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Group of Experts on Euro-Asian Transport Links

Sixth session

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Report of the Group of Experts on Euro-Asian Transport Links

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Attendance.....	1	2
II. Adoption of the agenda (agenda item 1)	2	2
III. Adoption of the report (agenda item 2)	3	2
IV. Recent developments related to the Euro-Asian Transport Links Phase II (agenda item 3).....	4	2
V. EATL progress report (agenda item 4).....	5	2
VI. Transport infrastructure (agenda item 5).....	6–9	2
A. Identification of priority routes.....	6–7	2
B. Identification of priority projects.....	8–9	3
VII. Euro-Asian Transport Links Phase II: Study on non-physical obstacles to transport and collection of related data (agenda item 6)	10	3
VIII. Adoption of the report of the Group of Experts on Euro-Asian Transport Links on implementing Phase II of the EATL project (agenda item 7)	11–12	3
IX. The way ahead (agenda item 8).....	13–15	4
X. OSCE-UNECE Handbook on best practices at border crossings (agenda item 9) ..	16–18	5
XI. Other business (agenda item 10)	19	6
XII. Date and place of next meeting (agenda item 11)	20	6
XIII. Adoption of the list of main decisions of the sixth session	21	6

I. Attendance

1. The Group of Experts on the Euro-Asian Transport Links (hereafter called the group) held its sixth session from 5 to 7 July 2011 in Almaty (Kazakhstan). The session was held with Ms. E. Glukhova (Russian Federation) as Chair. Representatives of the following United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) member States participated: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The following intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations participated: UNESCAP, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Intergovernmental Organisation for International Carriage by Rail (OTIF).

II. Adoption of the agenda (agenda item 1)

Documentation: ECE/TRANS/WP.5/GE.2/11

2. The provisional agenda (ECE/TRANS/WP.5/GE.2/11) was adopted.

III. Adoption of the report (agenda item 2)

Documentation: ECE/TRANS/WP.5/GE.2/10

3. The group adopted the report of its fifth session that took place from 1 to 3 November 2010 in Tashkent (ECE/TRANS/WP.5/GE.2/10).

IV. Recent developments related to the Euro-Asian Transport Links Phase II (agenda item 3)

4. The group was informed about recent developments of the Euro-Asian Transport Links (EATL) Phase II in the OSCE/ECE region. The OSCE information concerned specifically the follow-up to the eighteenth OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum (EEF) and the preparatory process to the nineteenth OSCE EEF.

V. EATL progress report (agenda item 4)

Documentation: ECE/TRANS/WP.5/2011/1 and first draft of the EATL Phase II report of 1 July 2011

5. The secretariat informed the group about the progress of Phase II of the EATL project (ECE/TRANS/WP.5/2011/1 and first draft of the EATL Phase II report of 1 July 2011), as well as the progress of the ongoing survey on non-physical obstacles to transport.

VI. Transport infrastructure (agenda item 5)

A. Identification of priority routes

Documentation: Informal document No. 1 – Corr.2

6. The group was informed by the secretariat about the proposed extensions of the EATL priority routes covering all countries involved in Phase II of the EATL project.

7. The group approved the review, update and extension of the EATL priority routes and related maps prepared by the secretariat on the basis of country inputs covering the twenty-seven countries involved, as reflected in Informal document No. 1 – Corr.2 and the maps circulated to the national focal points present and posted on the UNECE website before the session, as amended.

B. Identification of priority projects

Documentation: first draft of the EATL Phase II report of 1 July 2011

8. The group was informed by the UNECE external consultant about the progress and final results of the work on identifying, reviewing and updating priority infrastructure investment projects.

9. The group approved the results of the projects' prioritization exercise presented by the consultant and the related maps prepared by the secretariat on the basis of country inputs, as reflected in of the first draft of the EATL Expert Group Report dated 1 July 2011 that was circulated to the national focal points and posted on the UNECE website before the session, as amended.

VII. Euro-Asian Transport Links Phase II: Study on non-physical obstacles to transport and collection of related data (agenda item 6)

10. The external consultant informed the group about the progress on the study on non-physical obstacles to transport. The finalization of the study will depend on data collected from a questionnaire that the secretariat had sent by post to over 1,000 operators, and put on the UNECE website. Replies to questionnaire are expected in early autumn 2011, when the work would be finalized.

VIII. Adoption of the report of the Group of Experts on Euro-Asian Transport Links on implementing Phase II of the EATL project (agenda item 7)

Documentation: first draft of the EATL Phase II report of 1 July 2011

11. The secretariat presented the first draft of EATL final report on Phase II, containing the work results that were completed.

12. Following consideration and discussion the group:

(a) adopted the draft report of the Group of Experts on implementing Phase II dated 1 July 2011, circulated to the national focal points and posted on the UNECE website before this session, as amended and improved;

(b) requested the national focal points to communicate to the UNECE secretariat, by 5 August 2011, at the latest, their final, specific comments on the priority routes and maps; the results of the projects' prioritization exercise and related maps; and the Draft Report of the Group of Experts on Implementing Phase II, together with the updated — or new country reports as appropriate (1,000 words) — on the basis of the model sent by the secretariat;

(c) also requested the secretariat to inform the national focal points of the EATL countries that were not present, to communicate their specific comments to the secretariat (deadline: 5 August 2011);

(d) agreed that in the absence of comments from the national focal points by 5 August 2011, the drafts are to be considered accepted;

(e) requested the UNECE secretariat to incorporate the comments and inputs received, together with any further improvements to be introduced, into the second draft report of the Expert Group and submit it to the Working Party on Transport Trends and Economics (WP.5) — copy to the national focal points — for its consideration and approval at its twenty-fourth session, 6–7 September 2011;

(f) agreed that following the next WP.5 session, a further elaborated and complete (third version) of the Draft report of the Expert Group be submitted by the secretariat to the Expert Group for consideration and approval, at its seventh session.

