

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Freight Transport Logistics in Europe — the key to sustainable mobility

COM(2006) 336 final

(2007/C 168/13)

On 28 June 2006, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned proposal.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 22 March 2007. The rapporteur was **Mr Barbadillo López**.

At its 435th plenary session, held on 25 and 26 April 2007 (meeting of 26 April), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 150 votes to two with five abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 An efficient transport sector is essential in order for the EU to maintain and strengthen its competitiveness. Freight transport is considered to be a driving force for trade and prosperity. Modern management of complex transport flows is necessary in order to achieve efficiency and cooperation between different modes.

1.2 Logistics play a key role in guaranteeing sustainable mobility, as well as helping to improve the environment and energy efficiency, making freight transport more efficient, effective and competitive. Logistics cannot be seen as an entity that controls and manages the transport chain; advanced logistics solutions can allow effective planning, management, control and execution of unimodal and multimodal transport chains.

1.3 Infrastructure forms the physical network necessary for the development of the internal transport market, and in order to optimise it, two challenges must be met: reducing congestion and increasing accessibility, by mobilising all funding sources. The efficient, rational use of infrastructures is a guarantee for achieving sustainable mobility. However, any measure undertaken to streamline the use of infrastructures should also include logistical measures for private passenger transport. The key to sustainable mobility does not reside solely in freight transport.

1.4 Both transport suppliers and users make use of logistical tools to optimise transport and make commercial transactions more efficient and effective, minimising empty mileage.

1.5 Transport logistics requires competent and well-prepared workers and managers, who are trained in their profession and able to comply with health and safety regulations; basic and advanced training plans should therefore be drawn up in the field of logistics, with the active involvement of the social partners.

1.6 Transport consumes a great deal of fossil fuel, and priority should therefore be given to reducing its dependence

and cutting CO₂ emissions; therefore, a specific transport R&D and innovation programme should be created, and given adequate funding, in order to promote the use of alternative energies. A policy that distinguishes — particularly in tax terms — between modes should also be implemented, which would boost the adoption and use of new environmentally-friendly technologies.

1.7 Logistics should be seen as a commercial activity which is carried out by the sector; the authorities should be responsible for creating appropriate general conditions to ensure that goods can circulate as efficiently, effectively and competitively as possible.

1.8 In the case of short sea shipping, the sector was successfully involved in identifying bottlenecks and solutions; this practice should be extended to the other transport modes, in order to achieve similar results.

1.9 New technologies, particularly the European satellite navigation system, Galileo, which will provide future applications for tracking and tracing cargo, make a significant contribution to the development of effective, efficient modern logistics. However, technological developments should not become barriers to trade, but should be interoperable throughout the EU, and accessible by SMEs. R&D and innovation should be a priority in the Seventh Framework Programme, as technological innovation could open up new avenues for the sector.

1.10 Statistics on transport logistics should cover in depth all modes of transport and their transport activities, in order to gain a reliable picture of the situation and its evolution.

1.11 The problems resulting from the interoperability of rail transport need to be solved, in order to create a dedicated network for freight, and to improve the management systems in order to increase its efficiency, performance and competitiveness in relation to other transport modes.

1.12 The creation of quality benchmarks and one-stop shops will help to develop transport logistics in the EU, because measuring quality at EU level will bring a certain uniformity in the assessment of logistics performance, and the implementation of administrative procedures in a coordinated, uniform manner will simplify customs formalities.

1.13 It is essential for the different transport modes to be involved in the drafting of the future action plan being drawn up by the Commission, in order for its objectives to be achieved.

2. Introduction

2.1 Logistics play a key role in guaranteeing sustainable mobility, as well as helping to ensure a cleaner environment and greater energy efficiency, making freight transport more efficient and effective.

2.2 In its mid-term review of the 2001 White Paper, the Commission implicitly recognised the importance of the freight transport sector as a driving force for trade and economic prosperity in the EU.

2.3 The experience acquired between the publication of the White Paper in 2001 and its midterm review in summer 2006 has shown that road haulage cannot be dispensed with; attempts to channel traffic to other transport modes have met with very little success.

