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Making the most of Europe's inland waterways

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Palais du Rhin

Strasbourg, 17 January 2012

President, Secretary-General, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me today to Strasbourg, to the Palais du Rhin – a river steeped in history but also very much a working river and major trading artery for the whole of Europe. I am also very pleased that this event takes place at the seat of the Central Commission for Rhine Navigation, an important partner of the European Commission.

I'm sure that I don't need to dwell for too long on the many advantages of inland waterway transport and the reasons why the sector is so well placed to assume a larger role in Europe's wider transport network. But despite their success in the past and enduring importance today, our waterways are far from achieving their full potential. We all know there is a great deal of unused capacity: only about 15% of the Danube's total capacity is now being used for inland navigation, for example.

As you know, the European Commission's Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area calls for the waterborne and rail sectors to absorb a 50% shift of medium-distance intercity passenger and freight traffic from roads by 2050. Our vision for the future of transport contains other ambitions for waterways, to link them – where possible – to seaports and integrate them with other transport modes such as road and rail, for onward transportation of cargo. But first, the waterway network must be ready for the challenge. Inland waterways are a political priority in the proposed revision of the Trans-European Transport Network policy. They are included in the planned core network, which will form the backbone of Europe's economy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Using water transport to increase trade flows across the European continent will also be a huge advantage for EU business. This is particularly true for the petrochemical industry, since inland waterway transport is known as the safest and most secure means of moving dangerous goods. The quality of infrastructure, and especially the so-called hinterland connections, will be key elements in determining whether waterways can become competitive and attractive enough for their market share of transport use to rise from its current unimpressive level of around 5%.

For example, I recently received a letter claiming that lack of funds for maintenance caused a halt in navigation on the Danube for approximately 40 days last autumn. If this kind of problem happens again, our ambitions for inland waterway transport in the whole of Europe are doomed. At the same time, inland ports **must** work efficiently. This directly affects competitiveness, given the large transshipment and haulage costs involved in the overall price of door-to-door waterborne transport.

At the moment, there are great differences between ports in the western and eastern part of the European Union for equipment, facilities, productivity and management. Significant investments are needed for transshipment and storage facilities at many river ports in the eastern part of the EU. Incidentally, the TEN-T guidelines also include the upgrading of ports. But also in the north, several sea and river ports suffer from a lack of spare capacity, which causes long waiting times at terminals. So there is clearly a lot to be done. And industry can also do a lot itself. One example of such an initiative is the innovation agency for inland barging set up by the Dutch inland shipping sector, supporting the development of clean ships.

I already mentioned some of the problem areas. But I would also say that we do need to "think more European". Some Member States, for example, only invest in their main waterways. But the secondary ones are also important. It is essential to update and maintain the existing network: keeping locks and bridges in good working order, ensuring sufficient water depth where necessary to improve traffic flows, and so on.

To continue after the NAIADES programme, which runs until 2013, we will keep working to raise inland waterways' performance compared with other transport sectors. And we will have to make the fullest use of the different new funding instruments under the next budget period.

The infrastructure gaps that I have mentioned are only one aspect. The sector has shown itself to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of the economic and financial crisis because of its dependence on the production industry. This vulnerability can only be overcome by developing new markets and fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation. Our strategy will of course include continuous support to 'soft measures' like promotion. But we will also outline ideas for new legislation, in order to look at those areas where the sector is actually lagging behind.

Take 'greening the fleet', for example. Unlike road hauliers, inland waterway skippers have no real incentive to reduce the external costs that get passed on as a price that someone else has to pay. There are too many inefficient engines being used and too much polluting fuel. The fleet is green – but in relative terms, no longer **that** green. Inland waterways are now losing some of their environmental friendliness, their edge, over road transport. I am aware that there is indeed some voluntary upgrading and 'fleet greening' going on – and of course, I welcome this. But there could, and should, be more. An eventual move to alternative fuels such as liquefied natural gas might be considered – there is now only one pioneer ship in the entire EU fleet. We will be looking at the infrastructure requirements for refuelling facilities.

Finally, we need to streamline governance of inland waterway transport. One and a half years ago, the REGINA reflection group identified many tasks that could better be implemented at EU level rather than nationally. But we also need to overcome the fragmentation between international institutions. Today, several such organisations are charged with areas of work which partly overlap, both geographically and in their substance. Often, these organisations also rely on the same rather small group of experts to do the work. We must find ways to avoid these duplications and work together effectively. It is also necessary to set up a good framework of cooperation so that priorities can be agreed in advance and activities be coordinated strategically.

Since many of the governance activities supporting inland waterway transport are of European relevance, this is an area where I would like to launch a discussion. Such a discussion could possibly lead to a number of high-level agreements between the Commission and the respective organisations – namely with the CCNR. It could have the effect of mandating specific tasks, taking into account the respective strength of each of the organisations. One possible example of such a mandate is in technical requirements, where – despite the good cooperation – more streamlining and efficient use of everybody's limited resources is needed.

The EBU's 10th anniversary is a good occasion to look back at the benefits of the inland waterways sector so that it can organise itself and achieve EU-wide representation. I am grateful for the sector's input into our policy initiatives and so I encourage you to continue your efforts as we work for inland waterways to speak with one voice and overcome this fragmentation.

I look forward to a lively discussion on these and other points. Let us all work together to make the most of this tremendous natural asset and help Europe's waterways to work at their fullest potential.

Thank you for your attention.