

## Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'the Northern Dimension and its Action Plan'

(2006/C 24/11)

On 10 February 2005, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on: *Northern Dimension and its Action Plan*.

The Section which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 8 September 2005. The rapporteur was Mr Hamro-Drotz.

At its 420th plenary session, held on 28 and 29 September 2005 (meeting of 28 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 163 votes to 2 with 9 abstentions.

The European Union's Northern Dimension Policy (ND) was established in 1999. ND is part of the EU's external relations policy, whose objective is to improve welfare of the northern part of Europe through regional and cross-border cooperation. ND covers the Baltic Sea Region and the Arctic area. The ND is implemented within the framework of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia, as well as the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA — Norway, Iceland). ND has, after the enlargement of the EU, enhanced activities with Russia, especially towards the north-western regions.

The EU-Russia relations have been strengthened by the adoption of the 'Four Common Spaces'. In May 2005 an understanding was reached (the Road Maps) on how to proceed with the establishment of the common spaces. Russia is also negotiating accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which would facilitate trade and economic cooperation between the EU and Russia. The general development in the EU-Russia relations brings also an impetus to the Northern Dimension.

Linking the ND tighter to the cooperation between the EU and Russia is foreseen. This aspect is noted in the Conclusions of the European Council's meeting on June 16-17, 2005: *The European Council expresses its satisfaction at the outcome of the 15th EU-Russia Summit, which was held on the 10 May 2005, and, particularly, at the adoption of the road maps for the creation of four common spaces... Their implementation will strengthen the strategic partnership between the EU and Russia, as well as regional cooperation, in particular in the framework of the Northern Dimension*'.

ND is also referred to in the EU-Russia Road Maps for the Common Spaces, particularly under the heading of Common Economic Space: *'... The implementation of actions under the CES, priorities jointly identified in the framework of regional organisations and initiatives, such as the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Northern Dimension etc., will be taken into consideration*'.

The EESC decided in spring 2005 to prepare, as a continuation of the Committee's previous ND work, an opinion about the Northern Dimension. The opinion will be the EESC's contribution to the ND Ministerial Conference, which will take place in November 2005.

### 1. The objectives and priority sectors of the NDAP II, 2004-2006

1.1 The Northern Dimension Second Action Plan (NDAPII) <sup>(1)</sup> entered into force in January 2004.

1.2 The NDAPII covers five priority sectors:

- economy, business and infrastructure;
- human resources, education, scientific research and health;
- environment, nuclear safety and natural resources;
- cross-border cooperation and regional development;
- justice and home affairs.

1.3 The NDAPII also pays attention to specific regions: Kaliningrad and the Arctic region. It encourages concerted actions by all partners involved to reinforce economic, employment and social policies.

1.4 The NDAPII describes different possibilities for action in these sectors, leaving the practical conduct of actions to interested stakeholders. The ND has no separate budget, but is financed from various EU programmes (i.e. Tacis), the governments concerned, and the International Financing Institutions (NIB-Nordic Investment Bank, EBRD-European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, etc.).

1.5 The European Commission prepares annual progress reports on the implementation of the NDAPII. The 2004 Annual Progress Report refers to a vast number of activities in the five priority sectors. The report also makes reference to the EESC's conclusion that civil society organizations are poorly aware of the ND activities and calls for enhanced public information and further involvement of regional organizations in the implementing and monitoring of the ND activities.

<sup>(1)</sup> Source the NDAPII available at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/north\\_dim/ndap/com03\\_343.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/north_dim/ndap/com03_343.pdf).

1.6 The implementation of the NDAPII is monitored annually: a meeting of Senior Officials took place in 2004; the Ministerial Conference in 2005, and a Senior Officials' meeting scheduled to take place in the second half of 2006.

## 2. The Northern Dimension and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

2.1 The NDAPII requests a contribution of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in the implementation of the NDAP: *'To provide for the broad participation of civil society groups in reviewing progress under the Action Plan, it would also be helpful if the EESC would be able to organise annual Forums on the implementation of the Action Plan, bringing together representatives from the social and economic organisations represented in the Committee'* <sup>(2)</sup>.

