

SENATE OF THE REPUBLIC

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For the kind attention of Martine Genoux-Stawiarski

Subject: Criticisms regarding the rail/road bridge over the Strait of Messina – Priority project included in the Van Miert document on the trans-European transport network.

Please find enclosed our comments indicating that the proposed project is not conducive to an effective policy of modal rebalancing, that it will contribute nothing to social cohesion, that little traffic is expected to use the bridge and that it will have a serious impact on the environment.

We request that the infrastructure in question be removed from the list of priority TEN-T projects for the period 2007–2020 which the high-level technical group chaired by Mr Van Miert presented to the European Commission on 30 June 2003.

Kind regards,

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Verdi L'Ulivo Group
Senate of the Italian Republic

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Rome, 22 July 2003

CRITICISMS

REGARDING THE RAIL/ROAD BRIDGE OVER THE STRAIT OF MESSINA

Priority project included in the *Van Miert* document
on the trans-European transport network

Monica Frassoni MEP & Senator Anna Donati

The High-Level Technical Group chaired by Mr Van Miert recently included the bridge over the Strait of Messina in the list of priority projects for the trans-European transport network for the period 2007–2020 which it presented to the European Commission on 30 June 2003.

These criticisms, and the annexes to them, are intended to demonstrate that the proposed project is not conducive to an effective policy of modal rebalancing, that it will contribute nothing to social cohesion, that little traffic is expected to use the bridge and that it will have a serious impact on the environment.

1) Comments on the criteria used to identify priorities

The bridge has been included among the European infrastructure on which work is to begin by 2010 (List 1) or which is to become operational by 2020 at the latest. It was included on the grounds that it will connect the most populated island in the Mediterranean with the rest of the continent, thus providing a keystone of Europe's infrastructure.

It is important to note that the same document includes the modernisation of the Naples–Reggio Calabria–Palermo railway line in List 3, among the projects which are "important for territorial cohesion" and which "facilitate exchanges between Member States", even though the railway line in question in fact leads up to and connects with the Messina Strait bridge project.

This classification seems quite wrong, inasmuch as the Naples–Reggio Calabria–Palermo line deserves higher priority than the bridge: the existing line from Naples to Reggio Calabria (450 km) is in very poor condition, its design and route making it extremely inefficient for carrying either passengers or goods, while two thirds of the Sicilian stretch from Messina to Palermo is still single-track.

As this line constitutes the one existing rail link between Sicily and the rest of Europe, the island's connection to the continent (but also Calabria's and southern Campania's) would most probably be better served by prioritising the modernisation of the rail infrastructure rather than construction of the bridge.

Moreover, the track in question is not among the Italian Government's priorities for railway investment.

In view of the above, what should be included in List 1 of priority projects is the urgent upgrading of the railway line from Naples to Reggio Calabria.

We would also point out (and we return to this point in more detail below), that the preliminary project for the bridge refers to the Naples–Reggio Calabria–Palermo line as an "associated project", yet no funds for implementing that project are allocated before

2005 in any Governmental financial instrument or in the RFI [Rete Ferroviaria Italiana – the Italian rail infrastructure manager] Programme Contract.

The List 1 infrastructure identified in the Van Miert document also includes the "motorways of the sea". We agree with this entirely, but it is important to emphasise that, in a number of respects, the bridge project constitutes a decidedly competitive alternative to the third and fourth motorways of the sea, i.e. those of interest to south-western and south-eastern Europe.

We develop this idea below, but we wish to underline at this point that:

- a land motorway corridor connecting Sicily to the rest of Europe will constitute a natural alternative to cabotage;
- the private entities which are potentially interested in financing the infrastructure have, in reaction to the desire of Sicily's local and regional authorities to enhance the island's port facilities, asked for cabotage to and from the island to be "reduced".

2) The bridge is not included among the Italian projects for the 2000/2006 Community Support Framework

In terms of European programming, the Community Support Framework for Structural Funds for the south of Italy ["Mezzogiorno"] provides for the National Operational Plan for Transport¹ to identify a number of intervention strategies, including "integration of port and airport terminals at national and international level", and the 'priority' infrastructure thus identified includes the expansion of the Sicilian ports of Catania, Messina and Palermo.

The bridge over the Strait of Messina does not appear on the lists of infrastructure for which EU co-financing is due to be mobilised from the Structural Funds for the period 2000–2006 for the south of Italy, thus confirming that it is not deemed to be of strategic interest for the said region.

