Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Pan-European transport corridors’

(2005/C 120/04)

On 23 January 2003 the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on: ‘Pan-European transport corridors’.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on this subject, adopted its opinion on 5 October 2004. The rapporteur was Ms Alleweldt.

At its 412th plenary session (meeting of 27 October 2004), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 164 votes to two, with nine abstentions:

1. Introduction

1.1 The permanent study group resumed its work in January 2003 when its remit (1) was extended to cover all matters relating to the development of the pan-European transport corridors. In December 2002 the Plenary Assembly had taken note of and emphatically approved the activities of the previous term of office. In addition to the continuation and development of corridor-related activities, the European Commission also made significant new decisions in 2003 and 2004 on the development of the trans-European transport networks (TEN-T), which also relate to work in the ten Helsinki corridors. EU enlargement in May 2004 and the prospects for accession of south-east European countries also change the general framework for joint infrastructure policy and cooperation in the corridors.

1.2 The purpose of this own-initiative opinion is not only to report on the activities and views of the European Economic and Social Committee on the pan-European transport corridors over the past two years, but also to indicate what further steps should be taken by the parties concerned and how the Committee can be of help.

2. New general framework in the pan-European transport infrastructure policy

2.1 The Commission began to revise the TEN-T in mid-2003 with the report from the High Level Group chaired by Karel van Miert. As a result, the 1996 list of priority projects was extended and new EU financing options, and a new kind of improved coordination, were put forward (2). Plans were also made to enshrine the concept of transport corridors in EU infrastructure policy, with the intention of concentrating in future on priorities along certain trunk routes instead of general network-related policy. The van Miert Group’s approach failed to secure support.

2.2 The EESC discussed the future of TEN-T in detail at a section meeting in Rome in September 2003 with the Italian Economic and Labour Council’s (CNEL) Commission V on large-scale infrastructure projects and networks. A joint statement (3) was issued calling for more commitment to achieve an integrated transport network that effectively integrates the new Member States and goes beyond this. Intermodality and sustainability would have to come to the fore and financing would have to be jointly reinforced and possibly assisted by European funding for the trans-European transport network.

2.3 The Italian presidency asked the EESC to draft an own-initiative opinion to build on the discussion begun in Rome. The Committee outlined its current key positions on the European transport infrastructure policy in the document: Preparing transport infrastructure for the future: planning and neighbouring countries - sustainable mobility - financing (4). The EESC suggested trying out new ways and means of financing in the future, giving greater priority to environmental protection and social and environmental sustainability and in the planning and implementation of a pan-European transport network, continuing the established work in the Helsinki corridors, and responding in new ways to new challenges.

2.4 The European Union has made the peaceful reconstruction of the south-east Europe region a key priority and has pressed ahead consistently with the development of a fully functional transport infrastructure. A transport concept has been developed for south-east Europe in addition to the existing corridors related to the region (X, V, VII, IV and VIII),

(1) Bureau Decision of 23 October 2002
(2) For further information see EESC opinion OJ C 10 of 14.1.2004, p 70
(3) CESE 1043/2003 fin – available from the TEN section secretariat
(4) OJ C 108, 30.4.2004, p. 35
and based on the 1997 Helsinki Declaration and TINA (\(^1\)) experiences. It consists of an intermodal infrastructure network, the so-called South East Europe Core Regional Transport Network, which should be implemented through a joint, coordinated course of action. The states involved (\(^2\)) have prepared a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which, inter alia, explicitly refers to cooperation with the region’s socio-economic interest groups and the permanent EESC study group.

2.5 The coordination of the steering committees’ work in the ten Helsinki corridors (\(^3\)) and four transport areas (PETRAs) (\(^4\)) has been given a new look. About once a year the Commission invites presidents and heads of the corridor secretariats and other representatives of European or EU institutions to discuss the progress of the work and its prospects. The former G-24 transport working group should be replaced by a smaller, more efficient structure. It is also clear to those responsible in the Commission, that it alone can provide certain aspects of coordination and technical and organisational support. The most recent meetings took place in June 2003 and on 15 March 2004. The most important points discussed are taken up in sections 3 and 4 below.

