Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing for the period 2007-2013 the programme “Citizens for Europe” to promote active European citizenship’

(COM(2005) 116 final — 2005/0041 (COD))

(2006/C 28/06)

On 11 May 2005, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Articles 151, 305 and 251 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 5 October 2005. The rapporteur was Mr Le Scornet.

At its 421st plenary session held on 26 and 27 October 2005 (meeting of 26 October 2005), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by a majority of 125 votes with 6 abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 The programme is designed to encourage cooperation between citizens and their organisations from different countries so that they can meet, act together and develop their own ideas in a European environment that goes beyond a national vision and respects their diversity. Mutual understanding, solidarity and a sense of belonging to Europe are the building blocks for the involvement of citizens.

1.2 The programme both ensures the continuity of the current civic participation programme and opens the way to new activities, while providing a degree of flexibility in order to be adaptable to future developments.

1.3 The overall aim of the programme, reprising the terms used in the proposal, is to help to:

— make the idea of Europe more tangible for its citizens by promoting and celebrating Europe’s values and achievements, while preserving the memory of its past;

— encourage the balanced integration of citizens and civil society organisations from all Member States, contributing to intercultural dialogue and bringing to the fore both Europe’s diversity and its unity, and paying particular attention to activities with Member States that have recently joined the European Union.

1.5 Three types of action are proposed: Action 1 — Active citizens for Europe (Town twinning, Citizens’ projects and support measures); Action 2 — Active civil society in Europe (Structural support for European public policy research organisations, Structural support for civil society organisations at European level, Support for projects initiated by civil society organisations); Action 3 — Together for Europe (High-visibility events, Studies, Information and dissemination tools).

2. Context

2.1 The Commission proposes to make developing European citizenship a ‘main priority’ for EU action (1). The EESC sees this not just as appropriate but also urgent or even crucial to continued European integration. The low turnout in the last European Parliament elections, highlighted in the preamble to the programme, is not the only sign of this urgency. The vicissitudes of the ratification of the European Constitutional Treaty show that the consequences of a failure to involve European citizens actively in European integration are public mistrust of the union’s institutions, perhaps even leading to an attitude of rejection.

2.2 This situation is common, albeit to varying degrees, in all the Member States and affects or will affect the candidate countries. Given this, it is positive that the programme puts all of them on the same footing.

2.3 For while this weak connection with what is already a European reality is not expressed exactly identically in every Member State — not least because of the different ratification methods chosen by each country — and while it cannot, consequently, be seen to the same extent everywhere, it does nevertheless seem to exist to differing degrees in all the Member States.

2.4 Even where a sometimes intense, unprecedented European debate exists, particularly in the countries that chose or were able to ratify the European Constitutional Treaty by referendum, the debate turns more around national identity and citizenship (and safeguarding them in an often offensive, even 'nationalistic' way) than on the actual achievements and progress proposed in the Constitutional Treaty. This is particularly the case as regards social policies (rightly perceived as a key indicator of citizenship), and democratic policies ('scuppered' by a prejudice that is almost universal yet largely unmerited of an anti-democratic, technocratic Europe that almost wilfully keeps citizens out of the decision-making process).

2.5 Although it covers the period 2007-2013, and is thus outside the period when all Member States will have proceeded in their different ways with the ratification (or not) of the Constitutional Treaty, the proposed programme, its discussion and its approval in the current context cannot fail to have an immediate impact on the key issue of European citizenship that is so dramatically in the 'here and now'. However, the 2007-2013 programme shadows the Council's 2004 decision too closely (2). It has few resources, and while the methods envisaged are tried and tested, they are insufficiently innovative to deal with the challenges of which we are even more acutely aware today. The fact is that there is a problem here and now; children born today will be 8 years old in 2013 and their mental outlook as future citizens is already partly formed.

2.6 The EESC is convinced that the current context and the debate on a new 'Citizens for Europe' programme for the period 2007-2013 are, paradoxically, highly favourable to at last turning the spotlight on the question of European citizenship; to moving on from a somewhat hackneyed notion of unity in diversity which, in reality — and if we are not careful — might only promote diversity or even a compartmentalised society. It therefore endorses the proposal to extend the 2004-2006 programme without waiting for the external evaluation report scheduled for the end of 2006 at the latest (and which must still go ahead). The EESC wants to be a major player, a focal point for the importance invested in this programme. While it fully understands that a programme such as this must ensure continuity with the current civic participation programme, it fully endorses the strong criticism Parliament and some civil society organisations have made of that programme's lack of ambition. Its proposals therefore aim to ensure that the 2007-2013 programme will not be just a reworking of the current programme.

