



Isabelle Ryckbost

Secretary General, European Sea Ports Organisation

Sea change

A shifting political tide looks set to change the business of Europe's ports, while environmental concerns are forcing the need for infrastructure investment. They'll need all the help they can get to ride out this storm

The world is changing, with disruption the watchword of the new era. Even long-established industries can't escape the winds of change sweeping across all industries and jurisdictions, and this includes the age-old ports sector.

In the modern world, ports must be capable of providing the infrastructure needed to meet changing technological and business demands, and they must be assured of a flexible policy framework supporting them. This is where the European Sea Ports Organisation (ESPO) comes in, working with various European institutions to facilitate infrastructure planning and influence regulatory change – two areas characterised by slow decision-making processes.

The issues facing European ports include increasing vessel sizes, growing market power through alliances, carbon reduction, 'greening' of vessels, digitalisation, national budgetary austerity, increased security challenges, geopolitical developments, rising economic nationalism, and Brexit. Faced with these challenges, ESPO has put forward three major priorities for this year.



Open waters

The first priority is infrastructure investment. In the context of the aforementioned challenges, building or adapting port infrastructure means more than increasing capacity. Some of these investments, however, are not bankable in the short term. As such, the grant component of Europe's transport infrastructure policy needs to be safeguarded, if not increased.

In this respect, we are also looking with interest at China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative. It is good to see Europe is attracting foreign investment, but we should be careful not to let the quest for development funding lead to ceding control over essential or critical European port infrastructure.

Our second priority is facilitating maritime trade. European ports frequently raise the need for administrative simplification and the removal of customs obstacles when it comes to EU goods being transported between European ports. However, at a time when every effort is being made to reduce formalities in maritime transport, the protectionist bent to recent geopolitical developments risks radically changing trade patterns and creating new barriers. We are concerned about the impact this



Ports are part of their local communities, with a hand in their societal and environmental concerns



might have on the free flow of goods and just-in-time logistics. Solutions should be developed so as to avoid unnecessary red tape. Every effort should be made to ensure European ports can remain efficient, seamless, entry and exit points for trade.

Green waves

Last but not least, ESPO and its members put a strong emphasis on sustainability. Around 90 percent of European ports are situated in or near urban areas. This means ports are very much part of their local communities, with a hand in those communities' societal and environmental concerns. Ports in Europe thus have a duty to reassure the people living around the port – and society as a whole – that their operations and investments are sustainable.

We feel it is time to establish a CO₂ target, as well as measures to reduce emissions from shipping in line with the Paris Agreement. We strongly believe the level of ambition should be set at a global level.

But ports are not just places to accommodate ships; they are nodes of energy and increasingly important clusters of industry and maritime economy. Besides developing plans to cut emissions and increase energy efficiency, port authorities are beginning to reflect on how to turn the path towards decarbonisation into a successful business case.

Over the last few decades, European ports have faced many important economic swings. Even though political decisions and burdensome procedures often prevent ports from moving fast, they have proven themselves to be resilient and dynamic. Let's now hope they can further build on this resilience to face the coming waves of change. ■