

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Pan-European transport corridors 2004-2006

(2006/C 318/30)

On 16 December 2004, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on *Pan-European transport corridors 2004-2006*.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 4 September 2006. The rapporteur was Ms Alleweldt.

At its 429th plenary session, held on 13/14 September 2006 (meeting of 13 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 192 votes to four with ten abstentions:

1. Aims of the permanent study group

1.1 Since the beginnings of the pan-European transport policy in 1991, which laid the foundations for planning the major corridor links, the EESC has worked actively and with great conviction on this policy of promoting cohesion beyond the EU's external borders. In 2003 a brochure ⁽¹⁾ was published on the work undertaken over the previous ten years. Since then, a permanent study group has been working continuously on this issue. The last opinion ⁽²⁾ covered the 2002 — 2004 reporting period. The present opinion looks at developments up to mid-2006.

1.2 The aim of the permanent study group is to tie in the creation of a common pan-European transport infrastructure with the pursuit of a policy for a sustainable, efficient transport system and with cohesion targets, right from the outset and not limited by the EU's borders. In doing so, social, economic, operational, environmental, security policy and regional issues need to be taken into consideration, and the corresponding interest groups involved. The permanent study group wishes to make its own contribution to this through its practical work in the field. The opinion presented here is a report on the activities carried out and experience gathered in the 2004-2006 period. It also offers an assessment of the political changes that have taken place in this area.

2. Conclusions

2.1 The link between transport infrastructure development on the one hand, and the implementation of the key transport policy objectives and operational issues on the other, is at the heart of the EESC initiative and has lost none of its relevance and urgency. Although it has been asserted regularly and often at political level that such a link would be established, progress has been very modest because no specific implementation method for doing so has been developed. The hope that transport policy aims would almost automatically tie in with continued infrastructure development has not materialised over the past years. Here, a key role could fall to the regions, where all issues come together in practice and where an understanding

of the pan-European context is particularly necessary. Hence, leading by example, the permanent study group held a regional conference in North-east Poland to illustrate the importance of taking into consideration the effects planned trunk routes would have on regions. European policy must take on more responsibility here. It will not be enough to consider only the central trunk routes as a European task.

2.2 In the past two years much has been done to adapt European infrastructure planning to the new political circumstances. Within the EU new priority projects have been launched, new central trunk routes with neighbouring states identified, and an initiative with the Western Balkans further developed. In principle, the EESC considers these new initiatives to have been a success. It particularly welcomes the fact that the task of establishing links with neighbouring states has been taken seriously. At the same time, however, these new initiatives have remained rooted in old concepts: the focus is virtually exclusively on the planning of transport routes, with little or no attention paid to questions of intermodality and environmental impact, or to local economic and social interests.. The EESC considers this highly regrettable.

2.3 One of the reasons for revising infrastructure planning at European level was that only very slow progress was being made with implementation; this was often due to lack of funds. Hence, concentrating on just a few projects became the main priority. The EESC feels that European subsidies must also be increased, and has already made suggestions elsewhere on the possibility of additional funding. At the very least, the 20 % co-financing available through EU funds for projects within the EU should be better exploited. Also, with increased subsidies, the conditions stipulated for infrastructure projects, for example, environmental, intermodal and security projects, can and must be formulated in a more binding way.

2.4 The EESC advocates finding more common ground between the cross-border bodies set up by national transport ministries in the Member States (such as the steering committees for the corridors) and those set up by the Commission in

⁽¹⁾ EESC: Ten years of pan-European transport policy, 2003.

⁽²⁾ Committee opinion on The Pan-European Transport Corridors, OJ No. C 120 of 20.5.2005, p.17.

this field. Coordination alone will not suffice, or will mean losing out on important opportunities to make progress with practical policies. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain who has what responsibilities for achieving overall transport policy aims. The first three pan-European transport conferences in 1991, 1994 and 1997 provided important guidelines. The 1997 Declaration of Helsinki still provides an excellent basis for cooperation thanks to its comprehensive nature. At the time the intention was to regularly assess progress made. Today almost the only thing being assessed is the completion of construction work.