Consistently with this, the Regional Operational Plan for Sicily and Calabria, which implements the National Operational Plan for Transport, does not include the bridge over the Strait of Messina among the infrastructure eligible for European funding.

This means, therefore, that the Italian Government will be pressing ahead simultaneously with two competing transport strategies: the construction of a rail/road bridge providing an alternative to cabotage to and from Sicily, and the use of the Structural Funds to enhance Sicily's ports and build up cabotage in the context of Italy's north-south traffic.

3) Technical examinations and economic feasibility checks by the Italian Government have revealed problems with the project's bankability

The technical examinations and economic feasibility checks which the Government entrusted to international consultants in 1998, the subsequent explorations of the market and of potentially interested entities, and the final report of the Infrastructure-Treasury Ministerial Committee (October 2001) have all **revealed problems with the project's bankability, deriving from its high cost in conjunction with rather modest estimates of road and rail traffic. (See Annex A)**

¹ Approved by Decision C(2001) No 2162 of 14 September 2001.

From the first report from the consultants onwards, the fixed link across the Strait of Messina has consistently been viewed as a low-priority project. The ministerial report² concludes its comments with two clear points:

- investment is required immediately to improve the existing rail infrastructure, with LIT 4 650 billion of essential work needing to be carried out in the geographical areas affected by the project (see paragraph below on high-speed rail);
- it needs to be assessed whether the greater burden on the public purse which the bridge project would entail will be repaid by the increased quality and efficiency of road and rail transport.

Accordingly, it was proposed that a "check be made on the market's capacity to offer financially adequate solutions for implementing the bridge project", in addition to fixing the maximum public contribution which the State was prepared to make.

Then, on the basis of examinations carried out by independent consultants, the report by the Ministry of Public Works proposed that the market's availability for financing the bridge project be tested, and that only then should definitive "political" conclusions be reached on the basis of the market research.

The market's availability was checked by means of a series of hearings organised by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport with banks and financial operators interested in the project. Here too, many drawbacks became apparent: the project did not convince the operators, who requested a series of guarantees to bolster the traffic flow across the bridge, at the expense of other modes of transport.

Paragraph 2.1.4 "Contextual variables" of the Ministry of Infrastructure's report³ (see **Annex B**) indicates that "Many entities taking part in the hearings emphasised that the bridge project is in fact exposed to risks which are largely independent of what happens within the project context. Two main elements of risk were mentioned in particular:

- *bridge project and ferries*: attention was drawn to the bridge project's vulnerability to aggressive commercial policies pursued by the companies which operate ferries across the Strait of Messina. To minimise this risk, it was suggested that the provision of ferry services be regulated;
- *bridge project and the motorways of the sea*: it was noted that part of the traffic expected to use the bridge might be absorbed by the so-called 'motorways of the sea' (the Italian *Transport & Logistics Master Plan* includes a project to upgrade cabotage and port structures). Some entities taking part in the hearings called for mechanisms to offset this problem, too.

Paragraph 2.1.3 ("Traffic") of the report states that "The majority of those taking part in the hearings stressed that the traffic risk was the project's main shortcoming. However, the same persons confirmed that there was a major difference between taking on the rail traffic risk and taking on the road traffic risk, as in respect of the latter the possibility was indicated of the risk being taken on by the financing entities, albeit with mechanisms in

² Pricewaterhousecoopers Consulting srl, Sicily – Mainland Link, Executive Summary supplied to Ministry of Public Works. Ministerial Report, 15 January 2001.

³ Report from the working party set up by Ministerial Decree No 200 of 23 May 2001/segr. Dicoter within the Directorate-General for Territorial Coordination at the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, upon completion of the formal hearings of financing entities – October 2001.

place to offset it. [...] Most of those taking part in the hearings noted that there was a specific risk profile in relation to the rail traffic, which represented [...] the project's main source of revenue (all in all, more than 50%) and thus the main potential source of risk."

Thus the bridge project is not only divorced from any previous European planning (Structural Funds, TEN), but also, to be carried out:

- it would require, and this is very serious, a block on the 'motorways of the sea', which would compete with it for goods traffic business;
- it would require Rete Ferroviaria Italiana to use the bridge, even if the rail company was able to obtain better rates with the ferries;
- it would eliminate free competition, imposing a strict regime for crossing the Strait, so that private users would not be able to find ferries to carry their cars.

These rigorous assessments of utility, of economic feasibility, of consistency with cabotage policy, of exploration of the market and of the entities potentially interested in building the infrastructure – all drawn together in the Report by the Ministry of Public Works (October 2001) – point to a very problematic and negative outcome for the construction of a bridge across the Strait of Messina.

