

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Promotion of sea transport and the recruitment and training of seafarers'

(2005/C 157/05)

On 29 January 2004, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on the 'Promotion of sea transport and the recruitment and training of seafarers'.

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 5 October 2004. The rapporteur was **Mr Chagas**.

At its 413th plenary session of 15 and 16 December 2004 (meeting of 15 December 2004), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 137 votes to 1 with 5 abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 In 1996 the European Commission and the Irish Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers organised an international conference in Dublin under the title 'Is the European Union Seafarer an Endangered Species?' The conference acknowledged that European seafarers were vital to the sustainability of Europe's maritime industry. A number of proposals were made to re-establish, in sufficient numbers, a highly skilled pool of seafarers. That same year the Commission presented an analysis of the situation in its Communication 'Towards a new maritime strategy' ⁽¹⁾. Those concerns were also reflected in a Resolution of 24 March 1997 on a new strategy to increase the competitiveness of Community shipping ⁽²⁾. The Council of Ministers of the European Union endorsed the Commission's communication and 'inter-alia' recognised that positive measures were needed to foster the employment of Community seafarers.

1.2 The Commission has recognised in the Communication on the training and recruitment of seafarers ⁽³⁾ a sharp decline in the supply of well-trained personnel, especially officers in the last two decades. Since the early 1980s both EU fleet and the number of EU seafarers have declined significantly. However, the schedule passenger and ferry industry in the EU is an exception, continuing to be served mainly by EU-flag vessels crewed predominantly by EU nationals. The industry, the Member States and the Commission have addressed the issue of the declining number of EU seafarers, together with the shortage of well-qualified seafarers on a number of occasions; however, measures identified to arrest and reverse the decline have largely been ineffective.

1.3 A number of studies and research projects have sought to identify and address the decline in EU seafarer numbers. This has included:

— the 1996 study on the maritime professions in the European Union (financed by the Commission);

— the 1998 FST/ECSA Joint Study (financed by the Commission) ⁽⁴⁾;

— the METHAR ⁽⁵⁾ Research Project and the METNET ⁽⁶⁾ Research Project (both funded by the European Commission under the Transport RTD Programme of the 4th and 5th frameworks respectively).

1.4 The BIMCO/ISF 2000 Manpower Update Report ⁽⁷⁾, published in April 2000, is probably the most comprehensive study of the global supply and demand for merchant seafarers to date. It estimated a shortfall of 16,000 officers, or 4 % of the workforce. The projections for officers for the year 2010, dependent upon growth, manning skills, wastage and increased training, show, after sensitivity analysis, either an excess of around 11 %, or a deficit of 24 %. It is expected that a further update in 2005 is likely to indicate a deficit. According to the FST/ECSA Joint Study in 1998 ⁽⁸⁾, the EU is more seriously affected with an estimated shortage of some 13,000 officers in 2001, rising to around 36,000 officers in 2006.

1.5 A recent study ⁽⁹⁾ conducted in the United Kingdom (UK), by the University of Cardiff, commissioned by the Department for Transport, the Chamber of Shipping and the Marine Society have identified a significant shortfall with respect to the number of well qualified seafarers available to fill positions in maritime shore-based employment in the UK.

⁽⁴⁾ Source: Joint Study of the Federation of Transport Workers' Unions in the European Union (FST) and of the European Ship Owners' Association (ECSA): 'Improving the Employment Opportunities for EU Seafarers: An Investigation to Identify Seafarers Training and Education Priorities' (1998)

⁽⁵⁾ METHAR: Harmonization of European Maritime Education and Training Schemes

⁽⁶⁾ METNET: Thematic Network on Maritime Education, Training and Mobility of Seafarers

⁽⁷⁾ BIMCO (Baltic and International Maritime Council)/ISF (International Shipping Federation) 2000 Manpower Update – The World-wide Demand for and Supply of Seafarers – April 2000

⁽⁸⁾ See footnote 3

⁽⁹⁾ Source: Study entitled 'The UK economy's requirements for people with experience of working at sea 2003', commissioned by the Department for Transport, the Chamber of Shipping and the Marine Society in the UK undertaken by the University of Cardiff.

⁽¹⁾ COM(96) 81 final, of 8.4.1997.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 109, 8.4.1997, p.1

⁽³⁾ COM(2001) 188 final of 6.4.2001. EESC Opinion : OJ C 80, 3.4.2002, p. 9.

