

CESNI joint meeting of the inspection bodies, Rotterdam, 15-17 September 2026

Welcome speeches – Muhammed Elemenler – European Commission

Dear Ms Secretary-General of the CCNR Ms Duursema,

Dear Mr van Kruiningen

Dear Mr Wassenaar

Dear Justine,

Dear Member of the Inspection Bodies, dear colleagues

Let me begin by thanking our hosts, the CESNI Secretariat, and all those who have contributed to organising this meeting. Above all, I would like to thank you—the members and experts of the inspection bodies—for the work you carry out every day.

It is a great pleasure and a great honour to be here !

It is a pleasure for me for personal reasons. Some of you know that I am coming originally from the German Ministry of Transport. There I have been hearing colleagues of talking CESNI and technical requirements, problems of implementation, adequacy of rules and the like. And I always thought, that is interesting! I do not know how I made, it, but now I am here! I have the chance to listen to you and get involved in technical matters of vessels.

And it is an honour, too, as I said. An honour as the work you are conducting is essential. Dear colleagues, I unfortunately have sometimes the impression in legislation that the focus is too much on rules to look good on paper, but it is forgotten that all rules serve a purpose. And here you come into play.

We often speak about European and international legislation and technical standards. We discuss their wording, their scope and their legal basis. But even the most carefully drafted rules do not apply themselves.

Let me be blunt. What are rules

if they are not applied?

if they create confusion in reality

if they do not serve their purpose.

They are nothing – you apply the rules,
you make them work in reality and
you ensure that they make sense.

You are the hands, the eyes, the ears, the noses and the brains. Rules need to be understood. They need to be interpreted in concrete circumstances. And they need to be applied to real vessels, real equipment and real technical situations. In doing so, you transform a technical standard into practical safety, as Mr van Kruiningen also said. That is the very purpose of the rules.

Your work does not always receive the public attention it deserves. But it is essential for the safety, reliability and proper functioning of inland navigation in Europe. This is where the inspection bodies play an indispensable role.

This responsibility is particularly important because inland navigation is an extraordinarily diverse sector.

The European fleet includes vessels of very different ages, designs and purposes. It includes dry-cargo vessels, tankers, passenger vessels, pushed convoys, floating equipment and other highly specialised vessels. Some were built only recently, while others have been operating safely for many decades and have been repeatedly modernised.

At the same time, innovation is a constant. Today, we increasingly encounter new propulsion systems, digital equipment and new combinations of technologies. Automation may play an increasing role, too.

A standard must apply across this diversity. But it cannot anticipate every vessel, every configuration and every technical development.

This brings me to a fundamental point: no regulatory framework is perfect.

Even a very comprehensive and carefully drafted technical standard contains provisions that raise questions in practice. A formulation may be understood differently by different authorities. A requirement that appears clear in the abstract may be difficult to apply to a particular vessel. Two provisions may interact in a way that was not fully anticipated. And technological developments may create situations that did not exist when a rule was drafted.

This is not necessarily evidence of a failure of regulation.

To a certain extent, it is an unavoidable feature of technical regulation. A technical standard must be sufficiently precise to ensure safety and legal certainty. At the same time, it must be broad enough to cover a highly diverse fleet and remain workable as technology evolves.

There will therefore always be borderline cases, unforeseen circumstances and legitimate questions of interpretation. Any time you do a rule there are ruptures and matters need to be clarified. I am a lawyer by training, and we fill up libraries for such kind of clarifications.

The real test of a regulatory system is not whether it avoids every possible question from the outset. That would be unrealistic. The real test is whether it can identify such questions, address them consistently and, where necessary, improve the rules.

This is precisely why meetings such as this one are so important.

Inspection bodies are often the first to discover where a provision causes practical difficulty. You see where wording leads to different interpretations. You identify requirements that may be clear for a new vessel but difficult to apply to an existing one.

This knowledge must feed back into the standard-setting process.

In other words, implementation is not simply the final stage of regulation. It is also the beginning of the next cycle of regulatory improvement. As already hinted, a rule is nothing if it only looks nice on paper, but causes difficulty in application and in practice. At times, patience is required here in this process of constant improvement.

It is therefore important that questions and difficulties are shared. If one inspection body encounters a problem, it is quite possible that colleagues elsewhere have encountered—or will encounter—the same problem.

If such issues remain at national or local level, different solutions may emerge. Over time, those differences can become established administrative practices. The same technical provision may then effectively mean different things depending on where a vessel is inspected.

That would be contrary to the objective of the legal framework. For many years, there were different regulatory frameworks alongside one another. And with the CESNI, it was tried to lift that situation.

On the Rhine, the CCNR developed and maintained a detailed system of technical requirements under its regime. At European Union level, technical requirements were established for vessels operating on Union inland waterways.

Both systems pursued essentially the same objectives: a high level of safety, reliable certification and the removal of unnecessary technical barriers to navigation.

Nevertheless, maintaining parallel sets of technical requirements is risky. Even relatively small differences could create additional costs, uncertainty and administrative burdens for authorities and the sector. For a mode of transport that is inherently cross-border, diverging technical regimes are particularly difficult to justify.

Therefore, European Commission and the CCNR worked progressively towards closer cooperation and greater harmonisation.

This cooperation did not begin with CESNI. I do not want to bore you with the history of administrative agreements. But this cooperation culminated in the common creation of CESNI in 2015.

It provided a common European platform for developing technical standards on the basis of expertise, transparency and broad participation.

This was more than an organisational change.

CESNI created the conditions for the European Union and the CCNR to base their respective legal frameworks on the same technical standards. Instead of developing competing sets of technical rules, the two regulatory systems could refer to a common standard—ES-TRIN.

Directive (EU) 2016/1629 translated this approach for the EU. The technical requirements applicable under EU law and those applicable under the Rhine regime are now based on the same technical foundation.

But a European technical standard must not only be identical on paper. It must also be applied with a sufficient degree of consistency across Europe.

For vessel owners and operators, this is a matter of legal certainty. They should be able to rely on the fact that a technical solution accepted in one jurisdiction will not be assessed according to fundamentally different criteria elsewhere—especially where the same European standard applies.

And for the authorities, consistent implementation strengthens mutual trust. Recognition of certificates can function effectively only if each authority has confidence in the quality and consistency of the assessments carried out by the others. So the legal construction of harmonisation must be backed by practice.

Of course, harmonisation does not mean that every inspection body must reach exactly the same conclusion in every conceivable case. Technical assessments necessarily involve professional expertise and, sometimes, judgement. Nor should cooperation replace the responsibilities entrusted to competent national authorities.

But professional judgement should operate in a way that comparable cases should lead to comparable outcomes. Differences should result from the technical circumstances of a case—not simply from different national understandings of the same requirement.

And here I may say that the story was a success. We are currently drafting an implementation report on the Directive (EU) 2016/1629 and we found out that the ES-TRIN and its implementation by you has been quite harmonious. Of course, some improvements can be made to the system. But in general, the system works well and fulfills its purpose, safe navigation in Europe. This is mainly thanks to you.

In the coming days you will work on further improving the ES-TRIN.

Do not be shy, get involved. As I said, you are also a source of knowledge for the regulatory system.

Thank you for your commitment, for your expertise and for the responsibility you assume every day.

I wish you productive discussions and a very successful meeting.

Thank you.