

17 December 2001

UNICE REACTION TO THE LAEKEN CONCLUSIONS

Laeken declaration

UNICE welcomes the Laeken declaration aiming at a simpler, less distant and more efficient European Union. It also endorses the initiatives to be carried out without changing the Treaties on the simplification of legislation and European governance.

Reflecting the request made by UNICE, CEEP and ETUC in the joint contribution of Social Partners to Laeken summit, the European social partners will have 3 seats of observers in the Convention preparing the next Inter-Governmental Conference.

General economic situation and prospects

UNICE agrees with the Council's conclusions that confidence in the economy must be based on the Sustainability and Growth Pact and on the implementation of the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines, based on macroeconomic stability and structural reforms. These should indeed help the EU to fulfill its growth potential and create jobs, which is all the more necessary in this time of economic uncertainty. The physical introduction of the euro notes and coins will reinforce the Internal Market and the stability of the eurozone.

Lisbon strategy

UNICE looks forward to the Council's stock-taking of the Lisbon process in Barcelona, and urges the Council to not just agree on, but also to take the "concrete steps on priority actions" in order to achieve the ten year objective set at Lisbon. UNICE welcomes the use of structural indicators to assess the performance of Member States against the targets of the Lisbon strategy and looks forward to the Commission's synthesis report in January.

Employment

UNICE welcomes the Council's intention to accelerate efforts to achieve the target of 70% employment rate by 2010 and the endorsement of employment package for 2002. Worth mentioning are the explicit references to social partners willingness to develop a more structured ("multi annual") work programme, to the need to improve coordination of tripartite consultation on the various aspects of the Lisbon strategy and an agreement to have a "social summit" with social partners before each Spring European Council starting in Barcelona.

European social model

The Conclusions recognise the political agreement between the Council and the European Parliament on information and consultation directive and call on the Commission to submit a discussion paper on prevention and resolution of social conflicts (voluntary mediation

mechanisms). Political agreement has also been reached on the extension of Regulation 1408/71 to third country nationals and the report on pension sustainability. A request was made by the European Council to take a similar approach on health care and care for the elderly.

Research and development

The Conclusions highlight that a Community patent should have been available at the end of 2001. The European Council asks the Internal Market Council to hold a meeting on 20 December 2001 in order to reach an agreement on a flexible instrument involving the least possible cost while complying with the principle of non-discrimination between Member States' undertakings and ensuring a high level of quality.

Sustainable development and quality of life

Attention must be drawn to the fact (see point 35) that Laeken confirmed the EU's determination to see the Kyoto protocol come into force before the Rio+10 Conference in Johannesburg in September 2002. This confirms the intention of the EU to ratify the Kyoto protocol without parallel ratification by the US. Information obtained from the Council indicates that the protocol is likely to be ratified at the March 2002 Environment Council. This is not a new political element but confirms the heavy responsibilities on Member States and on the Commission regarding development of policies and measures which preserve the competitiveness of European companies.

Asylum and immigration policy

The Council commits itself to the adoption of a common policy on asylum and immigration on the basis of the Tampere conclusions. However, the declaration links these issues to foreign affairs and seems to lose sight of labour market aspects. No reference is made to a proposal for directive on conditions for entry residence and work in an EU Member State.

Enlargement

The conclusions are in line with the proposals made by the Commission in its recent document "Making a success of enlargement". However, the Laeken Council goes one step further in naming the 10 countries that could be ready for accession and brings forward its determination to finalise the accession negotiations with candidate countries that are ready by 2002. UNICE endorses conducting negotiations with candidate countries based on the differentiation principle and welcomes the relevant mention in the Conclusions. It also welcomes the urge for candidate countries to continue their efforts to bring their administrative and judicial capabilities up to the required level

EU-Russia relations

UNICE welcomes the specific mention of the need to further strengthen EU-Russia relations, which are of great importance for the economic and political development in Europe. UNICE looks forward to the realization of the full potential of EU-Russia economic relations envisaged in their Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation. In particular, UNICE strongly supports Russia's accession to the WTO.
