Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Contribution to the European Council of 15-16 June 2006 — Period of reflection

(2006/C 195/17)

On 15 February 2006, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up the following opinion: Contribution to the European Council of 15-16 June 2006 — Period of reflection and, acting under Rule 20 of the Rules of Procedure, appointed Mr Malosse as rapporteur general.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17-18 May 2006 (meeting of 17 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 133 votes to one with eight abstentions.

1. First of all, the EESC welcomes the Council Presidency’s intention not to restrict itself to a review of the initiatives taken during the period of reflection, but also to agree the next steps of the process.

2. The EESC restates the position expressed on this matter in its opinions of 24 September 2003 (1) and 28 October 2004 (2), which was that the constitutional treaty was a key instrument to enable the Union to address the challenges it faces. In particular, it reiterates the importance of the inclusion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which ensures that the Union’s policies are based on citizens’ rights, and of the provisions on the Union’s institutions and governance that give it greater visibility and efficiency.

3. Having regard also to the European Parliament resolution of 19 January 2006 on The period of reflection (the structure, subject and context for an assessment of the debate on the European Union).

4. The EESC takes the view that:

— the absence of a clear vision and of a consensus on the aims and purposes of European integration have fuelled doubts, despite the successes and achievements of 50 years of European integration;

— public scepticism relates more to the EU’s functioning and current policies than to the Constitutional Treaty itself, whose innovative nature has not been adequately explained to the public;

— the current institutional system, set up by the Nice Treaty, will not enable the European Union to progress on the path of integration. The current treaties do not fulfil the requirements of modern European governance and, in particular, give much too small a role to civil society organisations in Community policy and decision-making at all levels.

— it is up to the European Commission and the European Council, within their respective responsibilities, to make appropriate proposals to lay the foundations for a forward-looking vision of the future of Europe for its citizens, and to flesh out the Union’s policies so that they meet the expectations of the peoples of Europe. In this context, the EESC welcomes the fact that the inter-institutional agreement between the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission reached on 4 April 2006 commits to an increase in the 2007-2013 financial perspective above that initially agreed by the European Council. However, it notes that this increase is limited, and therefore deeply regrets that this financial perspective does not make it possible to release budgetary resources that are equal to Europe’s stated ambitions. On this matter, it refers to the opinion it issued on the subject on 15 September 2004 (3);

— for a communication strategy on Europe to be successful, it is important first to:

— set out a clear vision of the future of Europe;

— formulate and implement policies that give real added value to the public;

— raise the profile of European integration and its aims, and make them easier to understand;

— make the workings of the Union more democratic, in particular ensuring greater involvement of citizens and a more structured dialogue with organised civil society.

5. The EESC issues the following recommendations to the European Council of 15 and 16 June 2006:

5.1 Responsibilities

5.1.1 The responsibility for finding a rapid way out of the identity crisis the European Union is currently experiencing is largely in the hands of the Member States, and thus of the European Council. The June 2006 summit must therefore put out a clear message on the future of Europe and open up avenues that will provide a way out of the current political impasse. With this in mind, the EESC believes that the solution aimed at resolving the crisis must maintain the advances and balance achieved by the constitutional treaty, and take into consideration the fact that the treaty has so far been ratified by 15 Member States.

5.1.2 Under Article IV-443 (4) of the Constitutional Treaty, the two setbacks in the ratification process, the reasons for which clearly must be acknowledged, do not necessarily mean that the text has to be abandoned.

5.2 Better governance

5.2.1 The European institutions, Commission, European Parliament and Council, should press ahead with the most innovative aspects of the constitutional treaty in the area of governance. The EESC thus advocates expanding and strengthening, without delay, the process for consulting civil society organisations before any significant legislative initiative. It also asks the Commission to look into the conditions for implementing the right of citizens’ initiative.

5.2.2 In this context, the institutions should make better use of the EESC’s ability to help flesh out the EU’s policy by means of exploratory opinions and information reports, and through impact analyses.

5.2.3 Similarly, and in cooperation inter alia with the national Economic and Social Councils and similar institutions, the Committee will continue its initiatives aimed at making a decisive contribution to the promotion and greater structuring of dialogue and discussion between the EU institutions and organised civil society.

5.2.4 It would also be worthwhile to develop the principle of functional subsidiarity by assigning more and more responsibilities ‘on behalf of the EU’ to local and regional authorities and to civil society organisations, so as to speed up the process of citizens taking ownership of Europe. Subsidiarity monitoring should also be extended, not only to local and regional authorities, but also to civil society organisations.

