Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Naiades II package, comprising the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Council Regulation (EC) No 718/1999 on a Community-fleet capacity policy to promote inland waterway transport

COM(2013) 621 final — 2013/0303 (COD),


COM(2013) 622 final — 2013/0302 (COD)

and Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Towards quality inland waterway transport — Naiades II

COM(2013) 623 final

(2014/C 177/11)

Rapporteur: Jan SIMONS

The Commission, the Council and the European Parliament decided on 10 September 2013, 7 and 31 October 2013, and 8 and 22 October 2013 respectively to consult the European Economic and Social Committee under Articles 91(1) and 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) on the

NAIADES II package,

comprising the


COM(2013) 621 final — 2013/0303 (COD)


COM(2013) 622 final — 2013/0302 (COD)

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Towards quality inland waterway transport — NAIADES II

COM(2013) 623 final

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 18 December 2013.

At its 495th plenary session, held on 21 and 22 January 2014 (meeting of 21 January), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 140 votes to 2 with 10 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC welcomes and supports the measures proposed by the Commission in the Communication and the two legislative proposals, subject to the following recommendations.

1.2 In the Committee’s view, the failure of inland waterway transport to increase its share of the transport market is primarily due to the lack of financial and policy support for the sector in the past.
1.3 It therefore calls on the Commission to provide inland waterways and the inland waterway sector with sufficient funds — the Committee anticipates that at least 20% would be logical — from the budget for the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and certain areas of Horizon 2020 (in particular innovation) to meet the objectives in its programme. It also urges the Commission to support and encourage Member States in maintaining and expanding infrastructure, and to develop new financing mechanisms.

1.4 Given the major importance of infrastructure in achieving the Commission’s objectives, the Committee urges the Member States to shoulder their responsibilities in this area of competence. In this connection, it would point to, amongst other things, the 2010 ‘Danube Strategy’ for boosting the development of the Danube region and the related declaration signed in June 2012.

1.5 The EESC supports the Danube strategy, but notes that, to date, neither the strategy nor the 2012 declaration has been adequately implemented. It therefore urges the Commission to set up a working group to monitor compliance with commitments made under the strategy and declaration.

1.6 The Committee strongly supports the NAIADES Staff Working Document on the implementation of greening measures at sector level, and hopes that, here too, adequate funding will be provided, not least to make up for the opportunity missed under the NAIADES I programme.

1.7 With reference to its opinion on social security in the sector, the Committee calls on all those involved to develop new initiatives in this area. The proposed harmonisation of occupational profiles (based on social dialogue) and coordination of professional qualifications at European level will play a key role here; the Commission will need to put these into effect in close cooperation with river commissions, in particular the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine.

1.8 The Committee sees the proposals for institutional cooperation between the European Union and the river commissions as a significant development. It urges the institutions concerned to coordinate the various regulatory regimes closely in order to achieve the desired harmonisation.

2. Introduction

2.1 Every year around 500 million tonnes of cargo are moved via inland waterways; this is equivalent to transporting 25 million lorry loads and 140 billion tonne kilometres of cargo. Inland waterways also play a significant role in passenger transport, both in tourism (cruise ships and day trips) and increasingly in urban and regional transport (e.g. ferry services).

2.2 Conventional transport markets such as the long-distance transport of bulk freight are expanding to include new innovative services, with inland waterways also becoming more and more important in short-distance transport.

2.3 Owing to economies of scale and energy efficiency, inland waterways have the lowest external costs in terms of CO₂ emissions, noise, accidents and bottlenecks. With the highest safety standards in the world, this is the principal mode of transport for hazardous goods in Europe.

2.4 The inland waterways sector employs roughly 44 000 people, with around another 12 000 jobs indirectly linked to it. It is facing a shortage of skilled staff, and therefore offers employment opportunities for job-seekers, while new training programmes and career prospects mean that it offers interesting jobs for young people.

2.5 Inland waterways operate in a completely liberalised market, but since 2008 they have been negatively affected by the economic crisis. The recession has caused transport volumes to fall in the past few years, which has led to overcapacity in the sector, associated with low transport prices. Various studies assume that this situation will only improve after a few years.
2.6 The extensive European inland waterways network, consisting of around 37 000 km of rivers and canals, still has the capacity to absorb more transport flows, though this presupposes a well-maintained system of navigable waterways. During the NAIADES I action programme (2006-2014) waterways were not adequately maintained and missing links were not completed, often because of national budget cuts. Waterways infrastructure projects were further hampered by lengthy and sluggish procedures and avoidable red tape.

3. Gist of the Communication

3.1 The Commission published its communication Towards quality inland waterway transport — NAIADES II 10 September 2013. It notes in the communication that the predecessor programme, NAIADES I, created momentum but that the economic and environmental prospects for inland navigation are deteriorating and that little progress has been made in improving infrastructure. The sector is also currently in an economic crisis, with resulting overcapacity.

