Greening the Danube’s inland waterway transport

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Event Coverage

Europe’s second longest river has major economic potential, but much more needs to be done to make the Danube inland waterway a real EU success story, a recent conference was told.

Pro Danube, a non-profit organisation representing private companies and associations involved in inland waterway transport (IWT) on the Danube, was behind the recent ‘Danube Transport Day’ event in the European Parliament on 23 November.

Ana Claudia Tapardel, a member of Parliament’s transport and tourism committee, co-organised and moderated the event, a follow-up to last year’s inaugural conference where a vision for IWT on the Danube - ‘the Green Deal for Danube Transport’ - was presented. Friedrich Lehr, from Pro Danube Austria, pointed out that the vision has already borne fruit; “with our organisation actively contributing to the development of two strategic projects funded under the Danube Transnational
DANTE aims to identify and eliminate administrative barriers, while DAPhN looks to help Danube ports become eco-friendly, well accessible and multimodal hubs.

European transport Commissioner Violeta Bulc spoke passionately on the issue, underlining the Danube’s unique inland navigation potential.

“The Danube can lead the way towards a digital, decarbonised, people and environment-friendly mobility, increasing the efficiency and connectivity of EU transport, two core goals of our mobility vision,” said Bulc.

She called for the strong political commitment of stakeholders along the Danube basin to work together to overcome river maintenance challenges.

“Good navigability is essential in order to offer real modal choice for freight transport and increase competitiveness of the sector. This is where you have a joint responsibility.”

She noted that, “The Commission has supported the Danube inland waterway sector politically and financially and expect those member states along the river to stick to their commitments and ensure fairway maintenance. The navigability of the Danube needs to be ensured.”

The Slovenian Commissioner also reminded participants that since 2014, the Connecting Europe Facility funding instrument has supported 20 strategic projects along the Danube, including a cross-border fairway project involving five EU member states, work on the ‘Iron Gate’ locks in Serbia, development of Hungary’s Komaron port and a rehabilitation project on the Danube East of Vienna.

“This represents EU support of €350m. Overall the support for inland navigation has been €1.6bn from the Connecting Europe Facility.”

Bulc also said she was working to strengthen the Connecting Europe Facility in the EU’s next multiannual financial framework, which would “allow us to complete the TEN-T network and address decisively the transition to smart and low-emission mobility. Next year, 2018, is our multimodality year and Inland Waterways transport will be high on the agenda as a key component of multimodality.”

However, a number of speakers, following on from the Commissioner, reiterated that fundamental problems remain, hampering the river’s commercial development. ‘Greening the fleet’, a call to modernise the Danube’s IWT vessels, which are on average 40 years old, was the official priority of this year’s conference.

Pro Danube’s Secretary General, Manfred Seitz, introduced a new project initiative currently being pitched to the European Commission, under the banner of GRENDEL. This aims to deploy state aid schemes and EU money to bring about the modernisation of the Danube’s ageing IWT fleet.

“Sadly, there is currently no economic incentive for the industry to invest in fleet modernisation. Together with the lack of legislation for existing vessels and no incentive for funding programmes, public engagement for the sake of society and the environment is the only way forward. Already we can see a worrying trend of older, polluting vessels pushed out from the Rhine and transferred to the Danube.”

Turning to Bulc, Seitz added, “The Commission has the money and also the ambition. We as stakeholders need to work towards meeting that ambition. Danube businesses are ready to invest
into ports and modern fleet as soon as minimum standards for infrastructure maintenance are assured by the governments.”

The 480km stretch shared between Romania and Bulgaria remains a notoriously problematic section, where navigation is often hindered by insufficient fairway depths due to lack of waterway maintenance, generating crippling costs for the IWT industry.

The Bulgarian authorities, in particular, have, for many years failed to maintain their section of the navigable fairway despite comprehensive EU funding under the Connecting Europe Facility.

Romania’s transport minister Felix Stroe explained diplomatically, “We need closer cooperation with our Bulgarian colleagues. Bulgaria must meet its international obligations.” Other participants, including industry stakeholders, put it more bluntly. Antonio Stoean, of logistics integrator TTS Group, said, “Nothing has happened for 40 years. At our Danube Transport Day last year, we heard from the Bulgarians: ‘Yes, we can do it’. Again, nothing happened. We are still faced with on average 45 days of severe draught limitations a year. It’s a complete disaster.”

The tourism industry is also affected; Radu Comanici of cruise operators Danubia Kreuzfahrten pointed to the fact that because of the unresolved Lower Section problems, the Danube cruise industry last year lost its top spot for river cruises to the Rhine: “The unpredictability on the lower Danube and the subsequent risk of costly compensation obligations are too great. Many cruises now simply stop at the end of the Middle Section, the ‘Iron Gates’ on the Romanian-Serbian border, missing out on some of the most impressive scenery.”

Romania, with its economy on an impressive course of between four and five per cent annual growth, is particularly keen to resolve this ‘bottleneck’.

Ana Claudia Tapardel said that, “transport on the Danube could be the backbone of the European economy in the long run. Given its length and connectivity to 10 countries, the Danube area could easily become the heartland of a modern industrial revival and mobility. And, with relatively little investment compared to other sectors, our inland waterways could provide cost-effective solutions and improve the competitiveness of many industries.”

With Bulgaria scheduled to hold the rotating presidency of the EU’s Danube Strategy (EUSDR) next year, hopes are that things will finally change for the better. Bulgarian MEP Peter Kouroumbashev remarked, “It’s not easy being Bulgarian today. But the presidency of the EUSDR will put pressure on us and we will have to fulfil our obligations. I will talk to our transport minister.”

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