5.3 Flesching out Community policies and European citizenship

5.3.1 It is up to the institutions of the Union to flesh out European policies so as to demonstrate their effectiveness and their positive impact on the daily life of citizens: employment, mobility, environment, social progress, youth policy, entrepreneurial spirit, combating discrimination and exclusion, etc. They should also carry on implementing the major European projects that enable people to identify with the Union (trans-European networks, space policy, etc.) and launch new ones such as European voluntary service and the European system of mobility, environment, social progress, youth policy, entrepreneurship.

5.3.2 It is up to the European Commission, in accordance with the role and powers vested in it by the treaties, to draw up and propose real common policies in areas where the added value of the European dimension no longer needs to be demonstrated (in particular energy, the environment and research). With this in mind, the most pragmatic solutions should be chosen, whether these be, for example and depending on the policy area, EU/Member State co-financing or greater cooperation.

5.3.3 As regards foreign policy, and in accordance with the commitment entered into at the European Council meeting in Vienna in 1998, the cohesion and solidarity of the EU must also be significantly boosted so as to replace the wide range of initiatives and positions that cast doubt upon the real willingness of Member States to play the EU card. A consistent and convincing presentation of legitimate EU interests around the world would also help to significantly strengthen the EU’s credibility among the European public and to raise its profile.

5.3.4 By imbuing the EU’s policies with substantive content, the Commission and the Council will give credibility to the revised Lisbon strategy and will pave the way for a post-2010 European project that is in line with public expectations, as long as it is backed up by resources that are really equal to the stated ambitions. It is the prospect of a comprehensive project for society, which is currently missing, that will help the public to better understand the constitutional treaty.

5.4 Make full use of the existing treaties

5.4.1 With immediate effect, and without waiting for a new treaty, the Commission and the Council should fully implement certain provisions of the Treaty of Nice such as those that allow for qualified majority voting in certain areas of social policy and justice and home affairs.

5.4.2 In addition, the EESC recommends that the Commission and the Member States take new initiatives in the area of economic governance of the Union so as to strengthen the process of coordinating the Member States’ economic and finance policies with a view to boosting investment aimed at achieving the goals set out by the Lisbon strategy. With this in mind, it would be helpful to strengthen the remit of the Eurogroup immediately.

5.4.3 Furthermore, it is up to the Council to take immediate action to address the delays, shortcomings and indeed gaps that remain in a number of areas such as the establishment of European statutes for associations, mutual societies and small businesses and the Community patent. It must also act quickly to remove the remaining obstacles to the free movement of people, services and goods. These delays and gaps have damaged the credibility of the EU institutions and have provided fertile ground for the expression of national self-interest and a resurgence of competition between Member States.
5.4.4 When a draft EU legislative act put forward by the European Commission, in its capacity as the institution with the right of initiative and guardian of the general interest, is not adopted, the Council must explain to the general public, and even justify, its decision to block the legislation.

5.5 Credible and consistent information

5.5.1 The EESC calls on the Member States to develop targeted and permanent information campaigns on the achievements of European integration and its added value, and to put in place European civic education from primary school level upwards. If this information is to be credible and not written off as propaganda, it must involve networks of civil society organisations with the aim of having a substantive policy debate. The European Commission also has a fundamental role to play in ensuring the consistency of communication activities across Europe. In this context, the Commission should be more involved in defending the EU’s policies and mechanisms and not settle for a neutral stance.


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

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States


On 10 February 2006 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 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 3 May 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Greif.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17-18 May 2006 (meeting of 17 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 91 votes in favour with one abstention.

1. The Commission’s proposal for a decision

1.1 At the beginning of 2006, the Commission sent the Council a proposal for a decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States for 2006.

The proposal suggests keeping the 2005-2008 guidelines adopted in 2005 unchanged and recommending that the Member States continue to pursue their labour market and employment policies in accordance with the priorities set out in those guidelines.

1.2 In proposing this decision, the Commission is following the new cycle of governance resulting from the reform of the Lisbon strategy, under which the Employment Guidelines, which are adopted together with the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines in an integrated package, should, in essence, be fully reviewed only every three years.

1.3 This also means, therefore, that, for 2006, Member States in Council did not take the option of making any necessary adjustments in intermediate years.