Infrastructure maintenance

FIEC expresses its hope that this important issue will finally be taken up at EU level

"Please divert. Traffic jam of 20 kilometres. A bridge is closed." Not an unusual radio announcement in the past years for travellers in the EU. A decade of insufficient funding of maintenance coupled with an increase in traffic led to a situation where a significant part of transport infrastructure is not fully functional and will require demolition and reconstruction in the coming years. This does not only hinder socio-economic development and poses a considerable safety risk but is also an obstacle for successful environmental policies.
The European Commission acknowledges that incoherent and inadequate infrastructure quality causes unduly high emissions through efficiency losses in the overall transport system. Moreover, maintenance is a key contributor to a more circular economy by keeping assets in use longer which avoids recurring to massive amounts of raw materials for their reconstruction.

Advocating for an increase in maintenance is a major task at European level since the maintenance of infrastructure mainly lies within the competence of EU Member States. Therefore, it is politically delicate for the European Commission to kick-off EU initiatives. However, reality made action at European level necessary. In March 2019, about half a year after the collapse of the Morandi bridge in Genoa, first signs of a mindset shift could be seen at EU level with the European Commission publishing a discussion paper where it assesses the state of the EU's transport infrastructure and looks into the role the EU could play in improving its maintenance.

TEN-T REGULATION

Now, two years later, we see maintenance being taken up in the preparation of a key infrastructure policy at EU level: The EU institutions are currently in the process of revising the so-called Regulation on Union guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network, also known as TEN-T Regulation. Its objective is the implementation and development of a Europe-wide transport network. Therefore, the Regulation defines a core network and a comprehensive network. The TEN-T covers the most important transport routes in the EU - key to the functioning of the Single Market. Importantly, the Regulation sets out the requirements sections of the network have to meet and thereby guides Member States' infrastructure policies. For instance, the Regulation stipulates that the network's roads are high quality roads which are either motorways, express roads or conventional strategic roads.

Recently, the European Commission informed and consulted stakeholders on its plans for the revised Regulation. One of the policy options consist in strengthening the concept of infrastructure quality. This would include the introduction of new quality requirements to ensure high structural quality over the lifetime of the infrastructure, thereby further reducing the risk of accidents, increasing safety and preserving assets.

The European Parliament echoes this reasoning and is even more explicit in its demands. In a recently adopted report, the Members of the European Parliament point out the importance of regular and standardised maintenance of the TEN-T infrastructure, in particular bridges and tunnels, to ensure lasting high-quality infrastructure. They furthermore call on the Commission to introduce a clear benchmark for quality requirements for infrastructure, in particular bridges and tunnels, and to develop a common European approach for inspections and quality ratings of TEN-T infrastructure and call on the Commission to establish a core network monitoring plan on maintenance at European level.

QUALITY CONTROL

These approaches perfectly mirror what FIEC has been calling for. In our view, the TEN-T comprises the most important infrastructures in the EU and must be therefore a precursor for high-quality infrastructure and live up to the highest standards. While the completion of the TEN-T remains a priority, it is also about guaranteeing the quality of the parts that have already been constructed. This can only be achieved by an effective management of the network's quality and regular maintenance. Sufficient knowledge about the state of the entire network needs to be acquired to target interventions. It needs regular inspections for collecting data about the state of the infrastructure. A common European database should help targeting remedial action and inform civil society accordingly.

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AIDING RECOVERY

While the European Commission and the European Parliament have emphasized the importance of increasing the TEN-T's quality through regulatory changes, including through maintenance, the Member States are expected to complicate the equation. Different quality ratings of infrastructure, 27 approaches to maintenance and, most importantly, budgetary constraints will make it hard to convince countries to make major commitments. In the EU, it takes three to tango.

One thing is clear: Investments in infrastructure are investments in a sustainable recovery. During construction, direct and indirect effects are generated in the construction industry and its value chain. In the longer term, enhancing infrastructure leads to a more efficient transport system, improves the economic conditions within the Single Market and contributes to achieving the EU's climate targets. ce

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