2.5 The EESC conference in Bialystok was a great success ⁽³⁾. Not only did it bring Europe to the region, it also conveyed local people's expectations regarding an effective pan-European transport policy. The EESC will focus its future activities in this field on its capacity to provide such an impetus. It would also be useful to continue to work closely with the steering committees for the corridors, the South East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO) and, of course, the Commission, as part of ongoing coordination work. It is important, in future, to study and evaluate not only regional approaches, but also transport-mode-related issues along trunk routes and priority projects within the TEN-T network.

3. A new context for pan-European transport policy

3.1 Major developments have taken place in Europe over the last two years. In May 2004, ten new Member States joined the European Union. Europe has renewed and strengthened its commitment towards the Western Balkan countries and it has developed a new Neighbourhood Policy. The Commission's initiative to recast trans-European networks and press ahead with the development of the corridors was, on the one hand, directed inwards, as it reflected the 2004 enlargement and also brought some of the experience gained with the corridors to bear in the TEN-T policy within the EU ⁽⁴⁾. On the other hand, it was also a matter of extending the key transport routes in line with — and indeed also going beyond the scope of — the new European neighbourhood policy.

3.2 In 2002 the European Commission reviewed the state of implementation of the TEN-T network and pan-European corridors. The findings generally pointed towards serious delays in the upgrading of the major axes. A new approach was taken, with more clearly identified priorities and fuller commitment in relation to the countries concerned. As a result, three different regions have been identified: the European Union in its future shape of 27 Member States, the Western Balkans ⁽⁵⁾ and the remaining countries and regions bordering the EU 27. In each of the three cases high level groups were commissioned by the European Commission to recommend priority projects or axes, implementation measures and monitoring mechanisms.

⁽³⁾ The report on the conference can be found in Appendix I.

⁽⁴⁾ Based on the expert group headed by Karel van Miert, which submitted its report in June 2003.

⁽⁵⁾ For reasons to do with policy coherence, Western Balkans is occasionally dealt with as part of South East Europe, which practically include — apart from the former Yugoslavia — Romania, Bulgaria and even more occasionally Turkey and Republic of Moldova.

3.3 The first exercise of this kind was carried out for the EU 27 by the High Level Group coordinated by Karel Van Miert (2002-2003). Three quarters (3/4) of the pan-European corridors fell under scrutiny and the Group came up with 30 transport infrastructure projects, to cover both the 'old' and 'new' Member States, that represented the priorities for **the EU 27 Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T)**. Apart from this, the Group recommended *inter alia* new financial and legislative provisions to support the implementation of the TEN-T, new project-based coordination mechanisms. The High Level Group recommendations led to the revision of the TEN-T guidelines in April 2004.

3.4 The Western Balkans has offered a less homogenous base for regional policy making than the EU 27: the diversity in the status of the countries vis-à-vis the EU, the intra-regional relations, as well as the dynamics in the relations with the EU, has led to continual policy adjustments. The past conflict left the Balkans in deep need of stability — economic, social and political — and therefore in even greater need of external assistance. To this extent, the regional approach towards the Western Balkans has a particular added value. The EU has been a fervent adept of this approach not only in the transport sector but also in the efforts to set up a common free trade area and a common energy market.

3.4.1 In 2001, the European Commission issued a strategy for regional transport system in South East Europe as a multi-modal transport infrastructure network. The strategy was followed by two studies — TIRS and REBIS ⁽⁶⁾ which defined the CORE network and made recommendations regarding investment and financing. This process created the basis for setting up a Secretariat based in Belgrade, called the South East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO). SEETO is not only meant to support and coordinate infrastructure development, but also to function as a contact point for queries from social and economic players. This facility is being used more and more. The EESC permanent study group is also expressly mentioned in this context.