2.6 EU enlargement and the new neighbourhood policy also have some bearing on future transport policy planning in Europe and beyond. A joint Commission-European Parliament strategy meeting was held in June, which representatives of the European transport sector, including from the EU’s new neighbouring states, were invited to attend. It was decided to set up a high-level group, with the task of preparing the ground for agreements on the expansion of trans-European trunk routes, particularly in the direction of eastern neighbours, the Russian Federation, the Black Sea region, and the Balkans. For the Mediterranean, a project was launched for the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean transport network. Investigations are currently under way into transport infrastructure needs in Turkey.

3. Organising the work of the permanent study group

3.1 New developments and ongoing tasks: information and transparency

3.1.1 Despite seven years of implementing the Helsinki Declaration and consolidating cooperation through steering committees, and despite, in overall terms, input from the European Commission, there has been scant improvement in the transparency and enhanced networking of the various planning processes. The new TEN-T guidelines, the corridors and transport areas, the SEE Core Regional Transport Network, the work of ECMT and UN-ECE, and various regional reinforced cooperation initiatives are still the domain of just a small group of experts.

3.1.2 The lack of transparency is amplified at the level of organised civil society. One of the key roles of the permanent study group has been and continues to be to act as an interface for information both within official bodies, and to civil society organisations.

3.1.3 The Commission is working on an information system (GIS), which is to be available across the board for planning and evaluating results. At present this information system is only available for internal use, but it could be expanded to include socio-economic data, which would also make it more useful for the EESC. This matter should be discussed with the Commission.

3.2 Making use of consultation: ‘European’ transport routes call for a ‘European consensus’

3.2.1 The van Miert group results highlight the difficulties that cause a gap to emerge between ambitious European planning and actually putting those plans into practice. This gap is also hard to influence. It has been rightly pointed out that more cross-border planning procedures and closer involvement of civil society interest groups will be needed for better results in the future. These concerns are also reflected in the new TEN guidelines.

3.2.2 Involvement of civil society organisations is the key to balanced development, taking account of local and regional interests and bringing life to the operation and use of the roads. Infrastructure projects with European implications only fulfil their function if they are in the interests of sustainability. This requires the involvement of business associations, transport companies, trade unions, and environmental and consumer organisations working across borders at European level. The impetus for implementing ‘European’ transport routes can only be sustained by a socially-rooted appreciation of ‘Europe’ and a consensus which takes account of economic and social realities.

3.2.3 The EESC has repeatedly offered to help build this consensus. Hearings must be used systematically at European level to achieve this. However, the EESC advises against carrying this out as a mandatory act without considering the results. Despite meeting with considerable interest and producing clear conclusions, the 1998 hearing on the TINA process organised by the EESC in conjunction with the Commission was completely ignored in the final report.
3.3 From consultation to cooperation on ideas and practical work

3.3.1 The EESC has spent many years working on pan-European transport policy, and for a long time, the basic call was for consultation and involvement. To a large extent, this concern has now been taken on board by actors throughout Europe, and the EESC has established good working contacts. The Committee therefore has a legitimate claim to participate in the work of steering committees and other bodies, both by contributing ideas and through practical forms of collaboration.

3.3.2 The recent own-initiative opinion on Preparing transport infrastructure for the future, which explicitly defines what the Committee considers to be the basic principles of European transport policy is, in particular, a substantive basis for contributing ideas. The objective of sustainability, ways of improving financing, and gearing transport infrastructure to pan-European needs are three key issues. The opinion also lays down priorities for action in the development of the transport corridors. Given their relevance as guidelines for the work of the permanent study group, they are briefly summarised below (9):

— Better links between economic centres should be assessed.
— Intermodality must be increased on the basis of comprehensible criteria.
— Links to inland waterways must be improved.
— Short sea shipping should also be included.
— Cooperation on railway transport has already achieved a certain degree of success and should be further reinforced.
— Greater attention should be paid to links between regional and local transport networks and main transport routes.
— Work on the corridors must systematically incorporate qualitative, operational development objectives (safety, consumer interests, social concerns [particularly for road transport], service quality, environmental impact).
— To a large extent, the corridor approach should be maintained and extended to a wider area.