2.7 It is clear that the programme's extreme financial modesty means that it cannot cover all European citizenship issues, as its vast array of objectives and actions might lead to believe. It is, however, a key link in the chain: that of 'active European citizenship', defined as the ability of citizens to organise independently and exert power and responsibility in public policy, in order to defend the common good and ensure its development (3). The EESC therefore insists that the allocated budget (EUR 235 million over 7 years!) must be ringfenced, whatever the final conclusions of the debate on the financial perspective of the European Union might be.

2.8 While it is true that the context requires a qualitative leap forward, it also makes it possible. From this point of view, the EESC would like to see the Union press ahead with a study into the extent to which citizens currently feel a connection with the European Union — or at least pool available studies to enable a sufficiently accurate diagnosis to be made.

2.9 The Committee believes that the fact that 'European citizens seem to have developed a certain distance towards the European institutions and to have difficulties in identifying themselves within the process of European integration' (4) is, in addition to genuine ignorance and incomprehension of the way the Community operates and of the logic behind it, and the undeniable nationalist and protectionist attitudes linked to various objective and subjective risks and fears generated by globalisation, a result of the lack of recognition of existing European citizenship, in particular in its more active, organised forms.

2.10 From this point of view, one could argue that the considerable synchronisation, the different forms of mobility (admittedly well below the potential opened by European integration), the physical and material removal of borders, the common currency and the single market have not been sufficiently highlighted: 'a common European identity is not perceived because it has not been stated' (5). However, it is increasingly evident that when Europe is viewed from the outside, e.g. when travelling or residing outside its borders, a real 'European way of life' is everywhere apparent and attractive.

2.11 Consequently, the current fixation with an entrenched national identity must not be allowed to mask the consistency and quality of the European lifestyle, of its democratic forms of participation. A more ambitious programme of 'active European citizenship' could reduce, alleviate and transform these entrenched positions.


(5) TNS-Sofres 2005 survey of the 10 countries accounting for 85 % of the EU 25 population on common European values.
2.12 In any event, and whatever the difficulties or temporary deadlock that might ensue from the current debates surrounding the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty and the necessarily agitated period for European integration, the EESC believes that the context lends itself well to the issue of active European citizenship. It considers that the 2007-2013 programme must be seen — and if possible enhanced — against a background in which citizens are once more concerned — whatever their stance — with Europe, with their ability to intervene both directly and through their chosen organisations in the European decision-making process.

2.13 The EESC therefore calls for an open symposium so that the whole notion of European citizenship can be approached in this new context, and to get to grips with the issue in its entirety rather than just firing off responses in a multitude of separate programmes that are insufficiently comprehensible or operational. The EESC could organise this symposium. The Committee is delighted that the Commission takes a positive view of such an initiative (6).

3. General comments

3.1 While the EESC, a European institution representing organised civil society and explicitly referred to in the Treaties, appreciates the fact that it has been asked to deliver an opinion on the programme (referral not being mandatory in this case), it feels that the proposal submitted to the Council and to the European Parliament would have benefited from being referred to the Committee an even earlier stage. Admittedly, the programme was the subject of a major on-line consultation between December 2004 and February 2005 (receiving 1,000 answers) and of a consultative forum (bringing together 350 participants) on 3 and 4 February 2005. But providing more scope for consultation of the European Economic and Social Committee from the outset — instead of merely requesting for an opinion ‘ex-post’ — would offer a way of tackling the numerous reasons why European citizens feel disconnected from their ability to really count in EU decision-making, both as individuals and through their chosen organisations.

3.2 The EESC regrets to see that the programme, which refers to the Commission’s identification of three types of response to the problem of why citizens feel removed from the European institutions, does not seem able to address the issue holistically. Although the EESC is keen to see specific responses to specific topics, it would suggest that the three types of response should be also brought under an umbrella programme, making it possible to deal with all aspects of the issue and to work on common objectives, on areas of commonality and complementarity.

