Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on harmonised river traffic information services on inland waterways in the Community’


(2005/C 157/08)

On 8 June 2004, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 71 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 24 November 2004. The rapporteur was Mr Simons.

At its 413th plenary session of 15 and 16 December 2004 (meeting of 15 December) the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 144 votes in favour with one abstention:

1. Introduction

1.1 On 25 May 2004, the European Commission submitted a Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on harmonised river traffic information services on inland waterways in the Community. In submitting this proposal, the Commission is seeking to support the future development of inland waterway transport (IWT) by integrating and harmonising the existing national telematic services which, over the past few years, have been or are being introduced in the various Member States.

1.2 The proposal is part of a policymaking initiative to promote other transport modes as alternatives to road transport, in order to resolve the difficulties brought about by the inconsistent transport policy of the past few years, which is deemed to be the root cause of the major problems currently facing the European transport system.

The IWT sector has sufficient infrastructure and shipping capacity to take a considerably higher share of Europe’s overall freight market away from the road network. Much of Europe is within reach of Europe’s cross-border waterways and many national waterways. On many fronts, innovation is the watchword of the IWT sector. Thanks to its higher profile as an alternative to road haulage, IWT has already succeeded in winning new markets.

1.3 In a number of (own-initiative) opinions, meetings (1) and conclusions, the European Economic and Social Committee has already highlighted the importance of inland waterway transport on the Community market. Particular attention should be given to eliminating national and international infrastructure bottlenecks. On that front, the EESC has repeatedly called on EU Member States to properly maintain waterways. The Committee views proper maintenance of waterways as a basic condition for making the introduction of advanced river traffic information services worthwhile. Failure to fulfil this basic condition has already led to bottlenecks, which could jeopardise the future development of the role of river traffic (2).

1.4 Under the White Paper’s strategy, the Commission is committed to further assist the sector in adapting to new market needs. It strongly encourages the deployment of modern information and communication technologies (ICT), in this context with the particular aim of improving traffic and transport management on inland waterways.


(2) For example, in 2004 investment in waterway maintenance was halted in the Netherlands, even though expenditure of at least €35 million is needed to overcome current stagnation and to prevent future stagnation; the requisite funding will not become available till 2007. In Germany an estimated €11 billion of investment is needed for the 2000-2020 period, equivalent to annual instalments of over €500 million, whereas the new Federal Transport Infrastructure Plan for 2001-2015 assumes annual maintenance needs of only €440 million (Planco Report on The Potential and Future of German River Traffic (Potenziale und Zukunft der deutschen Binnenschifffahrt), November 2003).
1.5 The European Commission believes that the deployment of the river information services (RIS) concept will secure compatibility and interoperability between current and new RIS systems at European level. The idea is to encourage European equipment suppliers to produce RIS hardware and software at reasonable and affordable costs.

1.6 The international river commissions — the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine and the Danube Commission — back the development and introduction of RIS. To that end, the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine has already adopted, for the Rhine, the technical guidelines and specifications provided for under the directive and drawn up by the International Navigation Association (PIANC).

2. Users and the importance of RIS for inland navigation

2.1 According to the proposal for a directive, the RIS concept represents the most substantial change in the sector in several decades. The aim is to launch information services to support the planning and management of traffic and transport operations. To that end, telematic applications developed separately at national level are to be integrated into an interoperational concept.

2.2 The proposal envisages the introduction of RIS as benefiting the entire European inland waterway sector. The revitalisation of IWT through the implementation of RIS is of particular interest in the light of the enlargement of the EU to include central and eastern European countries.

RIS are also designed to facilitate the tasks of the competent authorities, in particular traffic management and the monitoring of hazardous goods. From the perspective of security and environmental protection, this should prove beneficial by ensuring that parties concerned are better informed and that response times to emergencies are cut.

2.3 Both traffic- and transport-related services are set to benefit from the introduction of harmonised RIS. The directive is thus designed to be of advantage both to national authorities and to IWT, and its objectives fall under both public and private law.

2.4 Given the differing aims and principles involved under public and private law in using the system, the information and services need special monitoring and steps must be taken to prevent any improper use. When the data are used for public law purposes, the protection of privacy in electronic communications must be clearly safeguarded.

3. Benefits of RIS for the future development of inland navigation

3.1 According to the proposal for a directive, river traffic information services are considered useful for a possible switch to waterborne transport and if IWT is to participate more in intermodal schemes, for the benefit of society. According to the proposal, RIS are expected to provide four types of strategic benefits:

— increased competitiveness,
— optimised use of infrastructures,
— improved safety and security, and
— increased environmental protection.

