

## SOME ASPECTS OF POLAND'S MARITIME POLICY

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Poland's maritime policy will inevitably be influenced by two exogenous factors; her geographical location on the Southern shore of the Baltic Sea and the membership in the European Union (EU). Other factors that will impact this policy are of a political, cultural and historical nature and relate, among others, to the

ambitions of the former Soviet Republics to join the EU, the reunification of Germany or the overall shifts in the directions of international trade in the BSR (Baltic Sea Region) after the demise of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

These factors notwithstanding, economics will play the most crucial role in the process of formulating Poland's maritime policy for the next decades. The countries of the BSR are, to a great extent complementary, unlike the other areas, such as the Mediterranean, for example, where the economies of Italy, Spain and Portugal, or Greece, not to mention the North African or Middle East countries, are strongly competitive to one another. And with some exceptions, the relationships amongst the BSR nations are based on a mutual respect of their sovereignty, neutrality and restraint from intervention into one another's internal affairs, rendering this area ripe for a close and mutually beneficial socio-economic and institutional integration.

It should also be borne in mind that the BSR belongs to one of the best economic performers within the EU. To ignore this fact within the process of defining Poland's maritime policy would be tantamount to shortsightedness and sheer neglect.

Poland's favourable geographical position as a transit area for both EW and NS transport corridors is one of the major factors that should determine her maritime future. And although a lot has been said and published in that respect, much less has been actually achieved in real terms. Rarely have the politicians in this country gone beyond empty declarations. Neither have the maritime fora, international conferences and seminars, scientific publications, etc. achieved tangible results that would give Poland a good start in that direction. One must realize that Poland will probably for a long time to come be limited to a status of a peripheral shipping market and her ports will play a marginal role compared to Europe's leading harbours.

What can be seen by some as a curse and pessimistic reality could in fact turn out as beneficial. After all Poland is number six in EU in terms of demography with her 38 million people that need to be fed, sheltered and assured decent jobs. That is a sizeable market for our EU partners, and companies all over the EU are striving to take advantage of that. They are discouraged and turned back instead. The reasons for that are numerous and the limits of this short contribution prevent us from exploring them thoroughly.

One must also realize that the golden days for Poland in terms of maritime economy are probably gone. No one who is clear in his mind

will promote the prospects of another coal exports boom to Japan of the mid- 1970s, after the first oil shock of 1973, which created artificial new opportunities for Polish shipyards to build larger bulkers to cut the cost of transportation for this route to an extent that would justify economic efficiency of such trades. Incidentally, it has been revealed in recent years that these trades were not advantageous but the constraints of earning convertible currencies regardless of the cost was trumpeted throughout the country as the great success. Nowadays, with the real currency, such manipulations of economic facts are simply unconceivable.

That does not mean that Poland's maritime economy is moribund. It can be revitalized but it has to find new ways to expand. First and foremost it needs a strong support from the government, provided it itself fully grasps the importance of this sector for the nation as a whole.

The ongoing discussion on whether Poland's maritime policy should be pro-European, i.e. follow the directives of the EU's overall policy in this field or whether it should be more national is – in our opinion – pointless in-as-much the national interest cannot be safeguarded. The crucial point is how this interest can be protected while Poland remains a part of the overall policy European maritime policy. To many participants of this discussion such a solution is quite feasible. It remains to be seen how such a message can be passed through and noticed in the power centers.

Few reforms succeed if they are not backed up by the grassroots movements. Centrally-induced reforms were only successful if they were implemented by a strongly centralized power. What was feasible at the time of real socialism, with little opposition to the one-party system, is ruled out in a democracy. In the latter case reforms have to be supported by the majority. But is that majority in Poland aware of how crucial the maritime sector is for the nation as a whole? That remains to be seen.

People who herald the supposed advantages of Poland's maritime sector tend to forget that this sector is subject to the exactly same economic laws that govern any economic activity. It has to be viable. And while the subsequent political elites of Poland may be justifiably criticized for their supposed neglect of the maritime sector in Poland, at the same time they can be excused when they claim that this sector, like any other economic sectors, first has to prove its feasibility, particularly in terms of its contribution to Poland's GDP. That this contribution is negligible, roughly around 1.0 to 1.5% depending on the method used to assess it, one can easily see from some basic national statistics. Does this fact justify the neglect politicians in this country show towards Poland's maritime economy?. Certainly not.

To prove that right one has to look at the example of some great maritime nations. When asked if the navy and the merchant marine

are crucial in safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, almost every English child would acquiesce. Confronted with the same question few Polish children would do the same. There must be some definite reasons for that. Ignorance is certainly one of them.

A strong and viable maritime sector for any country cannot be overestimated in terms of its impact on a nation's economy as a whole. One has to just look at the case of some landlocked countries, with the possible exception of Switzerland, to understand why these nations are confronted with great difficulties in terms of their foreign trade. The case of African nations is perhaps one of the most instructive in this matter. While Poland is not land-locked it certainly does not use the advantage of having a long sea coast to the fullest.

The maritime policy for Poland should take all the above factors, and many others not quoted in this paper, into consideration. The discussion on this subject is indispensable and contribution from all those involved is welcome. But discussions are not sufficient. Concrete actions are needed. Who should start them, and how such actions should be implemented is an issue of its own.

