

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision amending Decision No 1692/96/EC as regards seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals as well as project No 8 in Annex III'

(98/C 373/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision amending Decision No 1692/96/EC as regards seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals as well as project No 8 in Annex III [COM(97) 681 final — 97/0358 (COD)]⁽¹⁾;

having regard to the Decision of the Council of 24 March 1998 to consult the Committee of the Regions, under Article 129d and the first paragraph of Article 198c of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to the decision of the Bureau of the Committee of the Regions of 13 May 1998 to instruct Commission 3 for Trans-European Networks, Transport, Information Society to draw up the Committee's opinion on the subject;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 101/98 rev.) adopted by Commission 3 on 18 May 1998 (rapporteur: Mr Johan Sauwens),

at its 25th plenary session of 16 and 17 September 1998 (meeting of 17 September) unanimously adopted the following opinion.

1. Content of the Commission document

1.1. Decision No 1692/96/EC on Community guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network (TEN) provides a broad framework for the establishment of an integrated, multimodal network⁽²⁾.

1.2. The aim of the proposal for an amendment referred to the Commission is to clarify and reinforce the position of seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals in the trans-European network.

1.3. These interconnection points are a precondition for interchange between different transport modes. The development of intermodal transport should contribute to a more efficient use of the entire network in both operational and environmental terms.

1.4. The European Commission's evaluation of seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals in the TEN involved an extensive consultation of Member States and of other parties concerned.

1.5. In general, the Member States and the other parties involved endorsed the initiative to more effectively integrate seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals in the multimodal TEN.

1.6. Differences emerged mainly over the details of the proposal, such as the number and location of interconnection points, as well as the criteria for projects of common interest.

1.7. The TEN is intended as a multimodal infrastructure network which should progressively combine and integrate the different transport modes and national networks.

1.8. This is based on the assumption that the integration of different modes and national networks should result in an overall increase in efficiency, which in turn should reduce congestion and pollution effects.

1.9. The combination of different transport modes is essential if the expected growth in transport activities over the next years is to rely to a significant degree on less congested and less environmentally harmful modes.

1.10. At the same time, the integration of hitherto unconnected networks should increase regional accessibility within the Community with positive effects on trade and productivity.

1.11. As a multimodal network, the TEN consists of links and nodes. However, in view of the aim of the TEN to combine and integrate different transport modes, the guidelines may be regarded as insufficient without specific criteria and outline plans for the development of the principal interconnection points.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 120, 18.4.1998, p. 14.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 228, 9.9.1996, p. 1.

1.12. In particular, seaports, inland ports and transshipment facilities in combined transport are prerequisite to the functioning of intermodal transport within a multimodal infrastructure network.

1.13. In its present form, the TEN must therefore be regarded as incomplete.

1.14. The identification of seaports in the TEN is an important step towards establishing a multimodal infrastructure network. Historically, seaports have often been the starting points for the creation of mainland transport links. Today, seaports play a key role in the design and establishment of hinterland transport systems.

1.15. Moreover, since seaports and inland interconnection points are interdependent and equally important elements in the development of intermodal transport, the European Commission decided to include inland interconnection points in the proposal.

1.16. To sum up, the current European Commission proposal can be regarded as a refinement of Decision No 1692/96/EC on a Trans-European Transport Network, which adds both limiting and broadening criteria for the selection of seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals.

2. Opinion: general comments

2.1. The Committee of the Regions supports the European Commission's efforts to define more clearly the role of seaports and inland ports in combined transport at European level.

2.2. The Committee refers to its earlier opinions, in which it argued that water and combined transport should be assigned a more central role in European transport policy.

2.3. This should be done within an integrated overall approach to transport policy, with account being taken at the earliest stages of decision-making of spatial planning considerations.

2.4. Other important requirements are greater consideration of the real costs of transport, and a policy for the harmonization of conditions of competition.

2.5. The Committee of the Regions rather regrets that the current proposal for a decision is concerned almost exclusively with goods transport, although ports are an important part of the TEN in relation to passenger transport too.

2.6. The right of European citizens to mobility should be specifically mentioned in view of its social importance; this applies in particular to residents of peripheral areas of Europe. Moreover, the importance of ports in relation to tourism can hardly be overestimated.

2.7. The Committee regrets that the opportunity has not been taken to refine and clarify the criteria and specifications for inland waterway projects of common interest.

