

## **INLAND WATERWAY TRANSPORT – A STRONG PARTNER FOR THE EUROPEAN ECONOMY**

Intervention by Renaat Landuyt, Belgian Federal Minister of Mobility

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me first of all to congratulate the Austrian presidency with the initiative of this Inland Navigation Summit. The Inland Waterway Transport sector is indeed an important partner for our economy and deserves all the necessary attention at a political level. This is even more so for my country since it is situated in the Delta Area of Rhine, Maas and Scheldt. In this area important sea ports form a gateway to the European continent and distribution, logistic and transport activities play a vital role. The presence of a performing transport network is a prerequisite to fulfil these tasks. For these reasons the Belgian authorities are very pleased with the presentation by the European Commission of an Integrated European Action Programme for Inland Waterway Transport.

The Belgian authorities are convinced that the role of inland waterway transport will become more important in the near future because it is a mode that still has a large potential to contribute in resolving the mobility problems that we meet in our very densely populated region. Therefore we want to cooperate actively to the elaboration of the programme.

According to this line of reasoning I would like to take this opportunity to give some comments to the different elements of the programme and maybe bring forward a few useful practices or ideas.

As far as actions to create favourable conditions for services are concerned, I would like to stress the fact that, since the liberalisation of inland waterway transport at the end of 1998, the volumes of goods carried by this mode on the Belgian waterways have continued to grow at an average of about 5 % each year, to reach a total volume of about 140 million tons and more than 8 billion ton-kilometres the past years. In the transport of containers the waterway sector even reached an average grow rate of nearly 12 %.

It is important not to forget that this good result is also due to measures accompanying the liberalisation in Belgium. In this field the Flemish impulse programme for the construction of quay walls can be put forward as an example. This programme had and still has a considerable effect since it made a lot of riparian industries return to the waterway for their transport solutions. Furthermore this programme made it possible to build a successful network of inland terminals in the container sector.

The fact that the inland waterway industry in Belgium is essentially composed of independent operators with small sized companies – on a total of about 1500 enterprises more than 90 % are operating one single ship – emphasises the need for a flexible access to loan capital for fleet renewal. In this field the accessibility of the capital market is far from optimal for inland waterway operators. At this moment my administration is examining the use of fiscal instruments to improve own funding by the operator.

The idea of facilitating access to the entrepreneurship by the creation of one-stop shops is an item that forms a part of my policy objectives for the current year. The first steps have been set to integrate within my administration several inspections and services so that in the future the operator only needs to contact a single point.

We have also started the process to modernise and improve our administrative and regulatory framework that we want to bring at short term into conformity with the regulations that exist at the international level.

In the field of fleet modernisation and innovation I would like to inform you of a project that we are currently undertaking with the objective to improve the role of inland waterway transport for certain coastal ports. We are developing technical prescriptions for a type of inland waterway vessel that is suitable to make a limited use of the coastal waters to reach the inland waterway network via the Scheldt estuary. In this way we don't need to increase the capacity of the existing inland waterway links with these coastal ports, which would be a very costly matter.

Fleet modernisation programmes have also been a part of the measures accompanying the liberalisation of the market in Belgium. They certainly contributed to more client-oriented services. What we should nevertheless bare in mind is that we may not forget the role of smaller vessels. An important part of the inland waterway network still consists of smaller waterways. In my opinion it is of strategic importance not to neglect the transport function of these waterways. The efficiency of smaller ships often undergoes the negative influence of insufficient maintenance of these waterways. Limited draught by lack of dredging for example will lead to a capacity loss and to higher transport costs per ton with a decrease of the competitive position of these ships as a direct result.

The environmental performance of vessels is an important issue if we want to present inland waterway transport also in the future as a sustainable mode. In this field Belgium decided to implement the Strasbourg Convention on waste disposal in Rhine and inland navigation. My administration is also examining the possibility to fiscally stimulate environmental friendly investments.

An important challenge for the near future is the promotion of jobs and skills. The lack of new blood entering the sector as well as at the level of the operator as of that of the crew may well become a stumbling block. I hope it will be possible to create a successful mix of measures to resolve this problem. When we do so, it is crucial to me that harmonised qualification standards and labour conditions are established to guarantee fair competition within the single European market. Maybe some practices in the maritime sector might be used as an example.

In view of the needs of modernisation and innovation of the fleet and of promotion of jobs and skills, it is no longer justifiable to let the means of the former scrapping funds unused. The Commission has our full support to work out propositions to activate these funds.

Improve image and co-operation is of course a very important issue. I think a lot of good work in this field has been done in Belgium the past 10 years through the activities of our Flemish and Walloon promotion offices. There exist similar structures in a few other countries, but the example should be followed by other Member states and also be supported even more at the international level.

Provide adequate infrastructure stays a main concern if we want to increase the role of inland navigation. As I said earlier on, we have to look at the network as a whole, including waterways of smaller capacity and also implying the accessibility of the waterway through terminals or quay facilities. Since the Member States bear the largest part of the financial impact it is up to them to develop projects but a coordination at international level is necessary and a co-financing very desirable.

To conclude I would say that there is a lot of work to be done by all the private and public actors concerned. The NAIADES-programme is very ambitious and therefore needs an appropriate institutional framework. A few options are currently under discussion, and like it or not, we will have to cut this knot. The programme can only develop its full potential if it is implemented in a coherent way.

Let us all together put our shoulders under this enormous challenge and hope that the programme, baptised NAIADES, may prove to be born under a lucky star.

Thank you for your attention.