1.6 The Commission has recognised that Short Sea Shipping is an integral part of the transport system ⁽¹⁰⁾. While a number of initiatives have been taken to promote Short Sea Shipping, namely in the frame of the guidelines for state aid to maritime transport, this has not brought about any significant material improvement with respect to the employment of EU seafarers. Registered tonnage has ceased to decline in some Member States and some have seen an increase. However, the number of EU seafarers continues to decline.

2. Commission recommendations promoting the recruitment and training of seafarers, and sea transport ⁽¹¹⁾

2.1 Whilst acknowledging that employment and training are two issues for which the Member States have prime responsibility, the Commission has identified and made recommendations with respect to priority actions:

- a) proper application of existing Community and international law on living and working conditions and the quality of shipboard operations in order to improve the social conditions as a means of recruitment and retention of high calibre personnel;
- b) recognised the increased competition from cheaper non-EU labour on schedule passenger ferry services within the European Union. While providing a solution to this problem identified the need for parallel arrangements by the social partners;
- c) Member States and the social partners organise coordinated awareness campaigns at national and European level to re-launch the image of the shipping industry and give young people the facts about the opportunities and implications of a maritime career;
- d) ship owners explore the possibilities in respect of the improvement of living and working conditions, including tours of duty and remuneration;
- e) ensure the preservation of a high-quality system of maritime training in the EU with Member States and the social partners ensuring a sufficient number of on-board training places;
- f) Member States and the social partners explore and take advantage of the opportunities offered by Community instruments that are available for the financial support of maritime training;
- g) gave recognition that the Community may support the industry's efforts to reverse the present shortfall of the EU seafarers by sponsoring a number of ad hoc research projects through the 6th framework programme.

2.1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee expressed the opinion ⁽¹²⁾ that all those to whom the Commission communication on training and recruitment of seafarers was addressed, should take careful note of its recommendations. In particular, reference was made to Member States making the fullest use of state aid to maritime transport and other existing EU aid measures. The Committee drew attention for the need for improvement in on-board living and working conditions, the ratification and enforcement of the relevant international standards and where necessary take appropriate action to boost the social, prestige and job satisfaction of the seafaring professions. The Committee also drew attention to the need for cooperation and promotion of the profession by Member States and the social partners.

2.2 Acknowledging that sea transport is an issue for which the Member States have prime responsibility, the Commission has identified and made recommendations with respect to priority actions. Whilst there has been considerable emphasis upon Short Sea Shipping, measures have not been confined to this sector:

- a) legislative actions include implementation of the Directive on certain formalities for ships to arrive in and/or depart from ports in Member States (IMO-FAL), implementation of Marco Polo, standardisation and harmonization of intermodal loading units, Motorways of the Sea and improving the environmental performance of Shipping;
- b) technical actions include Guide to Customs Procedures for Short Sea Shipping, identification and elimination of obstacles to making Short Sea Shipping more successful, approximation of national applications and computerisation of Community Customs procedures and research and technological development;
- c) operational actions include One-Stop Administrative Shops, ensuring the vital role of Short Sea Shipping Focal Points, ensuring good functioning of and guidance to Short Sea Promotion Centres, promote the image of Short Sea Shipping as a successful transport alternative and the collection of statistical information.

2.2.1 The European Economic and Social Committee supported the Communication from the Commission in an opinion ⁽¹³⁾ on the action programme for the promotion of Short Sea Shipping. The Committee did, however, draw attention to the need for the removal of bottlenecks in order that Short Sea Shipping could evolve into intermodality. Concern was expressed on a number of associated issues. The Committee also stressed the importance for continuous monitoring of the actions to be undertaken.

⁽¹⁰⁾ COM(2003) 155 final of 7.4.2003

⁽¹¹⁾ See footnote 3

⁽¹²⁾ EESC Opinion OJ C 80 of 3.4.2002 p.9

⁽¹³⁾ EESC Opinion OJ C 32 of 5.2.2004, p. 67

3. Council recommendations promoting the recruitment and training of seafarers, and sea transport

3.1 The Council acknowledged ⁽¹⁴⁾ the general structure and policy directions of the Commission's Communication on the 'training and recruitment of seafarers' ⁽¹⁵⁾. In so doing acknowledged the importance of shipping in world and intra-Community trade. Further acknowledged that sea transport is the most effective, environment-friendly and cheap mode of transport.

3.2 While recognising the competitive nature of shipping, the Council also stressed the importance of combating sub-standard shipping by both the incorporation of international standards or filling gaps in international legislation, thereby emphasizing the importance of the implementation and enforcement of existing legislation, including legislation relating to living and working conditions as seafarers are fundamental elements for ship safety.

