

Address by the Secretary General, Mr van der Werf,

at the Congress on “The Congress of Vienna and its global dimension: 1814-2014”

(18 - 22 September 2014)

Minister,

Director General,

Madam President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am obviously very honoured to be able to speak to you today at the opening of this congress in Vienna entitled “The Congress of Vienna and its global dimension: 1814-2014”, since it was this Congress which gave birth to the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, which I have the honour of representing here today.

The Commission was instituted by the major powers nearly two hundred years ago, the fruit of a desire that had a European dimension and was tasked with modern missions. This action is testimony to a real spirit of openness, a spirit that has remained the organisation’s watchword. The forward-thinking attitude indeed is still a feature of the institution today.

The Rhine might well be defined today in the terms used by Blaise Pascale – “rivers are roads which move, and which carry us whither we desire to go”. –It is a fact that two-thirds of Europe’s river transport travels on this “highway”; the Central Commission, which has accompanied the river’s prosperity for nearly two hundred years now, has been equally constant. So allow me to share with you some of the elements which have no doubt contributed to the continuity and the dedication of our institution.

1. Pragmatism

The history of the CCNR began with a cooperation among the riparian States, its mission being to free navigation on the international river from all the hindrances which were making exchanges between separate countries and economies difficult or even downright impossible. To quote the terms of the Congress, it was a question of ensuring conditions that were “the most favourable to the commerce of all Nations”. The CCNR was in fact to carry out this mission in a very direct, pragmatic fashion, by working towards real achievements with readily measurable results. Thus with the passage of time, we have seen the disappearance of tolls and other rules preventing a free transport market whereas major projects for work on the bed of the river and the fairway have made it possible for navigation to develop and optimise its operation, and to ensure the necessary level of reliability.

2. Flexibility

A. Institutional flexibility

To be able to carry out in a lasting fashion the mission assigned to it, the CCNR has had to display real adaptability, not just in its functioning, but also in its working methods and in its ability to serve the common interests of its Member States. Thus the major powers were again quick to take action and be attentive when the CCNR, after its first century of existence, was called upon to renovate its functioning and, in the first instance, its international setting. This involved new institutional elements agreed to in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and they resulted in the CCNR being enlarged to include non-riparian powers, namely the United Kingdom, Italy and Belgium – this last State is still a member of the CCNR. Switzerland, absent from the organisation in the nineteenth century, expressed serious interest in joining the inter-State cooperation, and since then has become a full Member State. It was at this point that the CCNR was moved from the city of Mannheim in Germany to the city of Strasbourg in France, and its operation entered a new phase. Having

previously been merely a “standing diplomatic conference”, it now took on the dimension of a real modern international organisation, with a professional and permanent staff and offering international jurisdiction in Rhine navigation matters.

B. Regulatory flexibility

The work of the CCNR during the twentieth century involved defining and organising the fundamental principle of the “freedom of navigation” as defined by the Congress of Vienna. Real framework conditions necessary for ensuring the general safety of navigation on the Rhine were therefore first established and subsequently adapted, in keeping with changes in society. Thus the nineteenth-century notion of “general safety”, which is relatively restrictive in today’s terms, is interpreted nowadays more in terms of “sustainability”, and indeed this is currently one of the CCNR’s priorities.

To conclude, the genuinely pragmatic, flexible attitude on the part of the CCNR was already highlighted by its President when the organisation moved its activities to Strasbourg in 1920. *“I am convinced that the Central Commission will pursue its work in the broadest possible spirit of equity, with the sole desire of making the most of the magnificent waterway that is the Rhine, and of extending its benefits not only to all the States bordering the river but to all nations. Delegates to the Central Commission will need to concern themselves above all with technical and economic matters, leaving political matters aside; their mission is to ensure the best possible conditions for navigation on the Rhine, and like their predecessors they should at all times be guided by this concern.”*

Allow me to bring this statement up to date by saying that today it is a matter above all of focusing on the working methods required for an effective development of navigation not only on the Rhine but also elsewhere in Europe. With the European Union now implementing a genuine transport policy, it is important that pragmatism and focus on the technical and

economic issues are retained, leaving a complementary, or should I say secondary role for political and indeed institutional issues.

It is therefore by continuing to apply the same principles as those laid down initially, but with all the pragmatism and flexibility inspired by its history, that the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine currently addresses its efforts to sharing its achievements and its competencies with its European partners. At this occasion, in Vienna, on the borders of the Danube, I should like to mention one key partner in particular, the Danube Commission, with which the CCNR is working jointly for the creation of real capacity for innovation and integration of navigation in the main transport system in Europe.

I wish all participants a fruitful and inspiring congress, and thank you for your attention!
