

OPINIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

465TH PLENARY SESSION HELD ON 15 AND 16 SEPTEMBER 2010

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘The European Union strategy for the Danube region’

(2011/C 48/02)

Rapporteur: **Mr BARABÁS**Co-rapporteur: **Mr MANOLIU**

On 26 February 2010, Mr Šefčovič, Vice-President of the European Commission asked the European Economic and Social Committee, to draw up an exploratory opinion on

‘The European Union strategy for the Danube region.’

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 20 July 2010. The rapporteur was Mr Barabás and the co-rapporteur was Mr Manoliu.

At its 465th plenary session, held on 15 and 16 September 2010 (meeting of 16 September 2010), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 123 votes to 2 with 8 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and proposals

1.1 The focus of this EESC opinion is to take the opportunity offered by the European Commission for organised European civil society to put forward specific, practical proposals as input for the action plan on the Danube Strategy ⁽¹⁾ (hereafter DS) currently being drawn up. The EESC hopes that its recommendations adequately reflect the commitment and the strong support of the Committee and organised European civil society for the Strategy. The EESC expects the future Strategy to be a real contribution towards improving the living and working conditions for all citizens in the Danube region, which it sees as the mirror of Europe.

1.2 *At political level the planned Danube strategy:*

1.2.1 must be open, inclusive and sensitive to social, economic and environmental considerations, taking into account proposals from civil society organisations and building on their experience;

1.2.2 given the complexity and interdependent nature of the relevant issues, can only be effective if it consistently follows an integrated approach rather than sectoral considerations and if it emphasises the necessity of meeting the objectives of the relevant stakeholders;

1.2.3 must take into account and seek to stimulate cooperation in areas of ‘soft security’, such as emergency services working together in the face of natural disasters, mobility of workers, enterprises, etc, or for developing contingency plans to deal with ecological accidents;

1.2.4 must help to make fuller use of the potential offered by the Lisbon Treaty, for example in consistent application of the principle of participatory democracy;

1.2.5 must be a suitable tool for:

a. genuinely contributing as a macroregional development policy to the deepening of the European integration process, especially in the framework of the ‘Europe 2020’ programme (smart, sustainable, inclusive);

⁽¹⁾ The future Danube Strategy will include the following EU Member States: Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania, and the following non-EU States: Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

b. bringing the six non-EU Member States in the region closer to the European Union and supporting their efforts to achieve integration;

1.2.6 must reflect EU macro-regional level policy, as well as the active, constructive role and contribution of organised civil society;

1.2.7 must help to coordinate the work of cooperation systems already existing at various levels and in different parts of the region, make this activity more effective and avoid duplication;

1.2.8 must have a clear, simple and transparent governance system, based on a bottom-up approach in relation to organised civil society; the results should be evaluated by annual conferences;

1.2.9 must be implemented in the form of a process allowing for flexibility and periodic reviews; and, when possible, for assigning additional financial resources;

1.2.10 must have realistic objectives and, to ensure successful implementation, set priorities; a medium-term action plan should be prepared for the achievement of these objectives; this action plan must make it clear that active involvement of all stakeholders in line with the partnership principle is a key prerequisite for success;

1.2.11 must have clearly visible and tangible results for society and citizens with a view to leading to better working and living conditions for citizens, including the youth;

1.2.12 must reflect the importance of social and civil dialogue;

1.2.13 must recognise the importance of connectivity in the Danube region;

1.2.14 must take into account the experience of implementing the EU Baltic Sea Strategy.

1.3 *Practical proposals at the level of civil society for the action plan accompanying the planned Danube strategy:*

1.3.1 a regional network of civil society organisations (Danube Civil Society Forum) should be developed to enable, among other things, joint action and projects; members of the network could meet once a year in the various countries of the region;

1.3.2 events (meetings, festivals, visits, exhibitions, fairs, etc.) are needed to strengthen the feeling among people of the Danube region of belonging together, develop regional awareness and maintain cultural diversity, particularly where young people are concerned; a regional cultural review should also help to achieve this objective;

1.3.3 a Danube Week should be held in a different place every year; this could be a suitable forum for discussing topical issues relating to the DS and presenting its results;

1.3.4 in order to ensure continued support from citizens and organised civil society, both within the EU and the neighbouring non-EU members, an effective and ongoing communication strategy for the DS is required;

1.3.5 in developing DS programmes, particular attention should be paid to disadvantaged and marginalised groups, especially the Roma;

1.3.6 regular contacts and cooperation between stakeholders in the region should be strengthened, together with social and civic dialogue; economic and social councils at national level could play an important role here;