3.3 It specifically acknowledged the importance of the human factor in quality shipping and the need to favourably influence public opinion, both with respect to image and the attractiveness of seafaring as a career.

3.4 Further acknowledge the positive effect of the Community guidelines for state aid in the maritime sector and their importance in maintaining competitiveness of Member States' fleets and increasing the number of vessels under Member States' registers.

3.5 While acknowledging the importance of sea transport, the Council identified and made recommendations, 'inter alia', with respect to the following specific issues:

- a) early production of revised Community guidelines for state aid in the maritime sector in order to ensure the maintenance of competitiveness and the promotion of maritime knowledge, as well as the employment of European seafarers;
- b) Member States to improve the image of shipping;
- c) further promotion of quality shipping through stricter compliance with IMO and ILO legal instruments, as well as Community legislation in the framework of Flag State Implementation (FSI) and Port State Control (PSC);
- d) the possibility of setting up a European quality reward system, recognising quality operators complying 'inter alia' with standards of safety, living and working conditions for seafarers, security and environmental protection as an incentive to promote quality shipping;

- e) welcomed the intention of the Commission to provide a report on possible development of specific recognition procedures for certificates of competency within the Community, thorough compliance with STCW requirements;
- f) social partners to contribute to the efforts of Member States and the Commission to attract young people to the seafaring profession, including the creation of attractive working and salary conditions. This also to include the promotion of employment of women at sea as well as on land;
- g) ship owners to ensure and preserve a sufficient level of employment for EU citizens on board their ships and in their companies. In particular, the promotion of a career with perspectives of mobility, promotion and future employment by signing with young officers' career contracts. This to be complimented by improvements in working and living conditions taking advantage of modern technological and communication means;
- h) the importance of conventions referring to labour standards, i.e. ILO conventions.

4. European Parliament's opinions concerning promoting the recruitment and training of seafarers, and sea transport

4.1 On a number of occasions the European Parliament has addressed the issue of the promotion of maritime transport and the seafaring professions. In particular, in its recent resolution on improving safety at sea (P5_TA_PROV(2004)0350), following the accident with the tanker Prestige off the Spanish Galician coast, a number of proposals would, if implemented, significantly contribute, directly or indirectly, to promote EU shipping with benefits for both the EU ship owners and the EU seafarers.

4.2 Amongst others, the EESC notes with interest the following recommendations included in that report:

4.2.1 '[The EP] calls for a comprehensive and cohesive European maritime policy, which would have as its objective the creation of a European maritime safety area; considers that this policy should be based on the following measures:

- the banning of substandard vessels;
- ...;
- the improvement of living and working conditions and training for seafarers....'

⁽¹⁴⁾ Council 2515th meeting 5.6.2003, 9686/03 (Presse 146)

⁽¹⁵⁾ See footnote 3

4.2.2 '[The EP] stresses that, in the interests of safety at sea, it is essential that seafarers should receive a wage which assigns value to their work, and that an end be put to the overexploitation which exists on many ships; calls on the Commission to work for harmonisation of, and a higher status for, this occupation on a European scale by means of legislation and to act to this end within the IMO.'

4.2.3 '[The EP] calls for measures to raise the prestige of maritime occupations and make them more attractive to young people in general and young Europeans in particular.'

5. General comments and observations

5.1 As part of an ongoing programme of sustainable development within the EU, it is recognised that shipping has a vital role. The importance of sea transport was identified in a White Paper from the Commission entitled 'European Transport Policy for 2010: Time to Decide' ⁽¹⁶⁾ and outlined in a maritime policy document entitled 'European Union Legislation and Objectives for Sea Transport' ⁽¹⁷⁾.

5.2 Shipping carries 40.7 % by value and 69.9 % by weight of EU Exports/Imports ⁽¹⁸⁾. This is significantly higher for Member States with island status. Sea transport is the most important mode of transport with respect to external EU trade.

5.3 Shipping carries 12 % by value and 19.7 % by weight of intra-Community trade ⁽¹⁹⁾. For off-lying islands and some regions this is significantly higher, in particular, the UK and Ireland who are almost entirely dependent upon sea transport for their economic well-being and prosperity.

5.4 A healthy and vibrant shipping industry contributes to the maintenance of other forms of transport. In addition, a successful shipping industry aids the maintenance and prosperity of the whole maritime sector. In particular, meeting the requirement for trained, high calibre seafarers to migrate into the service, financial, leisure and manufacturing sub-sectors. While there is the possibility of some element of substitution, alternative methods of training are not always desirable or possible.

