



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**SOC/226**  
**European year of**  
**intercultural dialogue**  
**(2008)**

Brussels, 20 April 2006

**OPINION**

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the**  
**European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)**

COM(2005) 467 final – 2005/0203 (COD)

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On 16 November 2005 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)*

COM(2005) 467 final – 2005/0203 (COD).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 20 March 2006. The rapporteur was Ms Cser.

At its 426th plenary session held on 20 and 21 April 2006 (meeting of 20 April 2006), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 79 votes to 39, with 10 abstentions.

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## **1. Gist of the proposal for a decision**

The European Commission has submitted a proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008) (COM(2005) 467 final).

The proposal ties in with the strategy pursued by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, which, through the introduction of the European Year, makes awareness and acceptance of human rights a Community-level issue in order to achieve the main objectives of the joint strategy, and promotes national, regional and local cooperation, thus underpinning European citizenship.

Intercultural dialogue must be seen as an instrument to facilitate the implementation of a series of strategic priorities for the Union. In addition to national, regional and local cooperation, there is support for dialogue between various social, economic and occupational groups and individuals throughout the EU and – in keeping with the neighbourhood policy – in third countries.

### **1.1 The general objectives of the proposal**

The general objectives are as follows:

- to promote intercultural dialogue as an instrument enabling European citizens and all those living permanently or temporarily in the European Union to obtain knowledge,

qualifications and aptitudes which can help them to adapt to a more open but also more complex environment, and to overcome any difficulties in order to benefit from the opportunities provided by a pluralistic and dynamic society in Europe and all over the world;

- to raise the awareness of European citizens and all those living in the European Union of the importance of developing active European citizenship which is open to the world, respectful of cultural diversity and based on the common values in the European Union of respect for human dignity, liberty, equality, non-discrimination, solidarity, the principles of democracy and the rule of law as well as respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

## **1.2 The specific objectives of the proposal**

The intercultural dialogue envisaged by the proposal contributes to the following specific objectives:

- to raise the profile of all Community programmes and actions contributing to intercultural dialogue;
- to highlight the contribution of different cultures to our heritage and ways of life; to raise the awareness of European citizens and all those living in the European Union, particularly young people, of the importance of seeking the means to affirm through intercultural dialogue an active European citizenship which is open to the world, respectful of cultural diversity and based on the common values in the European Union;
- to contribute to innovation and to the horizontal and trans-sectoral dimension of the initiatives aiming at promoting intercultural dialogue, in particular to young people.

## **2. General observations**

- 2.1 The EESC is pleased to note that the proposal for a decision includes not only citizens of the European Union as defined in Article 17 of the EC Treaty, but any individual living permanently or temporarily in the European Union in the notion of "active European citizenship".
- 2.2 The EESC welcomes the fact that the proposal for a decision is intended to strengthen cooperation with countries outside the borders of the European Union through intercultural dialogue.
- 2.3 The EESC is pleased to note that intercultural dialogue is considered to be an instrument for cooperation to strengthen stability and democracy, not only within the Union but also, through partnership, beyond its borders.

- 2.4 The EESC is pleased to note that the proposal for a decision promotes or strengthens coordination and harmonisation of measures and programmes to implement joint strategies of the European institutions, given that the activities and cooperation of the various institutions at Community, national, regional and local levels lack uniformity and consistency, and that their outcomes and effectiveness are uneven, due to cultural differences. If European cultures really engaged in continuous dialogue with each other, enabling them to express their own identities, this might help to enhance and mobilise the operation, outcomes and effectiveness of various European, national, regional and local institutions.
- 2.5 The EESC is pleased to note that, thanks to education, innovation, equal opportunities for all, Community-level support for intercultural dialogue and coordination of such dialogue at national level, European cultural heritage is becoming something that individuals can not only recognise but also use and experience.
- 2.6 The EESC is pleased to note that cooperation between the Member States during the year of intercultural dialogue will facilitate implementation of Community goals. It therefore supports designating 2008 as the European Year of intercultural dialogue.
- 2.7 The EESC proposes that the year of intercultural dialogue should be used to ensure that differences, inequalities, contradictions and conflicts which are apparently due to economic, social, environmental and political causes should not only be seen in ethnic or cultural terms; rather, by becoming familiar with and accepting the diversity of our cultures and using intercultural dialogue as an instrument we should avoid conflicts by identifying the causes underpinning them.
- 2.8 To this end, and in line with our opinion and additional opinion on the social dimension of culture, *"the EESC is [...] in favour of the European Union becoming a forum for reflection and discussion on the cultural policies of each Member State – a forum for a new process of cultural reflection on culture. Preparations for the year of intercultural dialogue (2008) should be an opportunity for the Commission to present a very detailed document on the actual breadth of such dialogue, the persistent or new obstacles which it encounters, and new ideas which could help genuinely deepen it. The EESC is willing to play a role in the drafting of such a report, for example from the perspective of the social dimension of culture<sup>1</sup>."*

### 3. Detailed comments

- 3.1 Thanks to its structure as a consultative body to the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, the EESC has forged special links between European cultures. Its members are genuine Europeans, given that they respect and give balanced consideration to the interests of

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<sup>1</sup> EESC opinion of 15.3.2006 on "The social dimension of culture". Rapporteur: Mr Le Scornet (SOC/191).

the various social partners and the values of each other's cultures in the drafting of opinions, and reach consensus on opinions benefiting European citizens<sup>2</sup>.