3.4.2 The first *Five Year Multi Annual Plan* covering the period 2006 — 2010 was signed in November 2005 and identified approximately 150 projects. Additionally, up to 20 so-called regional 'soft projects' — representing measures to accompany the process of regional networks implementation are listed in the plan. Given the serious financial limitations, the number of priority infrastructure projects has recently been drastically reduced to 22. The process coordinated by SEETO can be compared to the former TINA process in the EU, where the regional network is to be finalised in addition to the main axis/corridors.

⁽⁶⁾ (Regional Balkans Infrastructure Study — Transport).

3.5 The work of the High Level Group (HLG 2) headed by Loyola de Palacio looked at the further development of trunk routes to the EU's neighbouring countries and far beyond. Four land routes and a navigable route were defined (?). These were intended not only to represent the main international links but also to strengthen regional cohesion. The HLG 2 has also put forward various proposals for horizontal measures, such as speeding up border formalities, improving traffic/transport safety, and securing better interoperability in rail transport. The HLG 2 also recommends closer coordination and a more forceful approach by replacing the MoUs with binding agreements. Based on the recommendations, the Commission intends to publish a communication on its plans sometime in July or September. The permanent study group feels the Commission must adequately address horizontal issues.

3.6 The pace of work in the corridors and transport areas has been varied (See Appendix II for details). With the exception of the Barents-Euro-Arctic Region the transport areas have yet to make their mark, a situation which has changed little since the areas were set up in 1997 (at the Helsinki Conference). There has been an increasing trend for cooperation within the corridors to spill over into regional networks as well. The EESC considers this an altogether positive development. Over the last two years, there has still been no progress in terms of financial and technical backing for organisational activity. The Commission has failed to respond to the frequent calls for more support. However, one decisive change is that, given the work of the two high-level groups and the Commission's conclusions, the corridor model has in practice become obsolete. Within the EU, the priorities are determined in line with the 30 TEN projects. Outside the EU, the corridors have been 'replaced' by the five new axes or have been continued under different names. However, there is clearly sufficient reason to press ahead with work on them. The steering committees have established themselves amongst the transport ministries involved as important platforms for contact and cooperation, and they have developed an identity (brand) of their own. They are continuing work on important links which are not covered by any other cross-border initiatives, such as priority TEN projects without designated special coordinators.

3.7 The Commission has stepped up its support for coordination, and the regular meetings held once or twice a year with all corridor chairs and various other leading players provide a key forum for exchange. The EESC is always welcome to

(?) The routes are as follows:

- South-west axis: connecting south-west Europe to the centre of Europe, including Switzerland, and the 'Transmaghreb' axes between Morocco and Egypt.
- South-east axis: connecting the centre of Europe to the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, as well as the Middle East and Egypt, via the Balkans and Turkey.
- Central axis: connecting the centre of Europe to the Ukraine and the Black Sea, as well as Russia and Siberia.
- North-east axis: connecting the EU to Norway, as well as Russia and Transsiberia.
- Motorways of the sea: connecting the Baltic Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as the coastal countries. Extension to the Suez canal is also planned.

participate and collaborate, and it has noted that this participation is also much appreciated. These meetings do not just involve exchanging information about recent progress in construction plans, but also involve the discussion of fundamental and conceptual issues in the field of pan-European transport infrastructure policy. A number of structural innovations are of relevance here: in order to facilitate implementation of key sections of TEN projects, the Commission has designated special coordinators for six projects (8). Provision has also been made for setting up an agency aimed at improving financing and execution of key projects, not least in view of the higher volumes of funding involved. Finally, there is an ongoing debate on a legally binding form of cross-border cooperation which would go beyond existing MoUs.

4. Organising the work of the permanent study group — activities

4.1 In line with the re-orientation of pan-European transport policy, the permanent study group no longer focuses only on work in the corridors, but also on priority projects within the trans-European transport network (?) as well as recent planning activity by the expert group headed by Loyola de Palacio, such as the idea of a special link between Spain and Africa. In discussions with the appropriate departments of DG TREN, it emerged that EESC input into the socio-economic evaluation of completed or planned TEN projects would be appreciated.

