

## Welcoming Remarks

**Mrs. Els de Wit, Chair, Working Party on Transport Trends and Economics (WP.5)**

**26 November 2020**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Distinguished Participants,

It is a true pleasure for me to welcome you all today these virtual consultations on **“Next steps in the operationalization of Euro-Asian Transport Corridors”**. It is an honour for me to be able to do this in my capacity as newly elected **Chair of the UNECE Working Party on Transport Trends and Economics (WP.5)** which as many of you know serves as the UNECE’s long standing parent body on Euro-Asian transport infrastructure connectivity.

Today’s consultations (held under WP.5 auspices) are organized in direct follow-up to the mandate given by the Working Party (at its last session in September 2020) whereby it *“Invited the secretariat to collect additional proposals and feedback from the ECE members on the operationalisation of Euro-Asian Transport Links in particular from those countries most concerned by the individual corridors”*. In response to this request of the Working Party, I as newly elected chair together with the secretariat decided to organize today’s meeting with the support of OSCE to further discuss these issues and receive concrete input from the Governments. I very much hope this will be the case today!

As you are all aware, the UNECE’s Euro-Asian Transport Links (EATL) Project, which was launched in 2002, almost 20 years ago, contributed significantly towards making Euro-Asian inland transport a reality. *The number of container block trains between Europe and Asia witnessed a tremendous increase as container volumes grew by almost 30 per cent year over year to 324,700 TEU in 2018. At the same time the overall transit time reduced by more than 50 per cent and more. The geographic expansion of the TIR system (accession of China and other countries in the region) offers us great opportunities for increasing the volumes of inter-continental road transportation.*

While initially the EATL project started as a joint endeavour of two regional commissions, UNECE and UNESCAP, in its Phase II and III it became a more “membership” driven initiative which received generous financial contributions and support from the Government of the Russian Federation and other in-kind contributions, in particular from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) which for the past 14 years has been a very loyal partner to the UNECE’s work in this field.

Over the years, the EATL project has gathered public and private sector stakeholders from over 38 countries in Europe and Asia, including not only many EU member States but also landlocked countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus as well as non-UNECE countries in Asia such as Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia.

This collective endeavour has resulted in a set of very tangible outputs, including among others:

- a) The identification of 9 rail and road links, 17 water transport links, 52 inland river ports and 70 maritime ports.
- b) The prioritization of over 300 infrastructure investment projects on EATL routes.
- c) The development of a detailed Geographical Information System (GIS) database.
- d) An in-depth analysis of non-physical obstacles to Euro-Asian transport, including the those relating to a lack of harmonization of technical standards and inter-operability
- e) A comparison study between maritime and inland transport.
- f) Concrete efforts to operationalize the identified corridors by preparing common time schedules and tariffs.

The EATL Phase III report launched at the UNECE Inland Transport Committee in February 2019 is quite clear in its key findings:

“Euro-Asian inland transport can compete with maritime transport!”. For time-sensitive and high value cargo, including in the context of growing e-commerce between Europe and Asia, it offers a compelling alternative between more expensive air cargo transportation on the one hand and significantly slower maritime transport on the other hand.

The Phase III report notes that while a lot of efforts have been undertaken by Governments and international organizations several major inter-operability challenges remain which can be tackled most effectively by collectively agreed “corridor-based action and coordination.”

The purpose of today`s consultations resulting in a draft outcome, as WP.5 we want to:

- Provide a platform for inter-governmental dialogue on remaining challenges for more effective Euro-Asian inland transport connectivity.
- Take stock of the existing inter-governmental/ public-private sector stakeholder coordination mechanisms in the region and explore whether there is scope to improve/ expand/ strengthen those.
- Explore whether at regional/ sub-regional levels Governments in the region are ready to strengthen corridor-based action and identify practical means to do so.

The fact that you have showed up so numerously, with over 140 Government and private sector participants from more than 30 EATL countries present here today underlines the great interest in and timeliness of the issues under discussion.

At the outset of our discussions I would like to emphasise that we are here to hear from you (!) on what the next steps in EATL operationalization could or should be. The more specific you can be today in your guidance and interventions, this will lead to more concrete ideas for our future corridor-based action.

Thank you for your attention. I wish us all fruitful deliberations.