3.3.3 The Commission has taken some of these objectives on board in the revised TEN guidelines. The main concern now is to push ahead in a practical and coherent way with their implementation through cross-border cooperation. The EESC is well placed to contribute to this process through specific action which takes practical concerns into account.

3.4 Creation of a corridor network and regional cooperation

3.4.1 Work in the steering committees is now proceeding at about the same rate in all corridors. At the same time regional connections can be observed, which means that today we are dealing with a corridor network rather than individual trunk routes. A regional component of cooperation is increasingly being developed in approaches for the transport areas, for example in Corridors IV, V, VII and X in south-east Europe, and Corridors I and IX in the Baltic area. By contrast, there is little activity in the officially designated transport areas (PETRAs).

3.4.2 Both approaches – the establishment of trunk routes and the extensive development of regional connections – are mutually reinforcing. In future, the permanent study group should focus more closely on regional development issues. The EESC makes a substantial contribution across its various sections by bringing together transport policy, regional development, and the central themes of its external relations work (eastern neighbours, the Northern Dimension, south-east Europe).

3.5 An objective for the future: establishing new connections

3.5.1 The strategic meeting of the Commission and the European Parliament in June 2004 was a welcome move as the EESC has always held that the EU’s role in initiating implementation of European transport connections should not be weakened as a result of enlargement. A letter from the Commission to the EESC describes the meeting as a starting point for a more open and broad-based coordination process to which all actors can contribute. Achieving this is crucial for the success and sustainability of new transport planning at European level.

3.5.2 It is vital for new planning to draw on past experience, not least the work of the steering committees. The specific contribution of the EESC described in this opinion, which is the outcome of many years of practical experience, could now be used at an early stage of infrastructure planning. It is important to make use of this opportunity.

(9) OJ C 108, 30.4.2004, p. 35, points 1.8.1 - 1.8.8
4. Activities of the permanent study group in the transport corridors

4.1 A trade union working party has now been set up in Corridor II (10). The first meeting took place in Moscow on 10 and 11 April 2003. The EESC also took part in the official meeting of the steering committee on 15 and 16 May 2003 in Berlin. Both meetings signal a promising outlook for our work. The problem in Corridor II is caused by difficult cooperation with Belarus. Meanwhile a trend has set in, whereby Belarus – and with it a large, very well developed part of the corridor – is circumvented to the north due to border difficulties. Cooperation with rail companies is currently being increased. Extension of the corridor to Ekaterinburg was recently proposed. It is particularly important to find better ways of dealing with road traffic problems and border procedures, and to take up the EESC’s help in this regard.

4.2 Involvement in Corridor IV (11) work has gone from strength to strength. At the meeting of the steering committee in Sopron (Hungary) on 20 and 21 May 2003, representatives of the rail companies and the railway trade unions in Corridor IV also came together for a productive discussion – which is to be continued – on the promotion of rail transport. This occurred at the last session on 10 and 11 November 2003 in Dortmund. Technical and organisational obstacles and proposed solutions for border crossings were identified as the main theme for further discussions. To ensure continuity, a representative of the trade-union-based cooperation involving railway workers will take part in the steering committees as an observer. The economic and social situation and technical and organisational aspects in the road freight transport in Corridor IV could now be addressed.

4.3 The EESC is particularly keen to promote Corridor X (12). To that end, contacts with the appropriate steering committee have been stepped up. More specific moves were made on possible EESC activities at the steering committee meeting in Slovenia on 18 and 19 July 2003. On 3 November 2003 the EESC held a very successful dialogue conference in Belgrade and issued a joint statement (13). This set in motion further steps to increase rail transport in particular. Working relations in Sarajevo and cooperation with the SEE Core Networks steering group are further topics to be covered by this work. With an eye to securing a balanced policy for seaports and their incorporation into hinterland transport systems, Corridor V (14) is an important trunk route.

