

Strive for more at home to lead in the world

By Isabelle Ryckbost (pictured), Secretary General, European Sea Ports Organisation (ESPO)

Between 23 and 26 May, the citizens of 28 EU Member States cast their votes in the European elections. The outcome of those elections marked the beginning of a new European Parliament, that started its mandate in July and will lead to a new Commission, a new political agenda

and new policy priorities for the next five years.

Mid July the European Parliament confirmed the candidacy of the German Christian Democrat politician, Ursula von der Leyen, and so gave support to her political agenda and priorities, which are

brought together in a document entitled "A Union that strives for more". While I am writing this, we are waiting for the full list of incoming Commissioners and their respective portfolios. We therefore have no clear picture yet of which concrete initiatives in the fields of interest to European ports, such as transport,



environment, energy and trade, will be taken by the Commission in the forthcoming years.

However, the agenda of the President-elect already clearly shows the direction the Commission will be taking and it must not come as a surprise that reaching “**a European green deal**” comes as a first of six headline ambitions of Mrs von der Leyen. Her ambition in that field is high: the President-elect wants a proposal within the first 100 days of office and wants to enshrine the 2050 climate-neutrality target into hard law. Europe must become the first climate-neutral continent and should even move towards zero-pollution.

The **European elections are** for policy organisations like the European Sea Ports Organisation **an ideal moment to reflect and set priorities both for ourselves as well as for the incoming European policymakers.**

We have been running this exercise over the last months and the result is **a memorandum** we presented during our annual conference in Livorno on 23 May. The document is more than just a shopping list of what Europe needs to do or not for European ports. We want to explain new policy makers how European ports can be a strategic partner in achieving Europe’s goals, in particular in terms of digitalisation and decarbonisation. In the first place, we want policy makers to understand the complex role of ports as entry gates for trade, being at the crossroads of supply chains, hotspots of energy, industry, innovation and digitalisation. Moreover, we want to emphasize that more than ever before, ports in Europe are “hybrid”.

Over the last decades, encouraged by the EU, almost all ports have developed their governance model towards being more commercially driven and being more financially autonomous. At the same time, port managing bodies are increasingly taking up – or are asked to take

up – wider societal responsibilities. They need, amongst others, to invest in projects that serve wider environmental imperatives, even if there is no direct return on investment for the port and even if the port itself is not responsible for the environmental problems. Port managing bodies understand these responsibilities and are happy to engage. I would even say that this engagement has never before been so strong. However, they ask policy makers to understand the difficulty for port managing bodies in Europe to try to be competitive and commercial as any other European company on the one hand and to serve the wider societal responsibilities like a public entity on the other.

With this in mind, the memorandum outlines a series of priorities and recommendations for the next five years. Let me highlight those that touch on climate, energy and environment more in general.

Decarbonisation comes of course first on this list. Ports are directly feeling the impact of extreme weather conditions; on average 40% of the commodities going through European ports are sources of energy. As ports are at the crossroad of transport and supply chains, clustering industry and energy, they are of the place where lots of CO₂ sources come together.

European ports therefore ask policymakers to support investments that implement the decarbonisation strategy of the port as well as investments aiming at enhancing the resilience of the port to climate change.

We further want policymakers to recognise that ports can really be a spider in the web for guiding Europe’s economy through the energy transition. We also hope that the target for shipping set by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) in 2018 will be followed up

as soon as possible by concrete emission reduction measures for shipping.

We furthermore underline that investments to be made on the port side to support the transition to cleaner fuels are time and cost intensive. Measures requiring ports to invest in certain facilities should come with corresponding obligations for the users. We believe however that stimulating new technologies should not lead to strict legislation hampering the sector to adapt to the ongoing technological innovation. Finally, we are conscious that our decarbonisation targets might need to be assessed in the light of the outcome of the discussion on the EU 2050 long term strategy for a climate neutral economy. The “von der Leyen agenda” shows a lot of ambition in that regard.

A second important priority in the field of environment is air pollution. ESPO’s environmental reports (see graph) have shown that over the last four years air quality has been the number one environmental priority for Europe’s port managing bodies. 91% of European ports are urban or close to an urban area. Air pollution is the single largest environmental health risk in Europe causing around 400 000 premature deaths per year. Ports cannot ignore the call for cleaner air, regardless of who is responsible.

To address this major concern and to safeguard the public acceptance of port activity in the years to come, we ask a gradual but mandatory transition plan towards cleaner fuels for shipping. Such a plan should deliver both on air quality and carbon savings. We also ask European policy makers to start the discussion on an EU wide Emission Control Area (ECA) in close cooperation with all stakeholders. In addition, we want the new Commission to take away the current disadvantage for the use of onshore power supply (OPS), by

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providing OPS the tax exemption that currently applies for electricity generated on board of vessels. We hope that this can be taken on board in the announced review of the Energy Taxation Directive. Finally, we express our support for the EU proposal to the IMO to take prompt and harmonised action with regard to the impact of liquid discharges from scrubbers on water quality.

Besides these two big priorities, the ESPO memorandum stresses the importance of sustainable hinterland connections and the engagement of European ports to be more transparent when it comes to their environmental performance. We finally also see digitalisation as a way

to make better use of both transport infrastructure and means of transport and we believe that digitalisation can enhance the knowledge about the environmental performance of supply chains and help shippers to make more responsible choices.

The environmental ambitions spelled out in the ESPO memorandum are high and will demand a lot of goodwill and cooperation between stakeholders of the port ecosystem. Von der Leyen's climate and green agenda is equally ambitious. For me, the most important message of the President-elect is that Europe should "strive for more at home in order to lead in the world".

This is exactly why we should be ambitious, but that is also exactly what we have to keep in mind when designing the path to achieving these ambitious goals. **We must deliver, but must do it in the right way in order to achieve promising results both for the environment and the people's well being, but also for the future of Europe's ports and Europe's economic and sustainable leadership in the world.**

We must combine bottom up engagement of the port sector with a right set of policy choices. ESPO and its members hope to be a strategic partner for the European decision makers in delivering their agenda. ●