3.3 Public information about the European institutions, communication campaigns on European issues, an awareness of the rights conferred by European citizenship and a feeling of belonging — i.e. European identity — are part of a whole. However, while the Commission programme speaks of complementarity with other Community programmes and instruments, it remains vague on this fundamental question and has nothing to say about the kind of arrangements that would ensure that action is consistent with the objectives. An approach that fails to bring together these three aspects will find it hard to reverse the current significant decline in the way citizens connect with the EU and European identity.

3.4 The EESC would like to be sure that this specific programme will be accompanied by a robust information and communication campaign to inform citizens about the institutions and their rights. This must include information about the existence and the specific role of the EESC itself, which is under-publicised in the communication policy of the other European institutions. The EESC also need to radically rethink its communication policy which does not live up to the role that it claims to play in bringing about an active European citizenship, as its most eminent representative.

3.5 Although the programme appears to appreciate the disconnection citizens feel with regard to the European institutions and their difficulty in being part of the European integration process, it does not seem to face up to all the consequences. This can be seen in the words and expressions that it uses, whereas merely referring to this crisis of identification and participation could play an important role in overcoming it. Consequently it hardly seems credible to present a programme of such modest financial means as the way to put citizens at the ‘centre’ of the European integration process. Who can believe it? Similarly, and even more so given the stakes (amply highlighted in the preamble to the programme), it is hard to find any major innovations which can really help to change the current situation, other than some significant advances (multi-annual projects, pooling experience, opening up to new partners, removal of some constraints for beneficiaries and support for major events, notably in the context of intercultural dialogue).

3.6 The overall impression is one of too much continuity with the 2004-2006 programme. The structural support once again granted to a certain number of organisations that the programme mentions as appearing to pursue an objective of general European interest should be replaced with an open funding access procedure, based on clear transparent criteria. What constitutes a ‘general European objective’ also needs to be clarified if it is to be workable.

3.7 The EESC is fully aware that the programme is more specifically open to associations and NGOs, which — unlike other civil society organisations, e.g. the social partners — do not have access to other programmes and other arrangements that enable them to make a meaningful contribution towards extending active European citizenship.

(6) Declaration by Commissioner Jan Figel at the EESC SOC Section meeting of 21 June 2005.
However, if it is to be able to identify clearly the express wish of the social partners and other civil society organisations, mutuals and cooperatives to play a specific, visible role in this process, the programme must be open to them both in theory and in practice. In return, the social partners need to be prepared to work more closely with the associations and NGOs on other budget headings.

3.8 As on several previous occasions, the EESC would reiterate the urgent need to define an open European citizenship, containing specific rights and open to all regularly settled or long-term residents of the European Union (7). The inclusion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the European Constitutional Treaty and the fact that the European Union is a signatory to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms requires the recognition of a ‘civic’ citizenship that is relatively independent of a European citizenship that can currently only be acquired through national citizenship of one of the Member States. This first step towards participative citizenship for all persons residing stably in the European Union should be ‘made legal’ if we really want to achieve a European identity and a specific European citizenship, and if we genuinely want this citizenship to do more than just superimpose some abstract European citizenship onto the national citizenship of the Member States.

3.9 The EESC takes the view that it will remain difficult to make any real progress in this crucial area without any progressive build-up of solid material support for European citizenship. Such support cannot come from national citizenship alone and the rights conferred by this European citizenship which unites us must be accompanied by a number of duties. Consequently, the failure to use a legislative instrument to promote citizen participation, whilst understandable given the lack of specific material support for European citizenship, is questionable if we are aiming, albeit gradually, to attach specific material support for European citizenship, and if we genuinely want this citizenship to do more than just superimpose some abstract European citizenship onto the national citizenship of the Member States.

4. Individual comments on the actions of the programme

4.1 Action 1: Active citizens for Europe

The EESC is naturally keen to encourage town-twinning, since it fosters mutual understanding and citizen mobility in Europe, which, it must be said, is still far too infrequent. Encouraging original forms of participation at local level, with exchanges as part of twinning arrangements, should be a priority for this type of action. With regard to citizen projects, the document’s extreme vagueness on this point makes it difficult to grasp their potential. One might wonder why 40 % of an already considerably restricted budget is earmarked for type 1 actions — notably town-twinning — when this instrument does not appear to be the most appropriate to achieve the programme’s objectives. All the more so when the programme does little to encourage current innovations in this area, in particular the so-called three-pronged twinning arrangements in which two European local authorities agree to build lasting relations with some other world communities. Yet these innovations are a sign of opening up to the world, which could be seen as one of the features of European citizenship, particularly for and through young people. In any event, and regardless of the type of twinning arrangement, it is important to inform citizens that the EU provides direct support for this method of promoting active European citizenship. Those interested in such a scheme are often unaware of this.