4.2 Around the turn of the year 2004/2005, the Commission began preliminary work on a second expert report headed by Loyola de Palacio. At this early stage, the permanent study group had an opportunity to make its views known on fundamental issues (10). The following observations were made: environmental protection should play a greater role; the requirement for intermodality should be translated more effectively into practice — this could be chosen as a separate evaluation criterion; and there should be more of a focus on links to regional transport networks. Finally, the permanent study group highlighted the importance of horizontal aspects such as harmonising legislation, safety issues, etc., and emphasised that these aspects would have to be discussed more fully and in greater detail if the intention was to push forward implementation of the EU's transport policy objectives. In its written

- (8) I. Berlin-Palermo rail link (Mr van Miert).
- II. Lisbon-Madrid-Tours/Montpellier high-speed rail link (Mr Davignon).
- III. Lyon-Turin-Budapest-Ukrainian border rail link (Ms de Palacio).
- IV. Paris-Bratislava rail link (Mr Balzacs).
- V. 'Rail Baltica' Warsaw-Helsinki rail link (Mr Telicka).
- VI. Rail corridors and the ETRMS (Mr Vinck).

(9) Decision 884/2004/EC of 29 April 2004, OJ 30.4.2004 and 7.7.2004.

(10) Letter to E. Thielmann, DG TREN of 15.12.2004.

reply ⁽¹⁾, the Commission stressed that it would in future, pay closer attention to the call for links to regional transport networks in particular.

4.3 In tandem with the second expert report, the Commission also took stock of work to date in the corridors. The permanent study group also provided a brief assessment, and in particular advocated greater scope for questions of economic and social cohesion and for consultation. The study group felt it was equally important to strengthen the steering committees and ensure that they were more effectively networked to make the arrangements in place more binding and to monitor progress, something which above all falls within the remit of the steering committees themselves. In its evaluation of the questionnaire the Commission drew four important conclusions ⁽²⁾: the corridor concept had proved its worth and would be retained; there was a need to act on operational issues and to take socio-economic factors into account; it was worth monitoring progress more closely, but such monitoring should be based on the specific characteristics of each corridor; the positive impact of the corridors could only be estimated in the long term, but the more binding the nature of the cooperation, the more successful that impact will be.

4.4 Cooperation with the steering committees of the ten transport corridors has continued to be of importance over the past two years. For practical and staffing reasons, active participation in steering committee meetings could not be maintained at the same level as in previous years. However, contacts have always remained in place, not least because the coordination sessions held roughly twice a year in Brussels ensure regular meetings and an exchange of experience. The permanent study group has introduced a system whereby specific responsibility for individual corridors is allocated through an equitable division of the workload. This will, in future, mean more practical commitment and greater continuity in the group's own ranks.

4.5 The opinion on 'The role of railway stations in an enlarged EU' ⁽³⁾ was relatively broad in scope; it was integrated into the work of the permanent study group and adopted in February 2006. European transport policy should pay closer attention to the preservation, use and design of railway stations — particularly from the safety point of view — as shop windows for passenger rail transport and as service centres in the transport network.

4.6 In the period under review, the permanent study group organised two external events: in November 2004, the EESC participated in a memorable train journey along Corridor X,

organised by the 'ARGE Korridor X' cooperative, which ran from Villach in Austria via Zagreb in Croatia to Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This event illustrated the need for more efficient rail links and for cross-border cooperation between the region's railways. To attract the attention of the media, activities were organised at the various stops. The second external event took place in Bialystok, Poland, with the focus on the regional impact of Corridor I planning on nature conservation, safety and the quality of life in north-eastern Poland. In many ways, the Bialystok conference was a definite success and can be seen as the highlight of the permanent study group's work. Evaluation of the event will therefore be included in the next chapter on 'main outcomes'.