3.2 The opportunities and challenges of this mode of transport have persuaded the Commission to extend its previous inland waterways action programme. NAIADES II is intended to promote long-term structural changes in the inland waterway sector without interfering with the free market.

3.3 NAIADES provides for specific measures in the following spheres:

— quality infrastructure, which also means improving the interconnection and integration of inland waterways with other transport modes. Ports (sea and inland) play an important role in interconnections;

— innovation;

— a smooth-functioning market;

— reducing environmental pressure through lower emissions;

— a skilled workforce and quality jobs;

— integration of inland waterway transport into the multimodal logistics chain.

3.4 This action programme is accompanied by two legislative proposals, one relating to technical requirements for inland waterway vessels and the other amending the capacity regulation for inland waterway transport. Both these acts have already been in force in the sector for a long time, and the aim of the Commission’s new proposals is to bring them up to date. The Communication is also complemented by an extensive Staff Working Document on greening of the fleet.

3.4.1 The Commission’s proposal for a new technical standards directive to replace Directive 2006/87/EC is intended to improve coordination between the various regulatory bodies, and provides for a mechanism to this end. It is the first practical expression of the institutional cooperation envisaged at regulatory level.

3.4.2 The Commission’s proposal amending the capacity regulation (No 718/1999) expands the instances in which the reserve funds can be used by the organisations representing inland waterway transport, in particular to include environmental purposes. It ties in with the package of proposed measures as a whole.

3.5 Various players are to be tasked with implementing the measures in the communication. Developing a quality infrastructure is the responsibility of the EU and the Member States. The same goes for creating a better legal framework to establish a level playing-field on the internal market. Responsibility for market transparency and innovation falls to sectoral players.

3.6 The Communication also addresses the issue of improving governance. Inland navigation has historically fallen under various jurisdictions. Freedom of movement on the major European rivers is enshrined in international treaties and the concomitant legislation. The EU also has competence in the sphere of inland navigation. The Commission proposes a new approach to deal with these sometimes overlapping powers and activities; this would consist in close cooperation with the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, to which end an agreement has been signed.
3.7 NAIADES II has no budget of its own to fund the measures proposed. The Communication instead refers at EU level to the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) for infrastructure measures and to Horizon 2020 for financing research, development and innovation. Both of these funding instruments would also be used for policy support actions and greening of the fleet.

3.8 The Commission wishes to raise its aspirations for promoting inland waterways by focusing on areas with the highest added value. It also expects the Member States and sectoral players to make a contribution here.

4. General comments

4.1 The Committee is a firm advocate of using inland waterways capacity more effectively, especially in view of the huge advantages this mode of transport offers in relation to transport volumes, sustainability and external costs. The importance and potential of inland waterway transport mean that it offers significant opportunities with regard to both freight and passenger transport. In addition to cruises, waterborne transport is also increasing in prominence in densely populated urban areas where ferry services are provided.

4.2 The Committee shares the Commission's view that inland waterways are underused and backs the Commission's efforts to increase the sector's share in total transport. However, in trying to improve the integration of inland waterways and to create the conditions for doing this, the Commission underestimates the importance of a solid financial basis for the action programme. The EESC notes that NAIADES II presents an ambitious new plan, but that there is still a lack of clarity regarding its funding; it therefore awaits with interest the Commission Staff Working Document on NAIADES financing, and urges the Commission to take account of past shortcomings.

4.3 In the assessment it made as part of the mid-term report on NAIADES I, the Commission notes that the programme has created momentum in the sector and raised awareness of its potential, particularly among policy-makers at national level.

4.4 Moreover, experience with NAIADES I and the latest TEN-T guidelines shows that the Member States cannot remain uncommitted if they subscribe to the objectives of this Communication. The Committee therefore also urges the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission to establish this clearly and explicitly.

4.5 It is clear to the EESC that promoting inland navigation requires effective and close cooperation between the European Commission and the river commissions. The Committee supports the proposals in this regard and points here to the important role played by the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine in developing inland navigation and high technical and safety standards.

4.6 The EESC highlights the importance of infrastructure in meeting the Commission's objectives. A well-maintained waterways network without bottlenecks and missing links is essential in order to improve the integration of inland navigation and ensure its reliability. The Committee urges the Member States to shoulder their responsibilities in this area of competence.

4.7 Given the limited budget of the Connecting Europe Facility, the EESC expects the Commission to make at least 20% of its resources available for waterways and to support and encourage the Member States to maintain and extend this infrastructure. Unlike roads and rail, waterways in Europe still have enough capacity to absorb many times the current transport volume, which means that investment in waterways can produce a maximum return on investment.