4.2 Action 2: Active civil society in Europe

4.2.1 The EESC considers that this part of the programme could be developed much further. Meeting and acting together at trans-national level is the cornerstone of European citizenship. The EESC therefore believes that, while this programme does not address the problem of a statute for European associations, mutual societies and foundations, a definitive solution should be found as a support measure in order to develop solidarity and mutual action, particularly as part of a voluntary framework.

4.2.2 The EESC takes the view that strengthening European networks is, in accordance with the programme, a crucial element. However, the EESC would again insist that all European networks should have the same access to this structural support, rather than some organisations having priority, although the Commission does take steps to ensure that there is no ‘carte blanche’ and that the projects must be quantifiable. Moreover, funding for projects — even small ones — is crucial as it enables national and local organisations, which are in direct contact with citizens, to take on a European dimension and help to bridge the gap between citizens and the European institutions. The EESC also welcomes the fact that, in providing funding for small projects, the programme enables trans-national initiatives to grow out of national networks, even if the initiatives do not cover all Member States.

4.2.3 The EESC is extremely concerned that a Commission proposal such as that from DG Justice, Freedom and Security (8) could lead, in the name of security and the fight against terrorism, to NGOs and associations being generally viewed with suspicion. This is because they could, by their very nature,

---


(8) Draft Recommendation to Member States regarding a code of conduct for non-profit organisations to promote transparency and accountability best practices, 22 July 2003.
be an entry point for such phenomena, and the associations could be forced, through over-bureaucratic procedures, to assume the burden of proof in the matter. If this were to happen, it would run against the spirit and the letter of the programme.

4.2.4 The EESC believes that it — together with the Committee of the Regions and with the agreement of the European Parliament — should be specifically tasked with coordinating consultations with the social organisations and local authorities; with distilling their opinions and communicating them to the other Community institutions; and with ensuring the latter are well-informed upstream. The European Parliament should formally consult the EESC and the CoR on this subject on a regular basis.

4.2.5 A formal partnership (*) rather than a case-by-case one, based on equality notwithstanding diversity of role, between the EP and organised civil society as expressed through its European institutions, becomes crucial, despite the fact that this is still far from happening or even being considered. The active European citizenship programme should work to eliminate all traces of any hierarchical vision of the European authorities, since European culture is also one of sharing power and authority.

4.3 Action 3: Together for Europe

4.3.1 The EESC believes that focusing on intra-European intercultural dialogue should be the main objective of this programme. The current debate on the Constitutional Treaty has shown that ignorance of intra-European cultural differences has been underestimated, as have deep-rooted stereotypes, the sometimes contrary nature of the most fundamental elements — particularly legal and constitutional — which determine the way each Member State views the world. Equally underestimated are convergence in lifestyle, values, worldview, the conviction that homo europeus is different in terms of his citizenship from all other citizens of the planet. ‘Homo europeus’ is the result of the concrete implementation of the Union’s moral and spiritual heritage, which is founded on the universal, unassailable values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity. It is underpinned by the principles of democracy and the rule of law. It puts the citizen at the heart of its work by creating EU citizenship and an area of freedom, security and justice. High-profile events, information and dissemination tools, studies recognising not just real differences (instead of clichéd ones) but also — perhaps primarily — a ‘European way of life’ must therefore be promoted energetically. European culture does not rest on inherited values alone; it also ensues from the construction of the European Union itself: its single market, its common currency, a Europe reunited with itself (enlargement to the countries of Eastern Europe). However, if these high-profile events are to encourage a sense of belonging and shore up a European identity, it is essential that citizens and their organisations should be very closely involved in planning and implementation, or better still, come forward with ideas themselves, as they are best placed to identify the key features and symbols of an identity that is part of their everyday lives.

