

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a multiannual Community programme to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable'

(COM(2004) 96 final – 2004/0025 (COD))

(2004/C 117/12)

On 25 February 2004, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 157(1) of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the 'Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a multiannual Community programme to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable' (COM(2004) 96 final -2004/0025 (COD)).

On 24 February 2004, the Committee Bureau instructed the Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society to prepare the work on the subject.

At its 408th plenary session of 29 April 2004, and in view of the urgency of the matter, the European Economic and Social Committee appointed Mr Pegado Liz as rapporteur-general and adopted the following opinion by 56 votes to one, with four abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 This proposal to establish a multiannual Community programme to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable, known as eContentplus (2005-2008) ⁽¹⁾ for short, takes account of the strategic objective of eEurope 2005 ⁽²⁾, the achievements of the current eContent programme (2001-2004) ⁽³⁾, the mid-term evaluation of this programme ⁽⁴⁾ and subsequent developments in technologies, legislation ⁽⁵⁾ and the market, as mentioned in the explanatory memorandum of the proposal in question.

2. The eContent programme (2001-2004)

2.1 The objectives of the eContent programme (2001-2004), which was welcomed by the European Economic and Social Committee (hereinafter referred to as the EESC) ⁽⁶⁾, were defined as follows:

- a. create favourable conditions for the development of the European multimedia content industry;
- b. stimulate demand for, and use of, multimedia content;
- c. contribute to the professional, social and cultural development of citizens;
- d. promote the exchange of knowledge between users and suppliers.

2.2 The eContent programme covers the four-year period between January 2001 and January 2005 and is implemented through three action lines:

- a. improving access to and expanding use of public sector information;
- b. enhancing content production in a multilingual and multicultural environment;
- c. increasing dynamism of the digital content market.

3. The mid-term evaluation of the eContent programme

3.1 The mid-term evaluation of the eContent programme ⁽⁷⁾ recognised the programme's positive impact and expressed a recommendation to continue supporting digital content via Community policies and programmes.

3.2 The evaluation report also contains recommendations addressed to the Commission and the Member States on the implementation of the current eContent programme, in particular that the commercial dimension of projects should be emphasised and that the Commission should encourage cooperation and networking among the national contact points that disseminate information about the programme, with a view to improving the quality of service provided. The report concludes by pointing to the need for a follow-on programme and asks the Commission to maximise the programme's impact by restricting the potential target group.

⁽¹⁾ Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a multiannual Community programme to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable - COM(2004) 96 final – 2004/0025 (COD).

⁽²⁾ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – eEurope 2005: An information society for all – COM(2002) 263 final.

⁽³⁾ Council Decision 2001/48/EC of 22 December 2000.

⁽⁴⁾ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the mid term evaluation of the multiannual Community programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote linguistic diversity in the information society (eContent) – COM(2003) 591 final.

⁽⁵⁾ In particular, the Directive on the re-use of public sector information [Directive 2003/98/EC of 17 November 2003], the Directive on copyright and related rights in the information society [Directive 2001/29/EC of 22 June 2001], the Directive on the legal protection of databases [Directive 96/9/EC of 11 March 1996] and a whole series of Directives to promote trade and on-line services in the internal market: e.g. the Directives on electronic commerce (22 May 2001) and electronic billing (20 December 2001) and the Directive and Regulation (7 May 2001) on VAT on digital products.

⁽⁶⁾ Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Council Decision adopting a multiannual Community programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote linguistic diversity in the Information Society - COM(2000) 323 final – 2000/0128 (CNS).

⁽⁷⁾ See previous footnote - COM(2003) 591 final.

3.3 The Commission shared the view that the programme's impact should be maximised and that some rationalisation of activities was needed. It also supported the view that multilingual and multicultural elements should be at the core of all the projects supported.

4. The proposal to establish the eContentplus programme (2005-2008)

4.1 The objective of the financial support programme eContentplus is to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable, facilitating the creation and diffusion of information and knowledge – in areas of public interest – at EU level. The programme will thereby help to meet the objectives of eEurope 2005.

4.2 The overall emphasis of the programme, which has a proposed financial envelope of EUR 163 million over a four-year period (2005-2008), is on producing quality content that helps disseminate information and knowledge, and not just more content. The programme encourages the emergence of pan-European frameworks (services, information infrastructures, etc.) that facilitate the discovery and use of reusable and interoperable quality digital content with a view to creating new content-based services. Target areas for action will be public sector information, spatial data, and learning and cultural content.

4.3 In short, the programme envisages three operational goals:

- a. facilitating access to European digital content;
- b. improving quality by fostering best practice in the area of digital content;
- c. reinforcing co-operation and awareness between digital content stakeholders (in particular scientists, students, researchers, professionals, 'reusers', public services, etc.).

5. Legal basis

5.1 The EESC agrees with the legal basis suggested by the Commission for this initiative (Article 157(3) of the Treaty establishing the European Community), which is moreover the same legal basis as the one used in the Council's Decision of

22 December 2000 adopting the Community eContent programme.

5.2 The EESC also considers the legal instrument used – a Decision – to be appropriate.

6. General comments

6.1 The EESC welcomes the Commission's proposal to adopt a multiannual Community programme to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable, known as eContentplus (2005-2008), which follows on from the eContent programme.

6.2 The EESC has in previous opinions expressed its support and encouragement for all initiatives to promote the information society, in particular the eEurope action plan, the multiannual MODINIS programme (2003-2005) ⁽¹⁾, network and information security policy ⁽²⁾, combating computer-related crime ⁽³⁾, the need to develop a non-discriminatory knowledge-based society ⁽⁴⁾, the right to safe Internet access in terms of protection of personal data, commercial transactions and information services ⁽⁵⁾, making Internet use safer by combating illegal and harmful content, and the reuse of public sector information ⁽⁶⁾.

6.3 The EESC wholeheartedly agrees with the Commission's objective that Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity must be assured and as such be an integral factor in the development of the information society ⁽⁷⁾ and has recently adopted an exploratory opinion on creative industries in Europe ⁽⁸⁾ in which it explicitly states that the public authorities of the European Union, the Member States and the regions must help to strengthen diversity.

⁽¹⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Council Decision adopting a multi-annual programme (2003-2005) for the monitoring of eEurope, dissemination of good practices and the improvement of network and information security (MODINIS) - COM(2002) 425 final – 2002/0187 (CNS) of 25 October 2002.

⁽²⁾ Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on network and information security: proposal for a European policy approach – OJ C 48 of 21.02.2002.

⁽³⁾ Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Creating a safer information society by improving the security of information infrastructures and combating computer-related crime: eEurope 2002 – OJ C 311 of 7.11.2001.

⁽⁴⁾ Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on Public sector information: a key resource for Europe - Green Paper on public sector information in the information society – OJ C 169 of 16.06.1999.

⁽⁵⁾ Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the telecommunications sector – OJ C 123 of 25.04.2001.

⁽⁶⁾ Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the re-use and commercial exploitation of public sector documents - COM(2002) 207 final - 2002/0123 (COD) of 11 December 2002.

⁽⁷⁾ Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Principles and guidelines for the community's audiovisual policy in the digital age - COM(1999) 657 final of 19 October 2000.

⁽⁸⁾ Exploratory opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Europe's Creative Industries of 28 January 2004.

6.4 Therefore, the EESC cannot but welcome the proposed Community action, which is intended to bring about the right conditions to overcome the technical and economic barriers created because there is too much diversity for relatively small national markets to absorb. The EESC welcomes the programme's approach, as it focuses on methods, tools, processes and services related to the design, development, access and distribution of high-quality digital content, while leaving the quantity of digital content produced up to market forces and other specific Community initiatives.

6.5 The EESC takes account of the fact that one of the conclusions of the mid-term evaluation report of the eContent programme points to the need to clarify the programme's focus in order to prevent user groups being too diverse and target markets too fragmented for the initiative to achieve the critical mass it needs to succeed.

6.5.1 The EESC therefore understands and accepts that the overriding principle of eContentplus is to maximise the impact on a group of participants. To this end, a clearer definition is needed of the criteria governing participants and the framework of objectives.

6.5.2 Nonetheless, in order to prevent an increase in regional asymmetries between beneficiaries of the eContent programme, the EESC calls on the Commission to widen the scope of the 'reinforcing cooperation and awareness' measure, in particular 'accompanying measures'.

7. Specific comments

7.1 As regards the programme's financial impact, the EESC requests clarification on why the appropriations for the 'Facilitating access to, use and exploitation of digital content' action for 2006 have been cut back [see point 6.1.1. Financial intervention (Commitment appropriations)], given that this occurs only once during the initiative's entire programming period.

7.2 Still with regard to the financial impact, and following on from the above comments, the EESC considers the overall appropriation for the 'Reinforcing cooperation and awareness' measure (between 6 % and 10 %), in particular the budget for programme evaluation measures, to be insufficient.

7.2.1 The EESC therefore urges the Commission to increase the appropriations in question and thereby attach greater importance to the mid-term evaluation of the programme.

7.3 Moreover, in view of the mid-term evaluation report's recommendations concerning the profile of the eContent follow-on programme ⁽¹⁾, in particular that the two overarching

requirements for all projects to be supported should be commercialisation – by favouring projects that have a high market potential and are of demonstrable interest to future user groups – and 'Europeanisation' – i.e. projects should be of interest to a wide group of European businesses and private users and at the same time enhance European cultural diversity – the EESC is of the view that the planned evaluation measures, as well as the evaluation report mentioned in Article 5(3) of the proposed Decision, must also gauge – as far as possible – the degree of satisfaction of users of the projects supported.

7.4 The Committee also recommends developing and promoting educational content and scientific and technical databases that can be accessed free of charge by all. Such material, which should be prepared by institutions, universities or associations, would make a significant contribution to the Lisbon strategy and the free movement of knowledge in Europe.

8. Summary and final comments

8.1 Acknowledging the role of digital content in improving people's access to information and stimulating the economic and social development of European businesses, the EESC is in favour of establishing the eContentplus programme as an instrument to encourage the reuse of public sector information and the creation of multilingual and multicultural European content.

8.2 The EESC agrees with the eContentplus programme's objective that Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity must be assured and as such be an integral factor in the development of the information society. It therefore welcomes the programme's approach, as it focuses on the design, development, access and distribution of high-quality digital content.

8.3 While it understands and accepts that the overriding principle of eContentplus is to maximise the impact on a smaller group of participants, the EESC points to the need to widen the scope and the respective financial impact of the 'reinforcing cooperation and awareness' measure, in order to mitigate the potential worsening of regional asymmetries between beneficiaries of the current Community initiative.

8.4 Moreover, in view of the mid-term evaluation report's recommendations concerning the profile of the eContent follow-on programme, the EESC recommends that the planned evaluation measures and reports should also gauge – as far as possible – the degree of satisfaction of users of the services supported by the programme.

Brussels, 29 April 2004.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESCH

⁽¹⁾ Point 3.2.3 - A possible profile for 'eContent II' - COM(2003) 591 final.