4) The missing rail investment associated with the Messina Bridge

The 2001–2005 Programme Contract between the Italian State and Rete Ferroviaria Italiana (see Annex C) includes, as a "new project under the Objective Law", the Battipaglia–Paola–Reggio Calabria high-speed/high-capacity railway line. As further investments in the south, it includes the doubling of the track from Catania to Syracuse, the rail works associated with the bridge across the Strait and the doubling of the track between Palermo and Messina (Castelbuono–Patti stretch), according to the following financing schedule:

| Rail works | Total | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | Beyond |
|--|--------|------|------|------|-------|--------|
| H-S/H-C Battipaglia–Reggio Calabria | 15 200 | 11 | 100 | 420 | 14 | 14655 |
| Catania – Syracuse (doubling of track) | 1 370 | 2 | 10 | 20 | 1 339 | |
| Messina: Castelbuono – Patti (doubling of track) | 154 | 1 | 2 | | 151 | |
| <i>(figures in € million)</i> | | | | | | |

It is important to stress that the preliminary study shows the high-speed/high-capacity Battipaglia–Reggio Calabria line **as being associated with the bridge** and to be built in that context. The preliminary study proposes a route to connect with this line, which at present is merely mentioned in an RFI draft, but whose financing has been postponed to after 2005.

The 2001–2005 Programme Contract of rail investments will focus resources on completing the High-Speed line still being built on the Turin–Milan–Naples sections.

In these circumstances it is very hard to predict how and when the Battipaglia–Reggio Calabria high-speed rail link will actually be financed **and it is significant that RFI has indicated 14 655 million euros in the column "beyond 2005"**. The same applies to the other two stretches, which are due to be discussed as of 2005.

This RFI table raises questions as to what priorities the Italian Government has introduced with the bridge project: the effort is geared primarily towards a fixed link across the Strait, while the movement of passengers and goods on rail will be "looked at" as of 2005.

5) Cabotage in Italy: a sustainable transport system currently in expansion which will be held back by the construction of the bridge

The construction of the bridge presupposes that a growing share of goods transport (to and from Sicily), both in Italy and beyond (in the Alps), will shift to the road, thanks to the new road connection provided by the fixed link across the Strait.

As indicated above, construction of the bridge will require a 'reduction' of both ferry and cabotage services to and from Sicily.

This approach, which goes substantially against the basic principles of the free market, also conflicts with the European Commission's White Paper *European transport policy for 2010: time to decide*.⁴ That important document deals exhaustively with all the main aspects of passenger and goods transport in Europe, including the removal of bottlenecks on major international communication routes.

The fixed link across the Strait of Messina does not appear in the lists of strategic infrastructure set out by the European Union in the White Paper, and the same document looks principally to the development of maritime cabotage to relieve, by sea, the road congestion being experienced in the Alps. This approach contrasts with the basic strategy underlying the construction of the bridge.

It should be noted that cabotage in Italy is a mode of transport with huge potential, all of it still to be exploited, and that the last few years have seen an increase in the quantity of goods transported (Table 1).

Table 1

| YEAR | 1990 | 2001 |
|-------------------|--------|--------|
| Million tonnes/km | 35 665 | 48 482 |

National Transport Accounts, 2001. Page 67

This increase has also, indeed primarily, involved maritime container traffic, which in Italy grew by 34% over the period 1990–2001. Container traffic has also increased very considerably in the south of Italy (Table 2) and has gained a sizeable share of the national market. Sicily's ports can play an important role in this growth scenario, though that role is liable to be thwarted by the construction of the bridge.

Table 2

| | 1990 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| % of nat. total | 15.01 | 15.99 | 26.75 | 40.32 | 46.04 | 47.82 | 47.74 | 49.51 |
| TEU | 287.848 | 486.225 | 982.332 | 2020.558 | 2699.824 | 2959.336 | 3368.072 | 3730.976 |

⁴ Brussels, COM(2001) XXX.

6) Environmental impact of a bridge across the Strait of Messina

The road/rail bridge project is being planned in an area of high natural and landscape value, including Sites of Community Interest which need to be protected, as well as presenting extremely high seismic danger. Our detailed comments regarding the environment are given in **Annex D**, which explains the criticisms formulated by the Greens and by Italian environmentalists, and we believe this aspect too is not to be neglected in an overall evaluation of the project.

Rome, 3 July 2003