4.4 The EESC has drawn up a series of proposals (15) to support inland waterway transport and Corridor VII (16) (the Danube). The most recent steering committee meeting was held in July 2004. Discussions are continuing under the auspices of the permanent study group, and these are focussing on current obstacles to the growth of shipping in Corridor VII, and on suitable provisions to overcome them. Also under discussion are options and investment needs for closer integration into a multimodal transport system. (17)

4.4.1 In its opinion on Preparing transport infrastructure for the future adopted on 28 January 2004 (18) the EESC mentioned the necessity of ‘promoting the inland waterway Corridor VII, the Danube, links to rail routes and appropriate technical and social regulations governing cross-border inland waterways transport’.

4.4.2 Moreover, the Joint Consultative Committee EU/Romania (Bucharest, 23-24/5/02) proposed that, in order to optimise the role of the Danube as a pan-European transport corridor, measures be taken and greater financial assistance provided to improve its navigability and its connection with the Black Sea.

4.5 Since the 2001 dialogue conference on Corridors III (19) and VI (20) in Katowice, the EESC has not engaged in any activities of its own in relation to these corridors. However, a letter was sent by the Corridor III secretariat in August 2004, inviting contributions for further development in the form of proposals for the 2004/2005 work programme.

4.6 The EESC has received particular support over the past year or two from the new trade-union-based cooperation, organised by the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF) and involving transport workers along the corridors and across Europe. The ETF project has made a substantial contribution both in terms of ideas and practical activities to the success of the EESC’s work across all transport sectors, and is set to step up its cooperation in the future.

(10) Germany – Poland – Belarus – Russia.
(13) See Appendix.
(15) In view of the fact that individual events are in the course of preparation, detailed information has not been included in this opinion, but can be obtained from the TEN section secretariat
(18) For more on this, see Mr Levaux’s working document, which can be obtained from the TEN section secretariat
(19) See footnote 4.
(20) Germany – Poland – Ukraine.
(21) Poland – Slovakia – Czech Republic.
4.7 Finally, it should be noted that the president of the permanent study group, in cooperation with the TEN Section secretariat and with the support of the relevant European Commission departments, has prepared information sheets with brief descriptions of each of the corridors. (22)

5. Recommendations for future activity

5.1 The permanent study group has taken on board the new objectives of pan-European transport policy, as described above, and incorporated them into its regional, practical and conceptual planning. More than ever, the EESC’s strength is its ability to reconcile interests and to make practical suggestions. The emphasis must be on action and presence on the ground.

5.2 Interested parties from inside and outside the EESC can use the Committee’s permanent study group as a clearing house for information and contacts. The permanent study group’s main remit is to lead and coordinate the EESC’s activities and to disseminate information on them. It also has a responsible role in overall coordination at European level. The study group can draw on 13 years of active EESC involvement in helping shape pan-European transport policy.

5.3 Over the next two years the emphasis of EESC activities should shift to practical cooperation and involvement of civil society organisations on the ground. The aim is to enable the relevant civil society organisations to contribute to achieving the transport policy objectives listed in point 3.3.2 by offering evaluations, criticisms and suggestions for improvement in relation to individual corridors, regions or infrastructure projects.

5.4 EESC cooperation with the corridor steering committees and the European Commission should be stepped up. The permanent study group needs to take on a new role in helping to establish the ‘South East Europe Core Regional Transport Network’ (see point 2.4).

5.5 The permanent study group needs to look into ways and means of ensuring that operational aspects of the transport business are taken into account more closely when setting up the pan-European transport corridors. In particular, it should be possible to define specific aspects of corridor policy relating to intermodality, environmental protection, security, social conditions and efficiency.

5.6 In the context of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) new corridors are currently being planned. The permanent study group should contribute by responding to the European Commission’s call for openness in this process.

5.7 The work of the European Commission and the steering committees in corridors and transport areas should be more closely interconnected. The European Commission has an important role to play as a coordinator and provider of technical and organisational support. It would be good to have more scope for joint coordination, involving all parties, of the various activities at European level, and closer involvement of the European Parliament.


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(22) See Appendix 2 – data are unofficial and subject to change.