

Riga, 25 May 2012

VASAB welcomes the proposal of the European Commission on further development of the trans-European transport network

Opinion of the Committee for Spatial Planning and Development of the Baltic Sea Region - VASAB

VASAB (Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea) is a cooperation of ministers responsible for spatial planning and development of eleven countries in Baltic Sea Region (BSR) – the EU countries Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden as well as Norway, Russia and Belarus. The main mission of this inter-governmental pan-Baltic organization is to prepare policy options for spatial development of the Region and to provide a forum for exchange of know-how on spatial planning and development between the BSR countries. Since 1992 VASAB had been working with macro-regional spatial developments issues in the Region. It is part of the network of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS).

In 2009 VASAB elaborated a transnational strategic spatial planning document “VASAB Long-Term Perspective for the Territorial Development of the Baltic Sea Region” (LTP). It envisages that in 2030 the Baltic Sea Region is (a) a well-integrated and coherent macro-region, (b) the Region has overcome the socio-economic development gaps between its individual parts and (c) the Region accounts for fast, reliable and environmentally efficient technologies of transport, information and communication that link the territories along and across the Baltic Sea, making the community of the Baltic Sea Region well-connected and highly accessible both internally and with the rest of the world. The VASAB LTP has set policy guidelines and specific actions in the field of internal and external accessibility to achieve the territorial cohesion perspective.

The ministers responsible for spatial planning and development agreed in their Ministerial Conference in Vilnius on 19 October 2009 to jointly implement this LTP. In the Vilnius Declaration the ministers emphasized that accessibility links are still missing or are inadequate mainly because of the former East-West divide in the Region. The Vilnius Declaration calls for implementation of the EU TEN-T and for better linking the EU transport network with the neighbouring countries.

Against this background, VASAB **welcomes** the proposal of the European Commission on the future development of the trans-European transport network announced in October 2011 (Proposal).

VASAB notes with satisfaction that the proposed TEN-T network supports the VASAB vision on well-connected and accessible Baltic Sea Region. The Proposal addresses the most and the main defined bottlenecks and missing links of transnational transport network in the Baltic Sea Region. Such missing North-South links as Rail Baltica corridor and North-South routes from Nordic countries via Central Europe to Western Europe and to the Adriatic Sea are included in the Proposal.

VASAB highlights in particular strengthening of the territorial development approach. Thus, using results of the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON) a systematic approach was applied to determine cities as the main nodes of a core and of a comprehensive network. Through the proposed integration of harbour cities into that network, a better link between sea and land connections can be achieved. The new concept presents a shift of paradigm where the network forms the basis for future measures instead of single corridors. At the same time, the corridor approach remains integrated when proposing priorities for the next years. Those priorities should be coordinated with national ones, especially with efforts to link Trans-European connections with regional networks.

With a clear view on the importance of maritime transport for accessibility and socio-economic development of all European regions, VASAB proposes that the projects on “Motorways of the Sea” should be part of the future multi-annual work programmes and thus, have access to the 80 to 85 % of the budgetary resources in the transport sector as described in the draft regulation on the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). In order to better identify the seaports of the TEN-T comprehensive network, the respective seaport maps should be supplemented by a list.

VASAB is well aware that the methodology for the core network has been discussed at length, and that it will require a considerable political effort to change the proposed network at this time. However, VASAB would like to point out that that some connections / nodes in the High North are still missing and therefore potentials of the particular region left unused (for example, links connecting Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia in the North to the Baltic Sea Rim). Those links might gain importance as a result of climate change and new transport opportunities related to that.

In order to fully solve the tasks set in the VASAB Long-Term Perspective by 2030 some internal and external cross border transport connections should be included in the TEN-T core network, for example, road connections to the main EU external border crossing points located in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The Proposal identifies significant investment demand to achieve the goals of the EU TEN-T policy and VASAB LTP. In this context, VASAB welcomes the idea of CEF arrangement for the countries eligible under the Cohesion Fund as this would provide an additional support for the transport projects and would facilitate meeting the accumulated needs in this sector, especially in the new Member States of the Baltic Sea Region. At the same time VASAB underlines the need for complementarity of implementing systems established under CEF with not only TEN-T, but also with the ones already existing within the EU Cohesion Policy.

VASAB notes with satisfaction that the Proposal has an external dimension – indicative extensions to the neighbouring countries. In particular, an integrative approach within EEA gives full picture of proposed functionality of the network. Within the Baltic Sea Region the indicative connections to Norway are clearly displayed and they generally correspond to the VASAB LTP vision. Nevertheless, VASAB suggests having similar approach providing extensions towards Russia and Belarus, as well. If applicable, a debate on the missing links and bottlenecks with the mentioned EU neighbouring countries shall be initiated and discussed within Northern Dimension Partnership on Transport and Logistics.