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Press release

Inland waterways enter the list of TEN priority projects

The high level group chaired by former European Commissioner Karel Van Miert delivered its report on the trans-European transport network (TEN-T) last week. The strategic importance of the Rhine-Main-Danube corridor for sustainable transport in an enlarged Europe has been fully acknowledged by listing all bottlenecks on the priority list. The Seine-Nord Europe project on the north-south corridor may join later pending the financial commitment of France. Last but not least, the group considers the pan-European implementation of River information Services (RIS) as a thematic priority.

Two inland waterway projects figure among the strategic priorities and one remains in the waiting room. This is in a nutshell the outcome of the Van Miert Group's report for inland waterways. It could certainly have been more, but is nevertheless a major change in the global perception of Member States and accession countries of the contribution of inland shipping to the goals of the common transport policy. It recognizes the internal market cannot grow without solutions that are both sustainable and economically viable. Once the deficiencies of the infrastructure are properly addressed, waterways will allow a better use of existing capacity and reliable navigation on the entire network. Positive perspectives will secure the growth of freight on water and act as a catalyst for potential cargo, adding to the quality of life of citizens as a result of less emissions and increased mobility.

However, the absence of firm financial commitments dangles as a sword of Damocles over the realization of the TEN-T networks. In view of the severe budgetary constraints on national governments, the group recommends a more important share of EU co-financing and private-public partnerships. Nevertheless, it should be noted the annual investment to carry out priority projects accounts for only 0.15% of GDP of the enlarged EU, without taking into account benefits. Therefore, the group rightly stresses that the selected projects provide a socio-economic return by reducing costs, facilitating trans-national trade and contributing to sustainable development. INE points at additional gains of investments in waterways since projects can tackle simultaneously multiple goals including transport, flood protection, nature restoration, recreation and tourism.

According to INE, the Van Miert report is a constructive contribution to revision of the TEN-T guidelines by the European Commission next autumn. In case France gives a financial signal in the meantime, the first lines of a quality network from north to south and from east to west can be drawn. A first step in the direction of a strategic vision!