5.5 A distinction needs to be made between ratings and officers. Ship owners appear to be more inclined to employ EU officers, despite higher labour costs.

5.6 A significant number of EU officers are employed at sea in areas of high risk and high value and in senior positions throughout the industry on a variety of ships at sea. The experience of such individuals is utilised extensively in both shipping companies and management of fleets both within and outside the EU.

5.7 EU ratings have been replaced in significant numbers by non-EU seafarers on EU registered vessels. Increasingly employment of EU ratings is confined to specialist vessels, including those deployed in the offshore energy sector. This is a consequence of cost reduction measures by ship owners seeking to reduce their labour costs to remain competitive and/or increase their profitability.

5.8 It is recognised that the sea ports are vital transport hubs essential for furtherance of trade and economic development of Member States. The importance of sea ports as transport hubs supported by statistical data is included in the Annual Report 2003 of the European Sea Port Organisation ⁽²⁰⁾. EU sea ports rely upon highly qualified and experienced seafarers in a number of positions. While marine pilots and harbour masters are a readily identifiable group, experienced seafarers are employed in port management and logistic operations.

5.9 A significant amount of revenue is generated in the EU from the provision of specialist shipping services. In addition to the direct management and operation of fleets, this extends to areas such as brokerage, law and financial services.

5.10 The manufacture of equipment, including safety equipment for ships and the leisure industry is significant within the EU. A number of ex-seafarers are employed in this sub-sector in both development and sales.

5.11 Shipbuilding, while suffering extensively from competition, particularly from the Far East, is important to the economies of some Member States and regions. Concentration is now focused upon warship, cruise ship and highly specialised vessels. There is also significant activity with respect to the repair of ships and provision for the Offshore Energy sector.

5.12 There is also a significant demand for highly qualified and experienced seafarers in the regulatory bodies of the EU Member States. Such personnel are essential in order to ensure adequate FSI and PSC inspection of vessels in order to ensure the safety of life at sea and the protection of the marine environment.

⁽¹⁶⁾ White Paper 'European transport policy for 2010: time to decide' – European Commission 2001

⁽¹⁷⁾ Maritime Policy 'European Union legislation and objectives for sea transport' – European Commission 2002

⁽¹⁸⁾ EU Energy and Transport in Figures Statistical Pocketbook 2003 – European Commission

⁽¹⁹⁾ See footnote 16

⁽²⁰⁾ European Sea Ports Organisation Annual Report 2003

5.13 Nautical Colleges in the Community provide a high standard of education/training for non-EU nationals so aiding the safety of navigation, safety of life at sea and protection of the marine environment.

5.14 Highly qualified and experienced EU seafarers are required for sustainable development of the maritime infrastructure and service related sub-sections. The joint proposal from ECSA/ETF for a project ⁽²¹⁾ on the mapping of career paths in the maritime industries has been accepted and its conclusions should be available in the course of 2005.

5.15 There is insufficient evidence to suggest that young EU citizens do not wish to embark upon a career in the shipping industry. Where there are effective promotional campaigns offering opportunities within the shipping industry they attract a significant number of applicants.

6. Maritime profession

6.1 It is recognised that there is an increasingly ageing workforce and present levels of recruitment are insufficient to replace the current number of EU seafarers. This is particularly so with respect to senior officers who are not only employed on EU flag vessels, but are in demand on foreign flag ships. Given the time necessary to train such individuals and for them to gain the necessary experience it has to be recognised that the situation is now becoming critical in some Member States.

6.2 The attraction of seafaring as a career appears to differ considerably across EU Member States. This may be as a consequence of differing economic circumstances, geographical location or culture.

6.3 It has been suggested that young people are increasingly unwilling to spend long periods of time at sea since it is considered to be socially and financially unattractive. However, there are few occupations that offer prolonged leave periods so as to engage in recreational activity and travel.

6.4 There is empirical evidence from the United Kingdom to suggest that where there is an effective promotional campaign, bringing about increased awareness of careers in the shipping industry, there are sufficient numbers of young people applying for the training positions offered.

6.5 In the interests of the sustainability of the maritime infrastructure industries and as part of a promotional campaign to induce young persons into the maritime profession, it is essential to offer a 'career in shipping' as opposed to 'career at sea'. In so doing, this demonstrates the wider opportunities that

are available and reduces the resistance of young persons and parents to a career in the industry.