5. Main outcomes of work in the 2004-2006 period

5.1 From 15 to 17 November 2005, the permanent study group held a conference with an open hearing in Bialystok, at the invitation of the Marshal of the Podlaskie voivodship. This was accompanied by talks and visits to areas in the vicinity of pan-European transport Corridor I, the 'Via und Rail Baltica'. The aim was to discuss with regional government representatives, the various social and economic interest groups and bodies responsible for transport policy at regional and national level how best to ensure that Corridor I development dovetails with regional interests and the needs of environmental protection. The EESC delegation was accompanied by a representative of the European Commission with special responsibilities for the Rail Baltica. All of the meetings took place in a uniquely hospitable atmosphere. The visit was not only important from the perspective of transport policy, but was also a success for both sides in terms of 'communicating Europe'.

5.1.1 This conference brought diverse stakeholders together: environmentalists, local politicians, railway entrepreneurs, local residents and works council representatives, and in practical terms, it forged a tangible link between the region and the EU/Brussels. It brought home the various ways in which transport corridors have an impact: the strain on people living along transit routes, expectations of an economic upturn resulting from transport links, the weaknesses in public passenger transport and regional rail transport, preservation of the natural assets of the region, concerns about job losses, financial difficulties not to mention the red tape, that could only be recognised as such and overcome by coming together in this way. The lessons of the conference were many-faceted and extremely instructive for all stakeholders, and, ultimately, new approaches for dealing with the problems also emerged.

⁽¹⁾ Letter from E. Thielmann of 21 January 2005.

⁽²⁾ Evaluation presented at the coordination meeting on 21 April 2005 in Brussels.

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion on The role of railway stations in the cities/towns of the enlarged Europe, OJ No. C 88 of 11.4.2006, p. 9.

5.1.2 The Via Baltica in north-eastern Poland can serve as an illustration of the issues to be dealt with in an integrated pan-European transport policy. One of the main problems is congestion in the region from transit traffic and, on the other hand, the urgent need for economic development which is generated by the transport links but not by transit traffic. A second key problem and also the region's main 'asset' is its unique natural environment, which must be protected. Many helpful solutions, which are not even necessarily more expensive, were identified here. It emerged that regional planning had not taken due account of the Rail Baltica, presenting an opportunity for the representative of the EU coordinator to make the case for the rail link. It became clear that only an integrated overall transport strategy in the region could deal with the problems and thus overcome the barriers to planning and implementing the Via Baltica and Rail Baltica. The EESC will continue to support the positive developments which were set in motion at the conference.

5.2 Cross-border cooperation between the transport ministries of the individual states along the 'corridors' will in future be replaced or superseded by the Commission initiative (see section 3). In so doing, it is important to seize this opportunity to pursue closer 'one-stop' coordination, instead of coordinating two parallel processes as has been the case up to now. This

would also improve the basis for the implementation of key transport policy aims. One problem which remains unresolved is how to effectively make cross-border cooperation between EU Member States and third countries more binding. Apart from enhanced contractual relations, the EESC feels that the best way for this to happen is by concentrating available EU funds. For example, there should be a concentration on priority projects even within the priority axes, and full use should be made of possible co-financing of 20 % for projects within the EU. At present, subsidies are barely at the level of 2-5 %.

5.3 Finally, there is the problem of combining infrastructure and operational issues, an area which has always been important for the EESC and one which remains underdeveloped. Although there have been regular and frequent pledges on this issue, little progress has been made due to the lack of a separate implementation procedure in this area. The hope that transport policy objectives would more or less automatically tie in with ongoing infrastructure development has not been fulfilled over the last few years. Transport policy will, unfortunately, no longer be shaped by large conferences, as in the past; in future, the key role should, therefore, be played by regions, where all issues come together in practice and where it is vital to have an understanding of the pan-European context. This observation is borne out by the experience of the Bialystok conference.

Brussels, 13 September 2006.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND
