ACCELERATE TOWARDS A FREE AND STRONG INLAND WATERWAY TRANSPORT

Intervention

by

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Conference organised by the Minister of Transport, Public Works and Water Management

Rotterdam (Netherlands), 5-6 September 2001

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WATERWAY TRANSPORT

Waterway transport has inherent advantages including that it is safe and clean and it can also be cheap and reliable. Unfortunately the words safe and clean are not recognised fully by markets. And transport markets, driven by trade and economic growth have not turned to inland waterways. Over the last thirty years, transport has grown at about 2% per annum but within the modes, road transport has grown by 4% per annum and waterways and rail traffic have remained more or less the same in volume terms. At present waterways have 6-8% of traffic in ECMT, though the figures are much higher on individual corridors.

New industrial location patterns and changes in the structure of goods explain a large part of the declining market share for both railways and waterways (estimates from Germany are that 60% of the traffic share loss is due to economic restructuring with the other 40% due to lack of competitiveness in traditional markets).
The waterway network is not dense and the water flows do not necessarily correspond any longer to the goods flows. Moreover, it is a sector with many small operators, like road transport. In itself, this is not a problem but it leads to weaknesses in creating logistical chains and networks. Another difficulty is that its competitors are more likely to be rail than road.

These considerations raise the fundamental question of whether the sector is in inevitable decline or is it a sector which because of its inherent advantages, can start to play a greater role in international traffic? Certainly there are some positive signs with growing traffic, especially of containers and record traffic on the Main canal despite the closure of the Danube. Increasingly we are seeing that traditional markets can be supplemented by traffic of consumer goods and agricultural products.

So, in finding the role for waterways that optimises (rather than maximises) its traffic, there are numerous actions to be examined or undertaken. Several are of a technical or engineering nature. There are several Institutions and organisations working here and ECMT cannot contribute significantly. Other issues are institutional or organisational and it can certainly be asked whether the existing structures are best suited to the development of this mode. Some of the actions are political or economic and go beyond the waterway mode itself.

Some of the questions that arise are:

- What kinds of partnerships are needed between the public sector and the private sector operators so that this mode is used well?
Another concerns infrastructure charging: You can, if you read carefully, see the difficulty in the declaration where the existing text is somewhat ambiguous. This is an area where more clarity will be needed. If waterways do not pay their infrastructure charges, where will the investment that is needed come from?

Another concerns the Pan European Corridors: This is a concept that started here in the Netherlands, at the Nordwijk Ministerial. And it has led to much useful discussion and planning on the infrastructure side. But a major defect was that there was no integration with the fiscal or transport policy measures to ensure that traffic would use these corridors. In the case of waterways, there will need to be incentives (or disincentives on the other side) so that they are used more. What are these? How can they be set up and applied in an efficient way, which does not distort?

Finally there are logistics and informatics: Efficient logistics requires smooth transhipment and modern information systems. These in turn require investment, co-ordination and marketing. But who will ensure this?

It is perhaps in some of these areas that ECMT can contribute.

**ROLE OF ECMT**

ECMT brings the Ministers of the entire continent together each year. They take a view on the sector as a whole, on its efficiency, on its sustainability. Waterway transport has not been on their agenda as such, for several years. But, as you will hear, Minister Mitrea, Chairman in office of ECMT, intends to have the topic on the Agenda of the next ECMT Ministerial Session in Bucharest in May 2002.
ECMT is asked in the declaration to work with others to overcome legislative barriers. Of course we will do this, but personally I see the potential of ECMT as being wider and in making a contribution to understanding all the barriers - economic, market, logistical, psychological - to the greater use of this mode and to contributing to putting in place policies to allow it to develop.

ECMT has no turf to defend. Ministers have said how they favour sustainable transport, which includes making optimum use of all modes. ECMT has a wide geographic coverage involving all the main waterway systems of the continent - the Rhine, the Danube, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian waterways. ECMT can be used to see where efforts might be made to bring different regimes together and integrate them into a coherent framework. We have possibilities to bring all the actors together for example in an informal seminar and can help identify obstacles, understand the constraints to removing them and finally give a political push to overcoming them. Such an event is one possibility to help prepare the Ministerial Session next year in Bucharest.

With the probable accession soon of Yugoslavia to ECMT, there is a political possibility to speed up the reopening of the Danube, a sine qua non for the development of waterway transport.

In conclusion, ECMT is ready to contribute in whatever way it can to improving the conditions and to bringing about policies where the waterway mode can play an optimum role in European transport.