2.2 The request was based on the EESC's contributions in previous years: the opinions on relations between the European Union and the countries bordering the Baltic Sea <sup>(3)</sup>, on the EU's Northern dimension including relations with Russia <sup>(4)</sup>, on Northern Dimension: Action plan for the Northern Dimension in the external and cross-border policies of the European Union 2000-2003 <sup>(5)</sup> and on the EU/Russia strategic partnership: What are the next steps? <sup>(6)</sup>; the statements to the ND Ministerial meetings in 1999, 2001 and 2002; the conclusions from the two ND Conferences (Forums) arranged by the EESC in 2001 and 2003.

2.3 The EESC responded positively to the Commission's request and decided to gather information about the CSO's views on:

- the awareness and involvement of civil society organisations in the implementation of NDAPII, either through requested or own initiative activities;
- the civil society organisations' opinions and recommendations, regarding the contents and the implementation of the NDAPII.

2.4 The CSOs' views were in 2004 collected with a questionnaire, which was widely distributed to civil society organisations in all the countries concerned, and through fact-finding missions to Gdansk, Kaliningrad and Riga.

## 3. The conclusions and recommendations by the EESC in 2004

3.1 The EESC was represented in the Senior Officials' meeting in October 2004, and it presented conclusions and recommendations in a report to the meeting <sup>(7)</sup>.

<sup>(2)</sup> COM(2003) 343 final, 10.6.2003, p. 16.

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 73, 9.3.1998, p. 57.

<sup>(4)</sup> OJ C 368, 20.12.1999, p. 39.

<sup>(5)</sup> OJ C 139, 11.5.2001, p. 42.

<sup>(6)</sup> OJ C 125, 27.5.2002, p. 39.

<sup>(7)</sup> The EESC report 2004 concerning the EESC findings under the EU's NDAPII.

3.2 The general conclusion about the CSOs involvement in the Northern Dimension Action Plan II was that:

- they are generally poorly aware of the ND;
- they are only marginally engaged in the implementation of the NDAP II;
- they have no role (except the EESC's activity) in the monitoring of the implementation.

The situation in these three aspects seemed to be more positive in 'the old' EU-Member States in the region than in the other states.

There was a general interest among the CSOs, which were contacted, to get more information about the ND and the NDAPII, to be engaged in projects and to participate in the monitoring, both at national and European level.

The EESC proposed that spreading of information to the CSOs about the NDAPII, as well as engaging them in the implementation and the monitoring, should be improved.

The EESC offered assistance in information and monitoring activities at European level, but, at the same time, underlined that the ND activities should be, primarily, at sub-regional, national and local levels, with the intention to involve the authorities and interested CSOs in a constructive interaction.

The EESC supported the principle stated in the NDAPII <sup>(8)</sup>, that representatives of civil society should be encouraged to participate in the annual meetings of the Senior Officials.

It was also proposed that the EU should consider some additional aspects during the NDAPII:

- raising the ND profile in the EU-Russia relations and in the development of the EU Neighbourhood policy;
- arranging a ND meeting in the region, including Kaliningrad (the CSOs in the region would highly benefit from this);
- improving the arrangements to facilitate the funding of small projects with the intention to encourage cross-border contacts between the CSOs in the region;
- clarifying the available EU resources for financing of ND projects (CSOs have difficulties to find funding sources);

<sup>(8)</sup> COM(2003) 343 final, page 16.

- spreading information in the region, including Kaliningrad, about the EIB and other financial resources, which may be partners in potential ND projects;
- considering an appropriate handling of the ND in the preparation of the EU's new financial framework 2007-2013.

3.3 These recommendations are still relevant.

#### 4. The EESC's continued contacts with the ND-related CSOs

4.1 The EESC expressed in the 2004 report its intention to provide a contribution to the Ministerial Conference in 2005, as well as to the Senior Officials' meeting in 2006, based on the same criteria as in 2004.

4.2 The EESC has in the context of the newly established Eastern Europe Contact Group (EECG) carried on its activities in the field of the Northern Dimension. The EECG is composed by members of the EESC and handles the Committee's activities towards the Eastern European countries. The aim of these activities is to support the EU's policies to improve relations with the East-European countries, to contribute with the views of the civil society organisations in this context, and to establish direct contacts with CS actors in these countries.

4.3 The EESC has spread information about the Northern Dimension through own contacts and by referring to the Commission's Northern Dimension Information System (NDIS).

4.4 The EESC has, as part of the preparation of the opinion, distributed a questionnaire to approximately 100 civil society organisations. The Committee has also discussed ND with Russian CSOs during the preparation of the EU-Russia opinion. The conclusions in this opinion, therefore, also reflect views of CSOs in Partner Countries.

### 5. Conclusions based on the EESC's survey in 2005

#### 5.1 *General knowledge on Northern Dimension*

5.1.1 The survey on general public awareness of the NDAPII was conducted in June 2005. The questionnaires were sent out to various civil society organizations in the countries that are mainly covered by the activities of the Action Plan (the Baltic and Nordic countries, Germany, Russia, including Kaliningrad and Poland). The questionnaire asked for information and views about the same aspects as it did in the previous year: a) the awareness of civil society actors about the ND and the

NDAPII, b) the opinion of the CSOs about the ND, and c) the involvement of CSOs in the implementation and monitoring of the NDAPII.

5.1.2 Only 20 responses were received — an indicator that general awareness about the ND and the NDAPII is still very low. This was further supported by the results of the questionnaire — while most of the CSOs answered that they had some awareness of the ND&NDAPII, only in some cases it was obvious that the CSOs had real knowledge about the NDAPII. A third of the CSOs replied that they had heard something about the ND&NDAPII, but, clearly, they had little idea about the aims and contents of it.

5.1.3 Some actors seem to be aware of the few public private partnerships (PPP) in the ND, above all the environmental partnership (NDEP). Several CSOs have, in addition, noted the ND through various regional organisations in the Baltic Sea Region, above all the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The employers' (BAC-Business Advisory Council) and the trade unions' networks (BASTUN-Baltic Sea Trade Union Network) have also promoted awareness on ND among their members.

5.1.4 NDAPII is seen by some actors as a programme, which is not concerning CSOs, but rather intended as a political project for regional cooperation between the governments and relevant authorities. This seems to be the case, regardless the Commission's efforts to improve public information through the NDIS-initiative.

#### 5.2 *Information and involvement of CSOs in ND activities by local authorities*

5.2.1 Results of the questionnaires clearly show that there have been very few initiatives by the governments, authorities or other associations to inform and involve the CSOs in NDAPII. There were only a few responses that confirmed such an engagement. Relevant authorities have, however, in some countries initiated seminars and workshops, which have addressed the implementation of the NDAPII. This is also the case with regional bodies.

5.2.2 Only a few CSOs have been involved in NDAPII by own initiative. This concerns activities related to strengthening investment conditions in the ND area, cooperation with other associations in the ND countries, debate on future of ND, and generally following the ND developments.

### 5.3 General opinion on ND&NDAPII

Overall, the opinion on the ND&NDAPII is rather positive, albeit with some exceptions. A majority of the CSOs had either a positive or fairly positive opinion of the ND&NDAPII, while a few of the CSOs had negative evaluation, and some CSOs had no opinion, primarily, due to lack of knowledge about the activities of the ND and NDAPII.

### 5.4 The most important fields of NDAPII

There seems to be a general convergence of views on the most important fields of NDAPII for the CSOs' countries. The fields of economy, business, infrastructure; environment, nuclear safety, and natural resources; cross-border cooperation and regional development were mentioned by the CSOs as having the greatest importance within the NDAPII. The fields of justice and home affairs, Kaliningrad, and the Arctic cooperation seems to be of less concern to the CSOs.

Fields of NDAP II	Number of times mentioned
Economy, business, infrastructure	*****
Human resources, education, scientific research, and health	*****
Environment, nuclear safety, and natural resources	*****
Cross-border cooperation and regional development	*****
Justice and home affairs	***
Kaliningrad	****
The Arctic co-operation	****

### 5.5 Actions of priority

The CSOs were of the opinion that following actions should be given precedence in the above-mentioned fields:

- Labour market issues, employment and social dialogue
- Promotion of small and medium sized enterprises
- Facilitation of trade and economic relations

- Enhancing the conditions for cross-border investments
- Interlinking infrastructure and improvement of transport networks

The CSOs, in addition, underlined the need for other complementary measures:

- Actions to involve civil society actors in the implementation of NDAPII
- Establishment of structures for implementation of the NDAPII
- Allocation of sufficient resources for NDAPII
- Distribution of progress reports on implementation of NDAPII.

## 6. Recommendations on the Northern Dimension

6.1 The EESC supports the continuation of regional cooperation in the northern part of Europe through structured, multilateral, cross-border cooperation, which also includes non-EU states in the region. The Northern Dimension seems to be well suited for this aim.

6.2 The EESC supports intentions to link the ND to the EU-Russia cooperation and the Four Common Spaces. The EESC has in its recent opinion 'The contribution of civil society to EU-Russia relations' <sup>(9)</sup>, para 3.2.5. stated: *'The EU and Russia should also work together to revamp regional cooperation — the Northern Dimension... The EESC is pleased to note that this aspect has also been duly taken into account in the Road Maps and encourages further measures to develop regional cooperation as part of the EU-Russia relations'*.

6.3 Successful regional ND cooperation would require that Russia properly participate in the preparation and implementation of future ND policy. Mechanisms for cooperation in this context, for instance a joint steering council should be considered, also taking into account the other non-EU countries in the region.

6.4 The EESC underlines the recommendations in its opinion on EU-Russia relations that civil society matters should be upgraded in the EU-Russia Road Maps, and that civil society actors should be involved in the EU-Russia cooperation. One should among others consider ways to establish a structured consultation of CSOs in the future ND mechanisms.

<sup>(9)</sup> JO C 294, 25.10.2005, p. 21.

6.5 The five sectors of ND cooperation are relevant for the future. One should, above all, take advantage of the positive experiences of the concept of ND partnerships (environmental, social and health, information-technology). Serious consideration should, in this respect, be given to the creation of partnerships in the following areas:

- infrastructure and logistics
- employment, human resources and social issues, including civil dialogue
- cross-border and people-to-people cooperation, including youth, education and culture.

6.6 Existing regional bodies in the Baltic Sea Region, above all the CBSS, should have a central role in the forthcoming ND exercise. The civil society organisations would in this context have a fair opportunity to be involved in and to contribute to the ND through their own regional cooperation networks and their established links to the aforementioned bodies.

6.7 The EESC reiterates its recommendation from 2004 that spreading of public information about the ND should be strengthened. Upgrading of the NDIS is needed for this

purpose. The EESC also stresses that information should, above all, be spread nationally and locally, as it is the responsibility of the governments and relevant authorities in the states concerned. Better information would stimulate broader interest in the ND and encourage civil society actors to increase their participation and contribution.

6.8 The financing of ND-partnerships should be determined on case by case basis, and also the governments and the International Financing Institutions (IFIs) should have a central role in this respect. The Norwegian and EEA financial mechanisms would as well be beneficial in spurring above all joint cross-border ND-actions. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) should become topical from beginning of 2007.

6.9 The EESC will carry on its ND-related activities and has the intention to contribute to the Senior Officials' meeting in 2006. The contribution may reflect also conclusions, based on the Committee's discussions with CSOs in the partner countries. The EESC would be prepared to contribute to further considerations on the future implementation of the Northern Dimension.

Brussels, 28 September 2005.

The President  
of the European Economic and Social Committee  
Anne-Marie SIGMUND

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