

Speech by Zeno D'Agostino, Chair of ESPO

On the occasion of the ESPO award Ceremony and Dinner

Bozar, 8 November 2022

When we met in Brussels last year for the ESPO award dinner, wonderfully well timed just before the last big wave of the pandemic, we were very happy to see each other back after all that time.

We believed that we were really in the aftermath of one of the biggest and most unexpected crises we could have imagined in Europe.

A crisis during which Europe has showed its unity,

a crisis during which ports have shown resilience and agility.

Ports remained open, assisted, buffered and found solutions. They played an important role in supplying the goods we needed and keeping economies and societies going.

At that time, we had not expected that another even- maybe far more - worrying crisis was looming.

Since 24 February, the Russian invasion in Ukraine is holding Europe in its grip. It faces us as European citizens, as society with a geopolitical threat landscape that most of us – unless you are very old – did not have to face before.

And again, Ladies and Gentlemen, ports are in the forefront, to help, respond, adapt, find solutions:

- be it in adapting to the sanctions,
- in helping with the Ukraine solidarity lanes,
- in finding solutions for the energy supply crisis
- and last but not least in speeding up the deployment of renewable energies and strengthening Europe's energy independence.

But, unfortunately, unlike last year, the end of the crisis is not in sight, the only certainty we seem to have, is, that there will not be a "back to normal".

Distinguished guests,

We can learn from crises. As Churchill said, "Never let a good crisis go to waste". These crises are showing how important ports are and can be in strengthening Europe's sustainability and resilience.

Ports do a lot for Europe. They are not any longer only a hub in the multimodal supply chain.

- They are unique interfaces between sea and land, hubs of energy and technological platform.
- They are engines of growth, engines of sustainable growth.
- They are geopolitical strategic entities.

But to fully play their role, ports need support, ports need to be empowered.

In that context what can governments, both at European, national and local level, do for ports? Allow me to develop some points:

1. Policy needs to recognise the critical and strategic role of ports throughout its policy.
2. Ports must be able to prepare their pathway towards reaching Europe's ambitions in terms of sustainability and resilience; Ports are different, so different pathways are possible. Policy should combine bold ambitions with flexible solution, allowing ports to be agile, adapt to new realities and choose the most efficient way to deliver. Stranded assets are to be avoided.
3. Funding: Ports are facing huge investments. For some of these investments there is a business case. Many other investments though are mission driven, have a lot of added value for Europe's economy and society but only a limited return on investment for the port. Ports will need and deserve more funding.
4. There is more than tonnes and TEUs only to measure the importance of a port. The new roles ports are taking up in terms of energy and circular economy hub, offshore landing point, geopolitical strategic node cannot always be counted in tonnes. This should be taken into account in the ongoing TEN-T review.
5. The Royal Haskoning study which was published during the conference in Valencia, puts the finger on one of the big challenges that will need to be addressed when going through the energy transition: Space. New and renewable energies need more space than fossil energies, because of the lower density, the storage needs and the safety perimeters. Space in and around ports is often scarce. Too often permitting processes slow down progress. It will be important to find support from the local community, from policy at different levels in getting the permits and the space needed to realise the transition, also considering the space on the sea, not only the land. We hope the commission proposal in that regard get the support from Parliament and Council.
6. Cooperation. There is a lot happening in ports. Port managing bodies can be facilitators, enablers, investors where possible, and sometimes operators. But there are many other actors in the port. To reach their objectives, port management bodies will need the support and engagement of all port stakeholders. All actors in and around the port ecosystems have to work together. Moreover, we will also need to engage with new stakeholders, in particular in the energy field.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are going through a period of huge uncertainties. The geopolitical crisis, the energy supply crisis as well as the climate crisis require responses and solutions that we cannot develop each on our side.

We have more than ever to think, to work, to cooperate, to learn from each other, in view of strengthening our resilience.

We need to be united, as Europe, as society, as ports.

Dear friends,

We, ports in Europe, are lucky to have an organisation like ESPO which explains what is going on in Brussels and is our voice at the Brussels political table. But maybe even more importantly at this moment, we can count on ESPO as the platform to meet among European ports and port professionals to support each other in the best way forward.

I must say I am proud and feel very honoured to have been elected today as chair of ESPO. I would like to thank all the ESPO members for their support.

Annaleena, I would like to thank you for the fantastic cooperation, for all the engagement and work you have done over the last years, not only as a Chair but also as Vice Chair, for ESPO, for Europe's ports.

I am also looking forward to continue the good cooperation with Daan and with Ansis and would like to congratulate them with their election.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The current crises do not only require a big cooperation among ports, among stakeholders. I believe that it is also important to further strengthen our exchanges with the Commission, Parliament and the Member States. The world is changing fast, ports are changing overnight. We need to explain ports, their changing role, their complexity, but also their strengths. We very much appreciate the open dialogue with many Commission, Parliament and Council representatives and look forward to intensify these exchanges. After all, we share the same goals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ports are what they are and can do what they do, because we can count on a very engaged and dedicated workforce, skilled people, hard-working people. We have to do everything to embrace these talents in the port and intensify the dialogue with the current and future workforce, preparing our workforce for the port of the future and look jointly for solutions to solve problems. Ports change, maybe profiles will change as well, but what will not change is that ports business will remain a people's business.

Allow me in that context to refer for a moment to one of my well esteemed predecessors, Giuliano Gallanti, who has been chairing ESPO from 2004 to 2008 and who has been instrumental for the Italian port community. If we are here tonight together for the 14th edition of the ESPO award on societal integration, it is maybe thanks to Giuliano who brought the topic of port-city relations on the ESPO table.

I would like to congratulate all seven candidates of this year's ESPO award for their participation and their strong projects. I would like to thank the Jury chair Dimitrios and all jury members for their work in selecting a winner among winners.

Last but not least, dear guests, let me thank our two sponsors for making this evening happen. Thank you TT Club, leader in insurance and risk management services for the transport and logistics industry. No need to say that strong insurance policies are required in these times.

Thank you also to our second sponsor, AquaSmartXL, a young Dutch startup, which uses drones and robots in a very innovative way to collect data on the state of level of quays, bridges, piers and other difficult and dangerous spots to reach in ports. Thank you Marlon for your support!

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To conclude,

I would also like to thank all of you, for your presence this evening. You cannot imagine how important this is for the candidates, for ESPO and for its members.

I would like to bring out a toast to all European ports!

Enjoy the evening and buon appetito!