

The “Athens Declaration” A Year On:

Exploiting the Full Potential of Short Sea Shipping

On 7th May 2014, the Informal Maritime Ministerial meeting in Athens issued a statement recognising the importance of the shipping sector to the European economy and calling on the European Commission and Member States to “make all relevant efforts to reach a high-ambition agreement for shipping”. The aims and objectives of what is now the Athens Declaration were very well received by the shipping and wider maritime community, being clear and unequivocal recognition of the value of the sector to the European economy.

A number of the objectives of the Athens Convention have been taken up in the ongoing Mid-Term Review of Maritime Transport Policy to 2018 and were discussed in detail at the European Shipping Week event in early March. As the first anniversary of the Declaration approaches however, the undernoted organisations, representing the breadth of the European maritime sector, have come together in this joint letter to remind the Member States and the European Commission of the commitments made in section V of the Declaration ‘Exploiting the full potential of short sea shipping and sea transportation services for businesses and citizens in Europe’ and to urge them to take concrete and effective steps to implement the Declaration’s objectives.

The ongoing impediments to maximising the use of short sea shipping and the sustainable development of ports and associated infrastructure are common and regular themes in the discussions between these organisations and European legislators and Member States.

The case for short sea shipping being a sustainable form of intra-European transport and offering a solution to traffic congestion has been made many times over. Unfortunately, the sector has been unable to achieve its full potential due to a lack of investment and the need to comply with considerably greater and more onerous regulatory and administrative burdens than its competitors moving cargo by road or rail.

Given the clear political commitment to supporting short sea shipping, effective policies must be put in place and implemented to allow all shipowners, ports and terminal operators carrying and handling Europe’s external and internal trade to easily access funding to boost efficiency and reduce emissions, to modernize ports, including their infrastructure as well as equipment on terminals, and improve the connection of the maritime leg to the rest of the logistics chain. The vocal and welcome support by DG-MOVE for the European network of short sea promotion centres also requires to be backed up with effective financial support to enable them to fully develop their capabilities and promote the mode in the most effective manner possible.

Reducing regulatory and administrative burdens would by itself bring significant benefits to the short sea sector but continued adherence to outdated policies (a prime example being that European coastal cargo moving more than 12 miles offshore loses its community status) has prevented advances in this respect. Regrettably a wide range of government agencies and authorities within the EU have resisted efforts to implement such changes and streamline the procedures needed to establish a genuine ‘European Maritime Space without Barriers’. We look to all Member States and the Commission to make new and determined efforts to finally deliver this longstanding political commitment, which is achievable only by prioritising a collaborative, innovative and forward looking approach.

Furthermore, it is clear that a number of EU Member States will not have implemented their maritime single windows on 1st June 2015 as required by the Reporting Formalities Directive. The lack of uniform standards and harmonization of data requirements for reporting, as well as the absence of interoperability between national systems (and in many cases between the systems of individual authorities in the same Member State) will adversely impact effective Europe-wide data exchange. A number of initiatives by the private sector to introduce practical and effective solutions to some of these issues, for example the WSC/ECSA eManifest proposal and the Blue Belt trials, have proven the concepts beyond any reasonable doubt but a lack of political will has prevented the initiatives being taken forward. Until such time as these unnecessary and unjustifiable regulatory and administrative burdens that uniquely afflict the shipping sector are eliminated, shipping cannot compete on level terms and is thus unable to provide the levels of service and environmental sustainability which Europe and its citizens expect.

Short sea shipping and ports are part of the larger transport system. Therefore, the goal must be to make all modes and the connections between them as efficient and sustainable as possible – not only through infrastructure but also connected ICT systems. The future of transport, including port operations and logistics, is digital. The European Commission is establishing a European Digital Transport and Logistics Forum. Industry hopes that it will be consulted closely on the identification and prioritization of issues to be included in the digital transport and logistics agenda for Europe in general, and on how the Forum can advance the goals for short sea shipping in particular as set out in this joint letter.

Funding for all these initiatives requires to be safeguarded and strengthened. In this respect, we underline the importance of the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) to fund projects along the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T). CEF and TEN-T are the tools of an ambitious and at the same time realistic infrastructure policy, which will contribute to achieving a better-connected Union, fostering the development of the solid transport network European industry needs in order to thrive. The reallocation of a significant portion of the CEF budget (18.1% of the CEF transport grants budget in non-cohesion countries) as EFSI credit guarantees will put at risk many projects that have been identified as priorities of the TEN-T network.

Initiatives at European level such as the Ecobonus would be of great support in strengthening short sea by reducing the competitive gap against all-road solutions. The Commission and national authorities should therefore actively support and promote such initiatives.

Finally, as stated in Section II, paragraphs 3 and 5 of the Declaration, action must be taken to ensure a steady supply of new and well-qualified entrants to the European maritime sector. Whilst much has been said about the clear and undisputed need to attract and retain European seafarers, similar provision must also be made for the large numbers of shore-based staff employed by ports and terminals, ship agents and shipbrokers, forwarding agents and shippers. The need for appropriate education and training is vital to the development of all professions in the maritime cluster.

By this letter, and through their individual contributions to the Mid Term Review, the associations listed below are calling on the European Commission and Member States to work together to put in place practical, meaningful and effective solutions for the issues currently facing the maritime sector so that it can achieve the outcomes envisaged in the Athens Declaration and contribute fully to the economic and social development of the European Union.

The organisations endorsing this letter are:



London and Brussels, April 2015