

Speaking note Etienne Schouppe, EBU, 18.03.2010
“Future of transport: the role of Inland Navigation within the new White Paper”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the EBU for taking the initiative to organise this seminar, the subject being of some magnitude. The transport sector has a key role to play in the growth of our economy. This particularly applies to Belgium, located in the delta area of the Rhine, the Meuse and the Scheldt, as a gateway for the import and export of goods on the European continent; and where activities linked to the distribution, logistics and transport sectors play a crucial role. The presence of a performing transport network and qualitative service providers represents a *necessary* condition to ensure that these services are well maintained.

This aside, mobility and transport must also contribute to a more sustainable economy and society as a whole. The challenges we face in this field are, and will remain, huge.

We have seen, in the transport sector, a sharp increase in CO₂ emissions, one of the principal causes of the Greenhouse Effect, which in turn causes the Earth’s temperature to rise.

In addition to this, escalating congestion leads not only to a negative environmental impact, but also to economic loss, aggravated by the fact that the delta area, as logistical centre of Northwest Europe, is being put at risk.

Measures are thus needed to support the sustainability of the transport sector.

Within the transport sector, Inland navigation is unique in its position. This mode of transport not only has the capacity to carry large quantities of goods, but it also avoids the problem of congestion. Inland navigation is also the most efficient in terms of energy consumption. This really is the trump card when it comes to supporting this mode of transport, environmentally-friendly options being of serious interest in our densely-populated regions. Nonetheless, the sector should stay alert, high standards should be maintained and technological improvements continually pursued.

Belgium is confident of the potential of inland navigation. It has been building in importance since liberalisation of the sector at the end of the nineties, when stimulus measures were being taken in various industries, aimed at the development of inland navigation. Relating to this policy, Belgium has also given its full support to the European Commission’s NAIADES plan and concrete actions have been taken on several points.

As an illustration of this, I will outline a handful of measures that I consider to be examples of “good practice”.

With regard to market development, the “kaaimurenprogramma”, or wharf support scheme, by the Flemish authorities, has had a significant impact. This support scheme has shown various industries the route to using the waterways; however the channels used by inland navigation have yet to be effectively utilized. The scheme has resulted in the successful development of a network for inland container terminals. This measure has also led to Belgian waterway transport increasing by over 40% between 1998 and 2008.

Another stimulus measure given financial support is regeneration of the shipping fleet. The Belgian inland navigation sector consists of essentially, autonomous entrepreneurs with small-scale business interests. Roughly 90% of Belgian businesses operate using one ship. Flexible access to business capital is essential for many entrepreneurs. In the field of tax law, a measure was taken for the sale of inland navigation vehicles. It allows sales to be exempt from taxation on the understanding that the surplus value thus created is re-invested in modern and efficient ships, resulting in a more ecological fleet.

In addition to this, at every administrative level, initiatives are being taken in support of the sector. Hence my services are working towards integration of various inspections, so that the entrepreneur can be provided with quick and efficient services.

We have also started to put into practice a modernisation and improvement of the Belgian regulatory framework for inland navigation.

The modernisation and innovation of the fleet is likewise a focal point, hence the Belgian authorities have seized the opportunity to start up support programmes. In doing so, they have also noted the role of small scale ships. After all, a vast and important part of the inland navigational network consists of small scale waterways. There is a strategic significance to the function of transport on these waterways, and it should not be underestimated. The efficiency of small scale ships, however, is often subject to negative upshots, due to the unsatisfactory maintenance of these waterways. This results in an inability to make use of their full capacity, limiting their competitive position.

Also on the subject of infrastructure, Belgium is occupied with an important overtaking movement involving investments executed or planned, for optimisation of the inland transport network. Belgium is also involved with a project within the TEN-T framework regarding the Seine-Northern Europe link. The implementation of this link will be a vital new opportunity for inland navigation in the corridor between Ile de France and the Delta area.

With these examples I would like to underline that inland navigation in my country is to be a particular focal point. Since the sector is mainly directed towards international activity, it is nevertheless dependent on the extent to which it receives attention from the other EU Member States, as well as from the European Commission.

It is in this context that the "New White Paper" is to be presented, as a particular opportunity for inland navigation to receive the recognition it deserves. The inventory of measures that was outlined in the NAIADES programme was undoubtedly a reference to the future. It is my intention, during the Belgian Presidency of the Council, to pursue a concrete evaluation of the implementation of this programme, and to examine the need for adjustment.

One of the points that definitely deserves to be of extra interest, concerns the appeal for new blood in the sector, at the level of the employer as well as the crew. As the Rhine Navigation Regulations constitute a basis for crew regulations in inland navigation, and as Belgium takes the chairmanship of the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine in 2010 and 2011, Belgium wishes this to be a top priority within the CCNR-context. For example, it should be made possible for people from other professional sectors to consider a career in inland navigation. These people should be given the opportunity to make the shift towards inland navigation thanks to an accelerated training, while calling upon modern training techniques, such as simulators.

This subject brings us to the cooperation between the CCNR and the European Commission.

Belgium attaches a lot of meaning to the expertise that is being developed by the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine and wishes this expertise to be maintained and to be of service to the global European inland navigation. An optimal collaboration is desired between the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine and the European Commission. During its chairmanship of the CCNR, Belgium would like to hold discussions on taking this agreement forward. Therefore the idea of the “Joint Working Group” with regard to technical regulations for example, can be optimised. This idea could subsequently be extended to domains other than technical regulations.

Subsequently, I would also like to underline the safety aspect. In this area inland navigation has a flawless reputation. Even so, maintaining a high level of safety demands constant attention in pursuit of the best possible methods. This demands, not only discipline on board the vessel, but also at the level of the ship-wharf interface. The CCNR has, at its disposal, a detailed handbook with recommendations on the risks involved in the loading and unloading of hazardous goods, and a minimum level of guidelines through an improved coordination between ship and wharf facilities. This document will be presented midway through this year.

To conclude, it is also necessary to draw everyone’s attention to the image of inland navigation. The benefits of this means of transport are not sufficiently well known. Although good progress has been made through the promotion of different inland transport landing areas, an extra effort would not be without benefits.

On that statement I would like to bring this speech to a close. I thank you for your attention and wish you every success with this seminar.