3.2 With regard to the first of these aspects, the EESC would like to point out that the aim is to strengthen the position of the sector as a whole relative to other means of transport. The planned services must not be allowed to further undermine the competitiveness of IWT in the new and future Member States, which is already weakened due to the economic situation there. Funding of services should give this aspect special priority. (1)

3.3 According to the proposal, more efficient voyage planning — where speed is adjusted as appropriate — will cut waiting times and limit productivity losses. Moreover, by providing information interfaces with all supply chain members, RIS are designed to promote the integration of IWT into intermodal transport chains.

3.4 Alongside promoting IWT’s competitiveness in relation to other transport modes, it is important to further emphasise the known advantages of IWT in areas such as safety, security and environmental protection. IWT is currently considered to be the safest transport mode (2).

3.5 As things stand, IWT will be able to retain its environmental lead over other transport modes. A recent study on the environmental performance of inland shipping (3) concluded that inland shipping can help improve the environmental performance of the transport chain. This in turn can help achieve the Kyoto objectives by cutting exhaust gases.

(1) All the Danube States are already participating in RIS Lead Projects on harmonising river transport services (e.g. COMPRIS: Consortium, Operational Management Platform 2002-2005, involving 44 partners from 11 countries, including Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria). River traffic information services are expected to result in substantial modernisation of river traffic along the Danube (Via Donau: Strategy and achievements on the implementation of RIS in the Danube region, 13.10.2004).


3.6 The EU environment ministers’ decision of 28 June 2004 to limit the sulphur content of fuel used by inland-waterway vessels to 0.1% by 2010 also reflects the IWT sector’s environmental thinking. A high sulphur content in fuel damages human health and may cause soil and water acidification. IWT will play its part in combating these risks so as to maintain its reputation as the most environmentally-friendly transport mode. The European IWT fleet to a large extent already uses fuel with a sulphur content of less than 0.2%.

By fitting low-emission engines and using low-pollution fuels, IWT is able to maintain its environmental edge over other transport modes.

Introducing river traffic information services will lead to a further cut in IWT energy consumption and the inherent benefits this brings can help the IWT sector achieve its environmental objectives.

4. The proposal for a directive and its scope

4.1 It is envisaged that the directive will oblige Member States to facilitate the introduction and use of harmonised river traffic information services (RIS) and to ensure that the regulatory conditions are in place for such services’ establishment and ongoing development. The basic idea is to directly integrate existing technologies (Article 1).

4.2 The Committee feels it is right to limit the scope of the directive to inland waterways of class IV and above. It also welcomes the dynamic reference to the Classification of European Inland Waterways.

4.3 The directive defines the specific obligations of the Member States as regards the provision of data necessary for the execution of the voyage, the provision of electronic navigational charts and the provision of notices to skippers and the authorities.

For the EESC, the requirement that Member States must ensure the availability of electronic navigational charts suitable for navigational purposes only for waterways of class Va and above in accordance with the Classification of European Inland Waterways raises some concerns, bearing in mind the waterway network in Germany, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Poland (Article 4).

4.4 In principle, the directive does not oblige private users — i.e. ship operators — to install the equipment necessary for participating in RIS. However, Member States are asked to take appropriate measures to encourage users and vessels to comply with the equipment requirements provided for in the directive. To meet this requirement and to encourage ship operators to use the services, the Committee feels that it is essential for Member States not only to make the requisite data available but also to provide incentives for onboard retrofitting.

For reasons of transparency — and given the principle that the measures involved are to be voluntary — use of the services should not be made mandatory. That said, as part of their drive to implement RIS, Member States should also be required to provide ways and means of encouraging ship operators to use the system as widely as possible in order to attain the directive’s intended objectives.

4.5 The technical specifications for the planning, implementation and operational use of the services are laid down in technical guidelines (RIS guidelines). For the sake of system uniformity, the Committee feels that these should match relevant international organisations’ existing guidelines and specifications.

4.6 It is particularly important to protect the privacy of ship operators when RIS data are used for public and operational purposes. The Committee feels that data protection is a key requirement given the sensitive nature of some of the information involved, and steps must be taken to prevent data being passed on to public authorities.

4.7 To implement and transpose the proposed directive, the Commission is to appoint a committee in line with Council Decision 1999/468/EC of 28 June 1999 laying down the procedures for the exercise of implementing powers conferred on the Commission. To make sure the directive is transposed in line with the objectives and the plan to promote IWT, this committee, made up of representatives from the EU Member States, should also, in the view of the EESC, consult trade body representatives in the course of its deliberations (Article 11).

5. Transposing the directive

5.1 Acceptance by users

In the view of the Committee, special attention must be paid to implementing and transposing the directive. The standardised RIS must contain useful information that can help promote shipping. Surveys into telematics use in the EU Member States have indicated that the IWT sector does not yet have adequate facilities to implement RIS.
To boost acceptance among users and to encourage ship operators to implement the directive, the Committee feels that flanking measures are vital to help meet the equipment requirements. The Committee therefore supports the joint proposal of the Dutch and Austrian transport ministries to draft a joint RIS implementation plan for submission to the European Commission. The Committee calls for the implementation projects in (future) Member States to be funded from the relevant EU support programmes, particularly with a view to introducing RIS in economically disadvantaged regions.