2.4 The EU's social and economic development depends heavily on the mobility of people and goods, with the aim of protecting the environment. It would be inconceivable to talk about development without considering the need to create and maintain an infrastructure network in line with the growing requirements of the EU.

2.5 Sustainable mobility is guaranteed in particular by using transport networks in an efficient and streamlined manner to transport both passengers and goods.

2.6 Freight transport plays an important role in guaranteeing sustainable mobility. The fast growth of freight transport certainly contributes to economic development and employment; however, it is less certain that freight alone causes congestion, accidents, noise, pollution, increased reliance on imported fossil fuels, and energy loss.

2.7 Therefore, any initiative designed to streamline infrastructure use should also include logistical measures for private passenger transport use, so as to create favourable conditions for mass transport to be used in a natural way. The key to sustainable mobility does not reside solely in freight transport.

2.8 Moreover, it has been shown that society does not demand road transport for arbitrary reasons, but because it has

proven to be the fastest, most flexible and efficient mode of transport to date. Although efforts have been made to transfer traffic to railway and maritime routes, the results have been anything but favourable, other than in short sea and river shipping.

2.9 It seems unreasonable to assume that transport suppliers and users have not already made use of the logistical transport optimisation tools needed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their transactions. However, advanced logistical solutions will help to improve the efficiency of the different transport modes and combinations.

2.10 In the medium and long term, certain transport modes will have to be much more operational and competitive if a transport combination policy is to arise spontaneously as a result of the convictions of transport users. The inefficiency of certain transport modes must be remedied in order to achieve greater competitiveness and increase their share in the modal balance.

2.11 Transport fleets optimise their loaded mileage, keeping their empty mileage down to the minimum needed for day-to-day operation.

2.12 It will always be difficult to correct the imbalance in cargo supply between the points of origin and destination of freight, even by applying advanced logistical solutions: there will always be an imbalance between incoming and outgoing freight, regardless of the transport solutions. No transport mode can avoid the need to find return loads.

2.13 With regard to the use of more environmentally friendly modes, in line with the Commission's action plan for energy efficiency ⁽¹⁾, it should be noted that the studies provided by the Commission on transport and the environment do not make a distinction in road transport between public and private modes, which would illustrate the negative repercussions that intensive, limitless car use has on congestion, pollution, energy consumption, etc.

2.14 There is nothing new about integrating logistics into transport policy. The main step forward in the logistics sector has mostly been brought about by the traditional transport firms' adaptation to market requirements. The main progress in logistics comes essentially from the flexibility and adaptability of transport firms in dealing with external factors caused by other production sectors.

2.15 Transport firms and their customers are the first to apply logistical support measures. Logistics cannot be seen as an entity that controls and manages the transport chain: it is the firms that incorporate logistical measures into their decisions and actions, within the context of their commercial relations.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2006) 545 final: Communication from the Commission — Action Plan for Energy Efficiency: Realising the Potential.

2.16 Owing to the multi-million-euro turnovers involved, there is often a tendency to overstate the value of the logistics sector and consider it as a separate activity. However, such a view overlooks the fact that most of this turnover comes from transport and related activities; it is this sector that actually invests in fixed assets, bears the fixed costs and moves the goods.

2.17 The Commission and the Parliament could add value to the development of Freight Transport Logistics in Europe if they manage to create an operational framework with no friction between transport modes. They must create a favourable climate enabling modes to be brought closer together, without measures that will be harmful to any transport mode.

3. General comments

3.1 As has been expressed elsewhere, the key to the mid-term review of the White Paper lies in co-modality, in other words, the efficient use of different modes on their own and in combination, which is the best guarantee of achieving a high level of mobility and of environmental protection at the same time.

3.2 The EESC welcomes the fact that the communication highlights the need to optimise the complementarity of different transport modes within an effective, seamless European transport system, providing users with the best possible transport services. However, it would be premature to state that, given current production systems, competitive alternatives to road freight transport exist today, other than on specific routes.

3.3 The EESC also agrees that the development of Freight Transport Logistics should, above all, be a commercial activity and a duty to be fulfilled by the sector; the authorities should be responsible for creating an adequate framework of conditions, leaving the internal workings of commercial logistics up to the companies.

