

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the statistics relating to the trading of goods between Member States'

(COM(2003) 364 final — 2003/0126 (COD))

(2004/C 32/19)

On 3 July 2003 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned proposal.

In view of the urgent nature of the work, the Committee decided at its 403rd plenary session of 29 and 30 October 2003 (meeting of 29 October) to appoint Ms Florio as rapporteur-general and adopted the following opinion unanimously.

1. Background

1.1. The present regulation on statistics relating to the trading of goods between Member States (known as Intrastat) resulted from an agreement amending the system for collecting data on trade both between EU Member States and with third countries. The agreement, signed in 1991 ⁽¹⁾, came into force in 1993, coinciding the completion of the single market and the disappearance of internal physical borders.

1.2. With the abolition of the system for collecting statistics based on customs declarations, the creation of a new instrument providing fuller information on trading of goods became essential, and could indeed be seen as a key support for the single market.

1.3. Statistics in this area are vital in connection with the balance of payments, national accounts and, of course, the effective operation and monitoring of the single market itself.

1.4. At this stage it became necessary to create a flexible, straightforward and harmonised system in keeping with the various national collection and accounting systems.

1.5. At the same time, the new regulation will have to ensure simplification in two areas: firstly, product nomenclature and secondly, a reduction in the number of statistical variables.

2. Characteristics of the new proposal

2.1. In brief, the new regulation which is to come into force in 2005:

- provides clearer and simpler rules;
- defines its scope, leaving the Member States greater freedom to meet national needs;
- accords a more important role to the administrative organisation of each country;
- is the result of three separate studies (an opinion poll of information providers in six Member States, a sample study of users of Community statistics and a study on problems with the product nomenclature in Sweden);
- retains the thresholds system while simplifying it so as not to impose an excessive burden on data providers (especially SMEs);
- introduces new provisions on deadlines for the transmission of data, intended primarily to meet the requirements expressed by the European Central Bank (macro-economic and short-term policy);
- retains the link between statistical information and fiscal formalities in the trade sector;
- introduces provisions concerning quality of statistical information;
- strengthens the principle of confidentiality of available data, in accordance with the existing Extrastat system;
- sets up a regulatory committee, instead of the present management committee.

⁽¹⁾ Council Regulation (EEC) No 3330/91.

3. Comments and recommendations

3.1. As indicated in previous opinions, the EESC welcomes developments in the sphere of statistics and data collection by the Commission and the Member States which are designed to strengthen and monitor the progress of economic and monetary union.

3.2. The creation of an instrument which is readily understood and easily used by businesses, especially SMEs, in their capacity as data providers, is at this stage essential, as is a different approach to the national statistical bodies responsible for collecting these data.

3.3. In view of the importance of such an instrument, a wide-reaching information campaign — focusing particularly on SMEs — will be needed to explain how, under the new regulation, information will be collected and how it will be used.

3.4. A specific grassroots information and training programme may be necessary in this regard, preparing businesses

for compliance with the regulation and removing any obstacles which might hinder their activity.

3.5. The Commission should be in a position to introduce flexible means of disseminating such information through a range of channels (business associations, chambers of commerce, etc.) and using different media (Internet, CDs, etc.).

3.6. Sound information will also prevent those responsible for providing information from incurring the penalties laid down by the Member States.

3.7. Information on the trading thresholds (which are accompanied by exemptions, facilities, etc.) is currently forwarded to the Commission which, however, has no means of subsequently checking on the data provided.

3.8. An enhanced link between the European data collection system and national statistical bodies could in future ensure greater reliability and uniformity of data collection criteria.

Brussels, 29 October 2003.

*The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee*

Roger BRIESCH