To be effective, RIS need to be used as widely as possible by ship operators. The Committee feels that master plans that are to be developed for that purpose must meet these requirements.

5.2 Cost

As the explanatory memorandum of the proposal for a directive makes clear, European equipment suppliers are to be encouraged to produce RIS hardware and software at a reasonable and affordable price. The European Commission maintains that the introduction of the RIS concept will ensure compatibility and interoperability between current and new RIS systems at European level. The Committee feels that the Commission will need to continue monitoring the situation and spurring things on if that aim is to become a reality. Regular information and publications on the subject could help to speed up this process.

In addition to expensive RIS hardware and software, high communication costs for ship operators have so far restricted GSM data transfer and internet communication. The Committee feels that, in implementing this directive, it is essential to promote communication systems that best meet IWT requirements and can be used in a cost-effective way.

6. Basis for the recommendations set out below

6.1 The EU’s main economic challenge is to realise its growth potential. To that end, it is essential to develop and support sustainable blueprints for growth. Freight transport plays a key role in the Community market. However, in the absence of a coherent transport policy, this sector is facing severe difficulties as a result of road congestion, the lack of cooperation between railway companies and restricted access to the market.

6.2 Water transport is part of Europe’s future. Water and waterways play an important role in society. 50% of the EU population live in coastal areas or along Europe’s fifteen largest rivers. With the enlargement of the European Union, IWT will play an even more important role in the internal market. Many of the new Member States have navigable waterways which are used for freight transport. Within the framework of the policy announced by the European Commission, IWT as such, and as part of the intermodal transport chain, can play a major role in the integration of the new Member States and realising their potential for economic growth.

6.3 To operate effectively, freight transport needs first-rate infrastructure. The proper maintenance and upkeep of existing IWT infrastructure and the elimination of bottlenecks are basic prerequisites for promoting intermodality in freight transport and boosting the role of IWT. The Committee views proper maintenance of waterways as a basic condition for making the introduction of advanced river traffic information services worthwhile. Failure to fulfil this basic condition has already led to bottlenecks, which could jeopardise the future development of the role of river traffic. The Committee therefore calls on Member States to act accordingly and to provide the necessary resources.

7. General recommendations

7.1 Against this backdrop, the Committee welcomes the introduction of a legal framework for harmonised river traffic information services on Community inland waterways. Provided they are accepted on a broad scale, harmonised information services on inland waterways can help achieve the stated objective of securing a modal shift to waterways as an alternative transport mode with a potential for growth and offering safety and environmental advantages.

The main economic challenge facing the European Union is to realise its growth potential. It is therefore necessary to support sustainable growth. Freight transport plays an important role within the internal market. However, it faces huge problems all over Europe where mainly road congestion is threatening economic development within the European Union. The solution is to be found in modal shifts and sustainable development by facilitating the use of intelligent transport solutions.

Economic development in Europe thus depends on a strong and balanced transport policy, a fact which needs to be fully recognised by European decision makers.

For this purpose, a proper framework must be established and secured so as to make IWT development a political priority.
With reference to the success achieved in the modal shift to short sea shipping, comparable advances are also possible in the IWT sector — through targeted measures and provided there is political support.

7.2 The economic benefits of reducing road congestion, incorporating IWT into intermodal transport chains and protecting natural resources by making even more efficient use of shipping capacity are good grounds for European support for telematics in the IWT sector and for the harmonisation of river traffic information services. So that the measures set out in the proposed directive can be introduced effectively, the Committee would recommend taking the following steps, which it considers to be necessary for the introduction of river traffic information services:

— the adoption of other relevant international organisations’ existing technical guidelines in the context of the RIS directive;
— a requirement that Member States should make electronic navigational charts suitable for navigational purposes available for all European inland waterways of class IV and above in accordance with the Classification of European Inland Waterways;
— the protection of data against improper use;
— consultation of the sector in the committee that has been or is to be set up by the Commission to transpose the directive.

8. Specific comments

8.1 Flanking measures are needed to transpose the directive on board inland-waterway vessels.

The IWT sector does not yet have adequate facilities to implement RIS. To be effective, however, these services need to be used as widely as possible by ship operators. The master plans that are to be drawn up must include targeted measures to cater for these requirements, such as:

— Drafting a plan for implementation of RIS.
— Encouragement and support for ship operators to introduce the requisite equipment on board ships so as to be able to use the system effectively in line with the objectives of the directive.
— The promotion of cost-effective communications systems that best meet IWT requirements.
— Monitoring of RIS hardware and software production costs.

9. In order to effectively implement the proposal for a directive, the EESC recommends that these steps be taken.

Brussels, 15 December 2004

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
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