IX. The way ahead (agenda item 8)

13. The group discussed its future plans and activities and felt that notwithstanding the value of the results achieved so far by the group, there are also many challenges ahead. It noted that the strategic objectives and conclusions associated with the EATL work clearly indicate the critical importance attached to further development of Euro-Asian transport links. After four years of uninterrupted joint work of the UNECE and the Governments of 27 participating countries, as well as joint work of the UNECE and UNESCAP from 2002–2007, there is still a lot of unfinished work.

14. It stressed that developing Euro-Asian inland transport links would be a long-term undertaking, requiring a great deal of effort and perseverance, and enhanced coordination and cooperation among all countries along the EATL. More importantly, the sustainable development of transport links and priority projects identified in the Phase II, would be seriously impaired if the climate created around the project and the momentum established among participating member States during the Phase II are not sustained. It concluded that there is, therefore, considerable merit in continuing the work in a new Phase III.

15. In view of the above, the group:

(a) requested WP.5, and through it, the Inland Transport Committee (ITC) to approve the extension of the Group of Experts on Euro-Asian transport links for two more years with a possibility of further extension in order to allow the group to continue its work in a new EATL Phase III;

(b) thanked the Government of the Russian Federation for funding the EATL work throughout the whole Phase II of the project and for its readiness to continue funding it beyond 2010;

(c) sought political support and commitment from participating Governments for the continuation of the EATL work in a new Phase III through the organization of a meeting of Ministers of Transport of EATL countries, and invited the UNECE secretariat to organize it in 2012, preferably in one of the EATL member countries that would be ready to host and support it;

(d) stressed that in such a meeting, Ministers of EATL countries could reaffirm their support and commitment to the project by signing a possible joint statement endorsing the project results and pledging their support to the future development of the Euro-Asian transport links;

(e) thanked OSCE for its political support and for co-funding and co-organizing some of the project activities in the last two years, and invited it to consider continuing and further strengthening its support in future, in close cooperation with the UNECE secretariat, including on the above-mentioned Ministerial Meeting;

(f) invited the Steering Committees of the TEM and TER Projects and UNECE secretariat to explore practical ways of ensuring operational interaction of the TEM and TER Projects with EATL for developing joint activities, elaborating studies and organizing joint events and initiatives aimed at promoting common objectives for the benefit of the projects and their member countries;

(g) invited governments, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, international financial institutions, businesses and donors to consider co-funding future project activities;

(h) also invited the UNESCAP secretariat to take an active role in the future work of the Expert Group in close cooperation with the UNECE secretariat.

X. OSCE-UNECE Handbook on best practices at border crossings (agenda item 9)

16. OSCE secretariat representatives assisted by external consultants presented the forthcoming *OSCE-UNECE Handbook on best practices at border crossings*. The main purpose of the handbook is to help OSCE participating States/UNECE member States develop more efficient border and customs policies by promoting existing best practices. While the publication is expected to become in the first place a reference document for national policy makers and customs and border officials, it also targets representatives of transport agencies, the business community and civil society. It is expected to contribute to further dialogue on these issues and to be used as reference material when drafting border management policies aimed at facilitating legal trans-border commercial movement while taking into consideration the necessary security aspects. It will provide concrete examples from across the OSCE region on how border-crossing points can be made increasingly efficient thereby allowing smooth trade and transport operations while at the same time reducing opportunities for corruption, illicit trafficking and transnational crime and terrorism. The publication also aims to compensate for the fact that the economic impact of inefficient border-crossings is not always fully taken into account. Cumbersome procedures at borders increase the costs of transport operations, hamper international trade and foreign investments.

17. The handbook will also offer the opportunity to countries in and outside the OSCE/UNECE region to learn from each other's experiences in overcoming problems and challenges. It will provide concrete policy recommendations, based on existing international legal instruments and input from the private sector. A lot of the useful material and case studies have been collected during two regional preparatory stakeholders' meetings held in autumn of 2008 and brought together relevant customs, border guard/police and transport officials from Eastern and Central Europe in Minsk and from Central Asia and the South Caucasus in Bishkek. The handbook will be published in English later this year and afterwards translated in Russian.

18. The group welcomed the valuable work done by the OSCE-UNECE secretariats on the joint Handbook on best practices in border crossing, and invited OSCE to consider an official launching of the Handbook at the next session of the group.

XI. Other business (agenda item 10)

19. The group expressed its sincere gratitude to the Government of Kazakhstan, the OSCE Centre in Astana and the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities for hosting this meeting in Almaty in such excellent conditions and providing the resource and financial support.

XII. Date and place of next meeting (agenda item 11)

20. The group welcomed the offer by the Russian Federation to host the next session of the group in Astrakhan and decided to hold its seventh session in Astrakhan (Russian Federation), tentatively scheduled on 24 and 25 October 2011.

XIII. Adoption of the list of main decisions of the sixth session

21. The group adopted the list of main decision of its sixth session and requested the secretariat and the Chair to prepare the full and complete report to be circulated to the members of the group for comments on items other than those contained in the list of main decisions.