- 3.2 Through active cooperation and activity not only at Community level but also at national, regional and local levels, EESC members embody intercultural dialogue, while promoting it and putting it into practice in civil society.
- 3.3 The EESC would point out to the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission that the Commission's proposal does not explicitly refer to respect for the cultures and diversities of third countries, given that in defining its objectives it refers to Article 151 of the Treaty establishing the European Community (Member States' obligation of mutual respect). Although any kind of legislative interference by the European Union must be ruled out, the European Commission and other institutions must call on the Member States to support respect for cultural diversity and to promote peaceful dialogue between the various cultures.
- 3.4 Unfortunately, tensions arising from conflicts between various cultures and religions are increasingly becoming a feature of our age; the existence of such tensions raises the question of whether the European Union needs to enshrine mutual respect for different cultures in the Treaties. These conflicts and tensions highlight the need for the European Union to set itself the consistent objective of mutual respect for the various cultures. In the current period of intercultural conflict and of crisis for European identity, support for European cultural values could be seen as a sign of optimism and confidence in the future of the European Union. The European Union should therefore be involved in developing cultural and religious dialogue with other nations, for example by promoting cultural tourism<sup>3</sup>.
- 3.5 The main basis for intercultural dialogue should be promoting respect for the various cultures, customs and traditions of citizens living in Europe.
- 3.6 The growing mobility of EU citizens and the increasing number of migrant workers, often followed by their families or other relatives, suggest the need for an effort to promote respect for cultures and traditions different from those which have developed in Europe: this task should be carried out by the European institutions and the Member States, as part of their coordination functions.
- 3.7 On the basis of the UNESCO documents mentioned earlier, the EESC recommends strengthening the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, making it a coordinating body at Community level to facilitate the cultural integration of tens of millions

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<sup>2</sup> Work programme of Dr Anne-Marie Sigmund President of the European Economic and Social Committee for her 2004/2006 term of office and Annual review of the work programme of Dr Anne-Marie Sigmund President of the European Economic and Social Committee for her 2004/2006 term of office.

<sup>3</sup> A point of view which has already been endorsed in the EESC opinion of 15.3.2006 on *Tourism and culture: two forces for growth* (rapporteur: Mr Pesci).

of immigrant citizens in order to further mutual awareness and respect between the various cultures.

- 3.8 The EESC is disappointed that the proposal for a decision does not mention the creation of a Community-level medium, such as a TV or radio channel broadcasting in all the languages of European citizens, as an instrument for achieving its objectives. However, since then, following on from its *Action Plan on improving communication* and *Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate*, the Commission has drafted a White Paper on a European communication policy. Each of these documents focuses on dialogue with European citizens. Community objectives cannot be fully conveyed through privately owned electronic or written media.
- 3.9 In several of its opinions, the EESC has already voiced its concerns with regard to funding for projects, the pursuit of objectives laid down as part of a European Year – which is a very useful concept – and the balanced implementation of these objectives on an ongoing basis<sup>4</sup>.

The very launch of the European Year initiative calls for evaluation of means to attract and retain the attention of the public while ensuring that a balance between considerations of sustainability is struck and maintained; it is indeed impossible to monitor the launch and subsequent progress of programmes established for a single year – the requisite funds are not guaranteed for subsequent years and there are also disparities in implementation of the objectives. For this reason, the question arises of how the proposal under review can ensure mutual cultural awareness and acceptance for all citizens and institutions on the basis of objectives that have been set for only one year.

- 3.10 There can be no doubt that individual one-year programmes will not suffice to achieve the objectives of the European Years of equal opportunities for all or of intercultural dialogue, or active citizenship and participatory democracy, as envisaged by the Commission's communication strategy; hence, a coordinated programme and use of funds is needed to ensure that objectives can be implemented in the long term or even on an ongoing basis.
- 3.11 The EESC is doubtful whether priority objectives can be implemented on the basis of the proposed budget. Most of the proposed budget is allocated to support for Community-level activity, and it is questionable whether the eight events are not disproportionate to the achievement of the proposed objectives. Support for local citizens' initiatives is also uncertain.
- 3.12 In view of considerable variations in intercultural dialogue, the EESC recommends that the Commission should develop qualitative as well as quantitative indicators to evaluate

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<sup>4</sup> EESC opinion of 14.2.2006 on the *European Year of people with disabilities*. Rapporteur: Ms Gunta Anca (OJ C 88 of 11.4.2006).

implementation of the objectives of the European Year. In view of its role as representative of civil society, the EESC undertakes to participate in this work.