1.3.7 the creation of a Danube Business Forum, which would include social and economic actors, could be an important tool for cooperation and economic, social and territorial cohesion in the Danube region; the region's employers' organisations should have access to and be encouraged to participate in the funding programmes geared towards the organisation of this forum;

1.3.8 further reduction or elimination of barriers to free movement together with application of the principles of decent work and fair pay should help to bring people closer together;

1.3.9 in implementing the Danube strategy, information society achievements and services should be made use of;

1.3.10 an international researcher group could be set up to carry out a scientific analysis and examination of strategic issues in the Danube region; the work of this group should be supported by a scholarship programme;

1.3.11 we need to consider how European years and thematic programmes could be linked to the Danube strategy;

1.3.12 initiatives concerned with the teaching of languages used in the region should be supported;

1.3.13 the EESC should set up a permanently operating observatory or study group on the Danube strategy;

1.3.14 elements of the Danube strategy and its action plan should be implemented and monitored by a management committee which includes representatives of organised civil society, and which could prepare an annual report on its conclusions;

1.3.15 in parallel with adoption of the DS, the European Commission should also support several pilot projects suitable for testing and acquiring initial experience;

1.3.16 implementation of the DS and its action plan could be financed from various sources: as well as funding from the EU (especially the Structural Funds) these could include countries in the region, the private sector and international financial institutions. Assuming support from these sources, we would recommend establishing a specific fund.

1.3.17 The EESC views the Danube strategy – scheduled for adoption during the first half of 2011 under the Hungarian presidency – as a decisive tool in developing a dynamic, competitive, inclusive and flourishing Danube region.

2. Danube strategy guidelines

2.1 In developing a DS it is important to define a theoretical framework underpinning the strategy for cooperation in the Danube area and an action programme to implement it.

2.2 It is therefore important to take the following into account when developing the DS:

— aspects relating to economic, social and territorial cohesion;

— the role played by the river in transport and infrastructure (with particular attention to Pan-European transport corridor VII, which affects the Danube) and the related potential to develop economic activities in general; the need to support fairway maintenance measures where necessary for transport and to remove the shipping bottlenecks referred to in TEN-T priority project 18 (in connection with this the Joint Statement drafted under the auspices of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) should be seen as a guide and enforced in practice); continue inter-modal transport projects (construction of container terminals in ports) and complementary road transport projects in the Danube region (bridges with a major impact on goods transport flows); furthermore, the need to carry out projects that

would have a major impact on development, such as the Danube-Bucharest canal, which would benefit the European economy;

— the Danube as a source of drinking water and energy, and as a natural environment which needs to be preserved – the key element is sustainable development; energy infrastructure projects should be supported, such as hydroelectric power plants;

— the role of innovation, research and education in the region;

— the needs of tourism in the Danube area and rural development potential; with regard to the latter, financing of projects should be considered that will stimulate activities in those countries with a considerable agricultural tradition; the funding of cereal-loading infrastructure projects would help tap the potential of local agriculture, particularly in countries with a long farming tradition;

— the role of the river in developing a shared 'Danubian' awareness and identity, complementing European awareness and identity for the whole of the EU; cultural dialogue and solidarity have a key role to play here, also between EU and non-EU members in the region;

— any increase in volume of transport needs to be respectful of the environment;

— to have a conflict-resolving potential able to address the tensions that have grown historically in the region.

2.3 Given the diverse and often competing nature of the values and interests involved it is vital to develop an integrated DS based on common principles, taking into account not only economic rationale but also social needs and factors, including the perspectives and contributions of civil society.

2.4 A fruitful DS based on economic, territorial and social cohesion will lead to the creation of a dynamic, competitive and flourishing Danube region.

3. Background

3.1 At its meeting of 18-19 June 2009 the European Council requested the European Commission to draw up a European strategy on the Danube region by the end of 2010. In the course of the preparatory work, many views were expressed, not least in the context of the open consultation process launched by the European Commission.

3.2 The EESC strongly and decisively supports the European Union's new macro-regional approach and the establishment of an EU DS in this context. As the institutional representative of organised European civil society, the EESC is willing to play an active role and to take the initiative in framing and implementing the strategy.

3.3 The EESC's interest in and commitment to Danube-related issues is not new. Indeed, the Committee has adopted numerous documents over the years on various subjects, such as transport or the environment. These documents clearly

explain the reasons why the EESC considers the Danube region to be important and supports the development of a DS.

3.4 It should be pointed out that recent enlargements of the European Union have shifted its geographical centre to the east, whereas the economic centre of gravity remains in Western Europe. Economic, territorial and social cohesion, as a key component of the DS, together with practical ideas supporting its implementation, represents an appropriate contribution towards addressing this imbalance.

Brussels, 16 September 2010.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI
