Ports and maritime infrastructures, multimodal trans-European network. Green paper

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OBJECTIVE: to launch a broad debate on the situation with regard to European seaports and the desirability of fresh political initiatives at European level in this field to improve the efficiency of ports and port and maritime infrastructure and to adapt the existing infrastructure while preserving fair competition in this sector. SUBSTANCE: the Green Paper refers to two types of action which are possible: 1) a review of measures which could be implemented under existing policies, 2) new Community frameworks which would, firstly, harmonise the financing and charging practices in force in the Member States and, secondly, more systematically liberalise the market for port services in ports with international traffic. By means of the most immediate measures which could be implemented under existing policies, sea ports should be promoted as transfer points to and from land transport and as elements in the trans-European intermodal transport chain (including in connection with the future enlargement of the Union). Safety aspects are likewise stressed, as is the importance of promoting the most environmentally sound modes, such as maritime cabotage. Greater recourse to research and development is encouraged (development of maritime technologies, integration of telematics, etc.). The Commission wishes to take measures to influence the competitive environment of port facilities and to facilitate access to the market for Community operators. To this end, it could draw up a new Directive establishing a Community framework for the financing of and charges at European sea ports. Hitherto the Commission has not regarded public subsidies to port infrastructure as State aid. This situation could change, as ports are increasingly considered to be terminals having mainly commercial activities with greater involvement of the private sector and Community-wide competition. The aim is to harmonise existing national systems regarding all forms of ownership, organisation and administration. Initially, an overview of public spending on major ports could be drawn up. Then, in the light of the results of the Green Paper and the information gathered, the Commission should present (in 1998) a general communication on the financing of modes of transport and charging for infrastructure. The approach to be adopted would favour intermodality. Community action is also envisaged with regard to port services and market access, with a view to speeding up liberalisation at the main sea ports receiving international traffic, while permitting the granting of exemptions. Such rules would ensure transparent and non-discriminatory market access. They would establish certain common principles with regard to charging while instituting a reference framework for public service obligations considered necessary and safety requirements. Minimum standards for the training and qualifications of workers would be drawn up to harmonise a labour market dominated by certain highly organised professions (e.g. dockers). Replies to and comments on the views expressed in the Green Paper are to reach the Commission by 01.04.1998.