3.4 The EESC believes that the introduction of a logistics perspective into transport policy will require due respect for the different transport modes; logistics considerations should simply be an underlying factor in decision-making.

3.5 The EESC also believes that proper complementarity of modes and advanced logistics solutions can allow effective planning, management, control and execution of unimodal and multimodal transport chains.

3.6 The Commission should place greater emphasis on the efforts that each transport mode should make to optimise its efficiency and performance. There is, therefore, a need to boost both maritime and rail transport by focussing on the competitiveness (not the deregulation) of these sectors rather than pena-

lising other transport modes. Road transport must be seen as an essential ally for other modes of transport, strengthening coordination and intermodality, with measures in place enabling it to continue to provide its services with the appropriate flexibility and pricing.

3.7 Transport policy must demonstrate commitment to quality, safety, the environment and transport efficiency, and ensure that the user is free to decide on the mode that suits them best.

3.8 As stated in the communication, certain interesting trends have emerged in recent years, such as the outsourcing of logistical activities. This cooperation between shippers and service providers is accompanied by the extensive integration of organisational and IT structures.

4. Areas of action

4.1 Identification of bottlenecks and their solutions

4.1.1 The EESC considers that to define the potential bottlenecks and solutions it is essential to have the participation of the players involved, as well as sharing knowledge and best practices, and cooperating on drawing up policies.

4.1.2 While bottlenecks have been successfully identified and managed in the short sea shipping sector, for the moment, as stated in the communication, there is no comprehensive picture of the concrete obstacles that hinder Freight Transport Logistics from developing faster in Europe.

4.1.3 However, it is recognised that there are various aspects that directly affect the road freight sector, restricting its operability, and a lack of harmonised legislation on the issues that are important for the creation of a fair, competitive market within the enlarged EU.

4.2 Information and communications technology (ICT)

4.2.1 Intelligent transport systems help to ensure a more efficient and rational use of infrastructure and therefore to reduce accidents and congestion and to protect the environment.

4.2.2 The European satellite navigation system, Galileo, which will be operational as of 2010, will provide future applications for all modes of transport, such as tracking and tracing of cargo, the Intelligent Car (?), promoting the new technologies in vehicles, the SESAR programme, which will help to improve air traffic management in the single European sky, and the ERTMS system, which will enhance interoperability between national rail networks and will have a positive impact on logistics.

(?) Communication on the Intelligent Car Initiative — 'Raising Awareness of ICT for Smarter, Safer and Cleaner Vehicles' — COM(2006) 59 final.

4.2.3 It would seem reasonable that, to guarantee the integrity of the single market, the technical solutions imposed should not become barriers to trade but develop in complementary ways across the EU, based on interoperable standards. Common standards widely accepted by manufacturers and operators, and synergies between different systems, are the keys to making logistics more efficient.

4.2.4 It is important to gauge the start-up costs, both in terms of technology and software, without this hampering SMEs' full participation in the market.

4.2.5 The EESC agrees that Freight Transport Logistics should continue being a research priority under the 7th Framework Programme because modern technological innovation can open up new avenues for the sector.

4.3 Logistics training

4.3.1 The EESC considers that training in transport logistics should not be limited: indeed, its scope should be extended to cover transport and logistics as different, complementary subjects.

4.3.2 It would be useful to work to achieve a clear definition of the competences that fall within the scope of logistics, for there are no statistical data or clear definitions in this field to date. The social partners therefore have a key role to play in drawing up an appropriate framework for training.

4.4 Statistical data

4.4.1 The EESC believes that we should not be content with a restricted statistical view of logistics, without looking in depth into the different transport modes and their related activities.

4.4.2 It is useful to have a reliable picture of the situation and its evolution over time, but the role of transport and warehousing therein should not be overlooked. The Community statistical programme 2008-2012 ⁽³⁾ points out that one of the aspects to be improved in EU statistics is the breakdown by transport modes, particularly road transport.