- 3.13 The EESC proposes that an encyclopaedia of European culture be compiled on the basis of events and measures under the European Year of intercultural dialogue in 2008; this could in turn be used to compile a handbook of European cultures, which could become a basic text for developing European citizenship. Together with a compilation of best practice, the handbook would be indispensable in promoting the integration of immigrant workers and their families.

#### 4. **Supporting diverse customs, traditions and cultures**

- 4.1 The EESC endorses UNESCO's universal declaration that "the cultural wealth of the world is its diversity in dialogue"<sup>5</sup> and the objectives set out in the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions<sup>6</sup>; of these, the EESC would emphasise the goal of fostering "interculturality in order to develop cultural interaction in the spirit of building bridges among people ...".
- 4.2 The objectives of the European Year of intercultural dialogue include the various forms of artistic expression of human emotions as one of the key values of European cultural heritage. Awareness and acceptance of various cultures can only happen if we understand, recognise and accept each other's feelings and values. Given that young people are a key target group, it is especially important to pay attention to healthy emotional development, and hence to support initiatives to develop multicultural awareness.
- 4.3 The EESC supports the proposal for establishing a Day of Intercultural Dialogue, to coincide with Cultural Development Day, which has already been introduced by UNESCO and takes place on 21 May. On this occasion, the European institutions could award symbolic prizes to educational institutions and civil society organisations which have played a leading role in initiating and implementing intercultural dialogue. The day could serve as an opportunity for organising ceremonial events.
- 4.4 Involvement of civil society organisations, educational institutions and European citizens is crucial to support for intercultural dialogue. For this reason, the EESC would particularly welcome the introduction of a prize, even one of symbolic value (whose award would, among other things, entitle the winning European citizen, civil society organisation or institution to make use of the logo of the Day of Intercultural Dialogue); this prize could be awarded to European citizens, civil society organisations and educational institutions which play a

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the 31st Session of the General Conference of UNESCO (Paris, 2 November 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in October 2005.

leading role in mobilising intercultural dialogue through initiatives aimed at helping young people to understand that members of society should mutually respect each other's traditions and cultural values, not only at local, regional and national levels, but also at European level.

- 4.5 The EESC concurs with the Commission and the European Parliament that initiatives to promote intercultural dialogue should be primarily targeted at young people. However, it would also remind the European institutions not to neglect older age groups.

## 5. **Coordination with other programmes**

- 5.1 To ensure more effective implementation of the objectives set out in the proposal for a decision, the EESC would recommend that they should be harmonised and aligned with the objectives and instruments of the European Year of equal opportunities for all (2007) and of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate.

- 5.2 Given the diversity of initiatives launched by the different Member States to promote intercultural dialogue, the EESC suggests that the European institutions establish a coordinating body with responsibility for harmonising, promoting and disseminating such initiatives.

- 5.3 Successful intercultural initiatives include the Leonardo programme, which promotes the European dimension of training by supporting the development of innovative initiatives in the field and projects involving international partnerships<sup>7</sup>, as well as the Anna Lindh Foundation<sup>8</sup> and EuromedCafé<sup>9</sup>, which aims to facilitate dialogue between European and Mediterranean countries.

- 5.4 The proposal for a decision aims at promoting harmony and coordinating cultural diversity, while taking into account economic globalisation; it therefore offers added value and a new impetus for achieving the objectives of the renewed Lisbon strategy.

- 5.5 The EESC would like to take part in the following in cooperation with the NGOs:

- making intercultural dialogue continuous,

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Ongoing initiatives which involve participation by third countries include the Thswane University of Technology Scholarship (South Africa), the West Virginia Scholarship (USA), and the GE4 Student Exchange in Engineering (USA, Latin America and Asia).

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The Anna Lindh Foundation was established to promote mutual understanding and respect among the peoples of Europe and the Mediterranean region, and ties in with the Action Plan for the Barcelona process.

<sup>9</sup>

EuromedCafé is a website created by the Mediterranean Laboratory Foundation to provide a fresh impetus for renewed dialogue and exchange between European and Mediterranean peoples.

- cooperating with the celebration of the 25th anniversary (November 2006) of the UN Declaration (that rejects intolerance and discrimination based on faith and religious belief),
- the assessment of year 2008.

On the basis of the above mentioned it shall make an appropriate supplementary proposal.

Brussels, 20 April 2006.

The President  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

Anne-Marie Sigmund

Patrick Venturini

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