parliament who has fought for five years to abolish daylight saving time.

"Some studies also indicate a link between health impacts and clock change, but even if you disagree, when people feel discomfort, you have to act," he said.

Over two-thirds of those who responded to the consultation were German.

Some countries imposed daylight saving during World War I and World War II to save fuel. It became more widespread in response to the oil crisis of the 1970s, again on the basis that it would save energy.

"But that hasn't been proven right," Mr. Liese said. "You save some electric lighting in the evening, but you spend more gas for heating in the morning, and lighting has become more energy-efficient than heating."

The European Union has three different time zones: Ireland, Britain and Portugal are on Coordinated Universal Time; western and central European countries from Spain to Poland are one hour earlier, on Central European Time; and Finland, the Baltic countries, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece run two hours earlier, on Eastern European Time.

Leaving it up to countries to decide for themselves whether to change clocks could create a confusing and potentially costly patchwork of times across the Continent.

In Spain, the prospect of a daylight savings change complicates a longstanding debate that is not about changing clocks, but about whether the country is using the wrong time zone. Most of Spain lies as far west as Britain and parts of Ireland, yet it uses the same time zone as most of Western and Central Europe — an arrangement that dates to World War II, when the regime of Francisco Franco wanted to align Spain's clocks with those of its ally Nazi Germany.

As a result, the sun rises and sets later in Spain than elsewhere in Europe, contributing to its well-earned reputation for late eating, socializing, television-watching and sleeping. A group called the Association for the Rationalization of Spanish Working Hours has been pushing for a time zone change that, it claims, would boost economic productivity and reduce energy consumption.

Political leaders have talked for years about switching time zones, but have not made the change.

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