4.5 Utilisation of infrastructure

4.5.1 The quality of infrastructure is a key to logistics in freight transport.

4.5.2 The EU's social and economic development depends heavily on the mobility of people and goods.

4.5.3 The trans-European Transport Networks are an essential factor in the development of the internal transport market, but the underlying situation of these networks is not the same in all EU Member States. In this context, it should also be noted that not all trans-European Transport Networks suffer from congestion, and thus there are different problems to be faced.

4.5.4 The EESC agrees that co-modal logistic chains can help to remove congestion from certain corridors in such a way that optimal use is made of the infrastructure of different modes, following both a unimodal and multimodal approach.

4.5.5 The EESC believes it would be a good idea to take into account the problem arising from the situation of certain remote and outermost regions and countries. In order to provide adequate cover for these zones, it is vital to speed up the timescales and increase EU budgetary funds earmarked for the construction of trans-European networks, facilitating transit through the Pyrenees and the Alps, amongst other areas, being of particular importance here. Better overall accessibility will improve the prospects for regional development, with the increase in competitiveness that this entails.

4.5.6 Together with these budgetary increases, the European Union should consider promoting the mixed-financing system for the construction and maintenance of infrastructure, something which would offer stability and legal guarantees for the involvement of private capital, provided that the pricing policies respect the interests of all players.

4.5.7 When the bottleneck results from a lack of suitable infrastructure or its improper use, then a solution is required.

4.6 Service performance

4.6.1 Recognition of quality

4.6.1.1 It could prove useful for the sector to introduce benchmarks for Freight Transport Logistics in order to assess and control service quality at European level, provided that it remains a comparative tool that can be utilised by companies and users.

4.6.1.2 Indeed, establishing a set of European benchmarks would create uniformity in assessing logistics performance.

4.6.1.3 However, the EESC believes that the creation of new quality labels must not generate more red tape and new unnecessary costs for the sector.

⁽³⁾ COM(2006) 687 final: Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Community Statistical Programme 2008-2012.

4.6.2 A network for rail freight services

4.6.2.1 The EESC agrees that, despite being an improvement, the measure to create a rail freight-oriented network allowing for dedicated freight corridors would not in itself resolve the lack of reliability and efficiency caused, inter alia, by insufficient technical and administrative interoperability.

4.7 Promotion and simplification of multimodal chains

4.7.1 One-stop administrative shopping and 'Common European Maritime Space'

4.7.1.1 The EESC supports the creation of 'one-stop administrative shopping' or single windows for logistics flows, in particular multimodal flows, where all customs (and other related) formalities are carried out in a co-ordinated way.

4.7.2 Multimodal promotion

4.7.2.1 The EESC supports the development of the network of 21 Shortsea Promotion Centres to also encompass the promotion of multimodal logistics solutions in inland transport chains.

4.7.3 Multimodal liability

4.7.3.1 The EESC agrees that, further to a comprehensive liability solution for Europe, the Commission could also look into the added value of standardising a transport document for multimodal transport operations.

4.8 Loading standards

4.8.1 The Commission's initiative to propose common European standards for intermodal loading units in intra-EU transport⁽⁴⁾, is a means of harmonising the current situation for weights and dimensions of loading units, but to achieve this it will be necessary to take account of the current features of transport networks and the possibility of using these measures without detriment to safety.

5. The way forward

5.1 The Action Plan for Freight Transport Logistics to be drawn up in 2007 should consider the proposals from the different transport modes involved prior to any regulatory initiatives by the Commission.

Brussels, 26 April 2007.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

APPENDIX

The following Section Opinion text was rejected in favour of amendment adopted by the assembly but obtained at least one-quarter of the votes cast:

Point 4.5.8:

'4.5.8 The EESC proposes that temporary traffic restrictions imposed by national authorities be replaced with restrictions coordinated by the Union, something which would require the adoption of Community rules. This measure would need to be coordinated with the declaration of a minimum trans-European road network free of such restrictions, on which road traffic could move without hindrance, while ensuring compatibility with the needs of network users other than road hauliers.'

Outcome:

93 votes for deleting the phrase, 49 against and 10 abstentions.

⁽⁴⁾ COM(2003) 155 final, as amended by COM(2004) 361 final.