2.8. The Committee also fails to understand exactly why many inland ports, whose activity can make a substantial contribution to strengthening the use of the European inland waterway network, have not been included in the maps in Appendix I. The Committee is keen for this inland port network to be substantially strengthened.

2.9. The European inland waterway network must be optimized in the framework of the TEN, and the scale and capacity of a number of cross-border links must be brought up to a sufficient standard. Only then can inland ports play their role to the full.

2.10. With regard to coordination, the Committee shares the view that the development of seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals is almost entirely market-led.

2.11. The Committee of the Regions particularly welcomes the inclusion of seaports in the Trans-European Networks (TEN), as a means of ensuring seaports can act as interconnection points in the international goods transport system with other interregional modes of transport provided for under the TEN.

2.12. Intermodal transport is an important aspect of a balanced transport policy. The Committee fails to understand exactly why many combined transport terminals, whose activity can make a substantial contribution to greater use of intermodal transport, have not been included in the maps in Appendix I. The Committee is keen for this intermodal network to be substantially strengthened.

2.13. Accordingly, the Committee of the Regions also endorses the Commission's efforts to provide funding for ports as projects of common interest when setting up the Trans-European transport networks. The consideration given to port projects highlights the importance of the seaport as a logistical centre and junction in the European transport system. The assessment and selection of the port projects must, however, be done critically.

2.14. The COR welcomes the fact that there are no proposals to draw up a classification of seaports along

the lines of that provided for in the guidelines for airports, and that the selection of specific ports as 'seaports of European interest' is not planned.

2.15. The COR agrees that TEN budget appropriations should in principle not be used to promote projects in port areas, in order to avoid distortions of competition. The promotion of superstructure projects is thus clearly excluded. The Commission has recognized that individual projects must be considered in the light of their impact on competition.

2.16. The three proposed exceptions to the principle that investment in infrastructure in port areas is not eligible for support are, however, to refer not only to transport management and information systems such as EDI but also to projects which involve combined transport. All the projects described under Appendix II, Section 7 would thus become eligible even when situated within the port area. This would cause considerable distortions of competition, as it would mainly involve superstructure investment for transshipment. This would be tantamount to back-door abolition of the basic criterion that in the port area only infrastructure projects are eligible for support.

2.17. Moreover, the Commission proposals would make it possible to harness the Structural Funds and Cohesion Funds for projects in port areas in assisted regions too, with support for superstructure investment being possible in exceptional cases. The Commission would thus be interfering directly in competition between European seaports. Competition must not, however, be distorted at the expense of the northern ports, as a result of a policy to direct or 'distribute fairly' traffic flows between European ports, whether by means of funding or improved basic conditions. EU measures must not be used to even out competition between European seaports. It is unacceptable that public funding for regional development should compromise the economic viability of private investment in other areas. If, from the point of view of regional policy, certain areas are to be developed, this should be done through the establishment and promotion of industries appropriate to the location. The COR is firmly against any deliberate transfer of existing, well-organized traffic flows.

2.18. There are thus good reasons for Community involvement, but in close consultation with the regions, Member States and local authorities, and with full regard to the principle of subsidiarity.

2.19. Contrary to the assertions of the proposal for a decision, efforts have already been made at a number of policy-making levels to coordinate interconnection points within the framework of an overall transport or mobility plan.

2.20. This will doubtless eventually result in a hierarchy of seaports at European level.

3. Conclusions

3.1. The Committee can initially endorse the criteria for defining seaports, as set out in Appendix 1, and the resulting list of 300 seaports adopted into the TEN. The Committee is also sympathetic to the granting of an exception for islands in the Aegean and Ionian seas.

3.2. At the current stage of development of European transport policy, the Committee can also endorse the criteria for the definition of terminals and inland ports, as set out in Appendix 1 (map).

3.3. Inland ports and intermodal terminals have not been adequately covered in the maps in Appendix I. Many further places fulfil the criteria. The maps, therefore, require supplementing.

3.4. With regard to the projects included in Appendix III, the Committee would point out that in all EU Member States a rapid development is taking place in priority projects and the definition of these, often on the initiative of regional and local authorities.

3.5. It would be better to update Appendix 3 regularly, after a broad round of consultations with the regions and local authorities.

Brussels, 17 September 1998.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*

Manfred DAMMEYER