4.3.2 The EESC believes that, within the confines of its remit, its contribution towards promoting the social dimension of culture and organising a permanent, able partnership with the European Parliament in this area is crucial to identifying and continuously honing a common cultural identity for European citizens. This cultural identity cannot be achieved by merely safeguarding a cultural heritage that is often less ‘common’ than we might want to admit. A common European citizenship is a highly contemporary issue. It will be forged through the decision to link the countries of Europe — of all Europe — ever more closely through the difficult but essential sharing of sovereignty. For, as Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it, ‘I knew a time when national identity was the only conceivable principle in relations between States. We now know the disasters that resulted’. A culture of shared sovereignty — not abandonment of sovereignty — this is the culture and identity of the European citizen of today, and of tomorrow even more so.

5. Conclusions and proposals

5.1 European citizenship is at the heart of the recent crisis following the rejection by some countries of the European Constitutional Treaty. Reconnecting citizens with the institutions of the Union must therefore, more than ever, be at the heart of Commission concerns and policy, in particular through the promotion of active European citizenship. A comprehensive debate of this issue thus needs to be organised with all stakeholders before the new programme for the period 2007-2013 is approved.

This debate could be organised within the framework of the symposium referred to in point 2.11 above, and the EESC could be tasked with preparing it.

5.2 The symposium should openly discuss active European citizenship, defining the rights and responsibilities of European citizens as opposed to those conferred by citizenship of individual Member States.

The option to define and trial economic, social, political, environmental and other rights that are specific to active European citizenship, particularly as regards solidarity and security (civil protection is one that springs to mind), should be discussed and put to the vote in a single European poll by universal suffrage.

5.3 The EESC believes that, despite the real problems involved, it is now crucial to deliver a European Association Statute, if we are to endow active European citizenship with an appropriate framework that goes beyond a simple — and contentious — ‘safe’ code of conduct.

5.4 In any event, and whatever the outcome of the EU budget negotiations, the EESC calls for the budget for the programme to be ringfenced, as it constitutes a minor outlay for a major plank in developing European citizenship, which the Commission rightly sees as a fundamental priority for EU action. Moreover, the EESC recommends not keeping to the announced per capita budget of EUR 0.55 for 6 years, but rather cultivating all possible synergies between the various Directorates-General in order to pool objectives and resources on this issue which concerns all the European institutions because of its central importance for the future. In this connection, European Union policy on active citizenship should be drawn up by a permanent inter-institutional unit, bringing together all stakeholder Directorates-General and representatives from all the other EU institutions.

5.5 The EESC suggests that primary education — rather than only lifelong learning programmes — is the time and place to teach European citizenship as a stand-alone subject rather than applying a merely cosmetic approach (colours, stickers, caps, festivals, etc.) Citizenship is not just a matter for active age brackets.

Following this line, the Commission could ask the Member States to include in their school syllabuses an EU knowledge component and questions that are specific to European citizenship. A primary level ‘Erasmus’ programme adapted to this age bracket should be envisaged, going well beyond traditional language exchange programmes.

We need to leave behind the static, unappealing European ‘sites’ that are currently available and harness all the new ICT potential, especially the playful, interactive, participatory features (perhaps even setting up a psychological evaluation unit for each new citizen support). The suggestion and proposals are consistent with the Comenius programme, whose objectives are:

1. to make young people and educators more aware of the diversity and value of European cultures;
2. to help young people get the basic qualifications and skills they need for their personal development, their future working lives and active European citizenship.

5.6 With regard to specific actions, all levels must be promoted together, without eliminating the micro-projects — where citizens are the protagonists and which help to promote European identity at local or national level — in favour of support granted to European networks. The only criterion for distributing funds to various types of action must be their impact on active European citizenship and involvement of citizens in the European project and in shaping and implementing EU policies.

5.7 The EESC fully endorses the Commission’s proposals which, from a technical standpoint, aim to simplify procedures radically in an area (direct, active citizen participation) that is much less able to cope with bureaucratic hurdles.

5.8 The EESC is convinced that the ‘invention’ of specific features of European citizenship, which are more than the mere sum of national citizenships (whether these features be of a symbolic, economic, socio-political, cultural or legal nature), is now an absolute priority for the European Union, and that the promotion of active citizenship can make a significant contribution here. The Committee is prepared to play its part in this ‘invention’ by coordinating the consultation of civil society organisations and by encouraging the other Community institutions to listen to their views and take them on board.

Brussels, 26 October 2005.

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