Danube Ministers of Transport conclusions on effective waterway rehabilitation and maintenance anticipating COVID-19 challenges

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Danube navigation is strongly impacted by the measures needed to contain COVID-19 in Europe. Passenger transport and tourism on the Danube has virtually come to a standstill whereas current cargo transport volumes could be largely maintained at normal seasonal levels for the time being. However, the expected economic slowdown after the lockdown period is also expected to heavily affect cargo transport on the Danube in the coming months and years. The low level of precipitation in winter 2019/2020 and the possible low water season that could hit Danube navigation during the summer 2020 as a consequence are a further cause for concern.

Today’s Danube Ministerial Conclusions are in line with the ongoing initiatives of Member States and the European Commission to counter the effects of these harsh circumstances. The Danube Ministers of Transport have firmly committed themselves to improving framework conditions for Danube navigation, especially in these most challenging times.

Following an invitation from Commissioners for Elisa Ferreira (Cohesion and Reforms) and Adina Vălean (Transport), the Danube Ministers of Transport (Hungary excepted) have reconfirmed their commitment to implement the Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan for the Danube and its navigable tributaries (adopted in December 2014). They also agreed on the need for national actions and cross-border coordination procedures in the field of fairway rehabilitation and maintenance. Moreover, the conclusions underlined the need for effective and timely monitoring of progress on the Danube waterway. Through national projects and the CEF-funded FAIRway Danube project, coordination and monitoring has already intensified in recent years. The Danube waterway is therefore now better prepared for extreme weather impacts than it was five years ago.

Already during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, the European Commission had requested Member States to ensure that EU-wide supply chains continue to operate and to designate all the relevant internal border-crossing points on the trans-European transport network (TEN-T) as ‘green lane’ border crossings. The key issue was to reduce border crossing control procedures for cargo to what is strictly necessary. Today’s Danube Ministerial Conclusions also particularly acknowledge the preparatory work of the joint Working Group of Priority Areas 1a and 11 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which has already resulted in a first set of harmonised border control forms in the course of 2019. These forms have been successfully introduced in Hungary, the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Serbia in February and March 2020 and contributed to the objectives of the ‘green lane’ concept, when they were needed most. In their conclusions, the Danube Transport Ministers therefore explicitly acknowledged the successful introduction of the mentioned control forms and supported their further roll-out along the Danube waterway.