4.8 The EESC takes note of the intention to carry out a consultation exercise on infrastructure charging with a view to internalising external costs in inland waterway transport. The Committee points out that the question of internalising external costs in inland navigation must be handled very carefully and that this tool should be used only to increase the volume of inland waterway transport and improve its competitive position.

4.9 One of the aims of NAIADES II is to make the sector more attractive on the labour market and create high-quality jobs, and to promote labour mobility. This is the point of trying to harmonise career profiles and coordinate professional qualifications at European level, which may help to resolve the shortage of skilled staff in inland waterway transport.
4.10 With regard to social security, the EESC refers to its opinion from 2005 (TEN/200) calling for the establishment of a Community social policy for inland waterway transport. There have been further developments in this area in recent years through social dialogue, leading to the drawing up of specific rules on working time in inland waterway transport, on which the social partners have signed an agreement. The EESC calls for more initiatives to be taken in the framework of social dialogue to make careers in the sector more attractive.

5. Specific comments

5.1 As regards the new TEN-T guidelines, the EESC urges the Commission to ensure that the position of waterways is firmly established when implementing the new multimodal corridor approach. The multimodal corridor plans should ensure a level playing-field for all modes, and the inland waterways sector must be allowed to play a substantial role when these plans are drawn up.

5.2 The EESC considers the inclusion of all waterways in class IV and above in the TEN-T core network to be very important. This entails a commitment on the part of the Member States to ensure that these waterways are maintained and upgraded, and to fully support the removal of bottlenecks so as to make the most of the spare capacity on Europe’s waterways. The Committee would draw attention to those rivers that still have ample capacity to absorb transport volumes, such as the Danube and the Elbe. It urges the Member States, with the support of the Commission, to remove bottlenecks on these rivers and to complete missing links — such as the Seine-Scheldt link — without delay.

5.3 The Danube has a particular role to play in the development of transport in the countries of central and eastern Europe, as the Commission acknowledges in its 2010 ‘Danube Strategy’ to boost the development of the Danube region. Transport on the Danube is one of the pillars of this strategy, and should contribute to the growth of inland waterway transport on this important river. The Danube countries — unfortunately with one exception — followed this up in June 2012 by signing a declaration undertaking to maintain the Danube to the relevant standards in order to prevent future hindrances to inland waterway transport caused by inadequate water depth.

5.4 The EESC supports this Commission strategy, but notes that, to date, neither the strategy nor the 2012 declaration has been adequately implemented. It therefore urges the Commission to set up a working group to monitor compliance with commitments made under the strategy and declaration, and to resolve any problems identified without delay to avoid compromising the envisaged development of transport on this important corridor.

5.5 The Commission notes that inland waterways lag behind other modes with respect to innovation. One reason for this is the longevity of equipment. A culture of innovation is also lacking in the sector. The Commission calls on the sector to take the lead in this area and develop an innovation policy.

5.6 The Committee agrees with these points, but also highlights both the longevity of equipment in the inland waterways sector and the high level of investment, which make the innovation rate slower. High investment costs mean that innovation must be encouraged through adequate financial and economic incentives and easier access to funding, which so far the programme has not provided.

5.7 The Committee notes that with the introduction of LNG-fuelled vessels, the sector itself has already developed very advanced innovation projects. The Committee calls on the competent bodies to create a legal framework and develop infrastructure for these and for alternative fuel supplies without delay so that such innovation can be widely deployed and further encouraged.

5.8 A Staff Working Document on greening the fleet is attached to the Commission Communication. In this document the Commission sets out scenarios for reducing atmospheric emissions. The EESC knows that inland waterways emit much less CO₂ than road and rail, but the document does not mention this.

5.9 By focusing on air pollutants other than CO₂, the Commission concludes that inland navigation now risks becoming the most polluting transport mode. The Committee notes in this regard that work to develop future emissions standards must avoid distortions of competition and take account of the need for an adequate supply of appropriate engines for the inland navigation sector.
5.10 In the Committee’s view, the Commission could play an important role in spurring the sector to innovation and greening and ought to provide substantial financial support. In view of the benefit to society of improving the environmental performance of inland navigation, there is good reason to provide support for this from EU and national resources, which can have a significant catalytic effect.

5.11 The Committee therefore calls on the Commission to use every means to earmark funding from the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and Horizon 2020 for putting greening of the fleet and other measures from the NAIADES proposal into effect once the multiannual budget of the EU has been fixed.

5.12 The EESC also urges the sector to make use of the resources available in the reserve fund for greening purposes, in order to improve the industry’s image. The option to do so is opened up by the proposed amendment to the capacity regulation, which forms part of the NAIADES II package.

5.13 Professionalisation and closer cooperation within and on the part of the sector will undoubtedly help to improve its economic position on a structural level, given that the economic crisis in inland navigation has recently resulted once again in structural overcapacity in the sector.


The President of the European Economic and Social Committee
Henri MALOSSE