6.6 Maritime education and training, whilst meeting the provisions of the STCW Convention and the ISM Code, need to ensure that courses are kept in date, meeting the needs of industry and equipping the individual for technological change.

6.7 Mariners from the fishing industry and the military provide a useful, albeit limited, pool of additional labour for the shipping industry. With both the decline in the fishing industry and contraction of EU Navies, those available for employment in the shipping sector, either at sea or ashore, are reducing. Substantial reductions in the size of the EU fishing fleet are unlikely to yield significant numbers, due to an ageing workforce.

6.8 The retention of EU ratings is also important for the retention of a European maritime skills base. Additionally, they can be a valuable source for recruitment to officers' positions through adequate training.

7. Maritime transport

7.1 It is acknowledged there have been a number of initiatives to promote short sea shipping in Member States. In some instances this is very much in its infancy and the effects are yet to be determined. However, there appears to be little cooperation between Member States. Initiatives such as branding 'Motorways of the Sea' are useful in increasing the profile of shipping. There is a need to engage all Member States in cooperative measures to make the fullest use of sea transport.

7.2 While acknowledging that State Aid Guidelines with respect to support measures for shipping are essential to ensure fair competition between Member States and increased competitiveness, the effectiveness of such measures could be in question given the continued decline in the employment of EU seafarers.

7.3 There is evidence to suggest that some Member States are not making the fullest use of the provisions that now exist under State Aid Guidelines. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of will to make change where restrictions either exist or are perceived to exist.

7.4 While recognising that it is a responsibility of Member States to promote shipping, the lack of central coordination appears to hamper development. As a consequence, initiatives such as the Marco Polo or the Motorways of the Sea projects designed to promote Short Sea Shipping have not yet had time to take effect.

⁽²¹⁾ Proposal for a joint ECSA/ETF Project on the mapping of career paths in the maritime industries 2004

8. Recommendations

8.1 The Commission should take appropriate action and make recommendations to:

- a) evaluate existing measures designed to encourage the promotion of sea transport by Member States;
- b) evaluate existing measures designed to encourage the recruitment and training of seafarers in Member States;
- c) estimate the number of EU seafarers necessary to sustain the maritime infrastructure and related industries;
- d) examine the operation and adequacy of existing provisions of State Aid Guidelines with respect to 1st certificate qualification. In addition, examine the provisions of a training link to 2nd and 3rd STCW certificate level for service/training while in employment onboard ship;
- e) ensure that priorities are set so as to encourage recruitment, training and retention of EU citizens as seafarers.

8.2 Member States should take appropriate action and make recommendations to:

- a) ensure that core ILO and consolidated Conventions, IMO Conventions as amended, and EU Directives are implemented and complied with so as to enable adequate employment and living conditions;
- b) provide adequate financial support for training making fullest use of existing State Aid Guidelines. This to include, where appropriate, use of tax and social security regimes;
- c) identify any further measures necessary to encourage the recruitment and training of EU seafarers;
- d) work with the social partners in order to introduce effective promotional campaigns to encourage young persons to take up a career in the shipping industry;
- e) ensure that adequate funding is available for the provision of high quality education/training establishments for specialist nautical training;
- f) encourage wider support with respect to training of seafarers from the maritime industries;
- g) ensure the necessary transport infrastructure so as to facilitate and expand the use of shipping;

- h) promote the use of sea transport as an environmentally friendly mode of transport;
- i) ensure a range of ships available to meet strategic and economic needs;
- j) ensure measures are not introduced to criminalise the seafaring profession and remove any measures currently in place that seek to criminalise seafarers, in particular, Masters.

8.3 The European Parliament and Council should:

- a) facilitate proposals from the Commission for measures to promote sea transport;
- b) facilitate proposals from the Commission for measures to promote the recruitment and training of seafarers;
- c) monitor the actions of the Commission with respect to measures intended to promote sea transport;
- d) monitor the actions of the Commission with respect to measures intended to promote the recruitment and training of seafarers.

8.4 Ship-owners should take appropriate action to:

- a) ensure adequate employment and social conditions so as to encourage recruitment and retention of high calibre EU seafarers;
- b) seek to recruit high calibre individuals and provide appropriate training;
- c) ensure adequate number of training and subsequent employment positions to ensure the supply of EU senior officers;
- d) investigate ways of developing shipping for intra EU trade and external trade.

8.5 Trade unions should take appropriate action to:

- a) promote careers in the shipping industry;
- b) seek to ensure the high professional standing of EU seafarers;
- c) include participation in the promotion of the shipping industry, including short sea shipping.

Brussels, 15 December 2004.

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