

Unleashing the potential of the Vistula Lagoon

Interview with Urszula Kowalczyk of the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk, Leader of the project "Opportunities and Benefits of Joint Use of the Vistula Lagoon – VILA"



Cooperation within the project VILA between coastal communities of the Vistula Lagoon region is directed at full realization of its economic potential as well as creating an attractive tourist-recreational complex. About the project's objectives we talk with its Leader, Urszula Kowalczyk of the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk.

■ **What are the main goals of the VILA project and the most promising potential of the Vistula Lagoon?**

The main aim of the VILA project is to strengthen the economic and social cooperation in the Vistula Lagoon area. This will be done through forging a long-term development strategy focused on the whole region in question, encompassing strategic goals, sustainable development rules, directions of modernizing the infrastructure as well as a public-private-partnership model suitable for using in the region – ways in which local and central politics could cooperate and encouraging the municipalities to play a bigger role in developing the area. Solitary collaboration actions across the Vistula Lagoon have been carried out for many years but the area requires something more to fully unleash its potential. The region's geographical position creates conditions not only for advancing tourism or so-called small border traffic, but can also contribute to making freight volumes go up as well as environmental protection easier and more efficient. A long-term strategy can significantly boost the prosperity of the local citizens, increase their mobility and secure a stable development pace.

■ **What is the role, tasks and research objectives of the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk within the project?**

The MIG is Project Leader and its task as such is to foresee coordinating the works, promoting the initiative and realizing the project's primary targets together with partners from Poland and Russia. Currently, the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk along with the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal

University and the Atlantic Department of the P.P. Shirshov Institute of Oceanology of the Russian Academy of Sciences are working on evaluating the natural, economic and social conditions of the Vistula Lagoon. The appraisal will help to pursue sustainable development in the region.

■ **What are the most important challenges facing Polish-Russian cross-border cooperation and the main political barriers standing in the way of sustainable development of the entire Vistula Lagoon?**

Intensifying cross-border cooperation depends upon the character of the border itself. There are three types of bordering regions – integrated, collaborating and isolated. After Poland's accession to the Schengen area, the Vistula Lagoon is unfortunately the third – the isolated type. Thereby the Poland-Kaliningrad Oblast border negatively impacts socio-economic development of both bordering territories. Present undertakings are therefore focused on strengthening bilateral cooperation, beginning with facilitations for the flow of people and goods. In this regard small border traffic, put into practice last year, should also encompass maritime trade. Other international initiatives easing uninterrupted traffic will also be very much welcome. Additionally, we cannot forget about actions designed to combat local difficulties which are as important as breaking political deadlocks. In this context I mean, e.g. going through stereotypes, overcoming language barriers or changing the mindset of citizens.

■ **What actions are needed in the fields of transport and environmental protection?**

Approximately, one million people live in the nearest vicinity of the Vistula Lagoon, out of which about 70% are located on the Kaliningrad Oblast's side and 30% in Poland. This number stands for an economic potential and it would be a shame to waste it. Therefore, a long-term strategy is necessary to point out key priorities in the areas of infrastructure and environmental protection. For instance, a unified set of protection standards would greatly contribute to lowering the pollution of the Vistula Lagoon's waters, as their condition today decreases both the touristic value of the region and local citizens' standard of living.

■ **How do you see the future of the Vistula Lagoon?**

All the knowledge obtained during the project will be handed over to all interested parties, as to make the best use of it. The project's guidelines and recommendations will be further developed and implemented into real life after completion of the initiative. This will be especially valid for those solutions which facilitate the introduction of the EU's rules concerning sustainable development of transport. All in all, the world is changing its face, presenting new opportunities of which we should take advantage. This also holds true for the Vistula Lagoon region and our joint actions cannot only make our lives easier, but can also secure the prosperity of next generations living here.

Lena Lorenc

About the project

The project “Opportunities and Benefits of Joint Use of the Vistula Lagoon – VILA” will allow for an assessment of economic, social and environmental conditions of the area, contributing to the creation of a common strategy for the development of the Lagoon. The strategy could be further implemented in the region by the Polish and Russian political entities, ensuring its development and increasing its role.

The project is implemented jointly by the Polish and Russian partners, within the framework of cross-border Cooperation Programme Lithuania-Poland-Russia 2007-2013. Its main objective is to identify opportunities to fully take advantage of the economic and social potential of the areas located within the Vistula Lagoon region. This first-of-its-kind initiative, with a total budget of approx. EUR 1.07 mln, could also become a model for similar Lithuanian-Russian actions, regarding the Curonian Lagoon. VILA, led by the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk, will be implemented over two years, starting from January 2013. This initiative will be realized with Russian partners: Atlantic Department of the P.P. Shirshov Institute of Oceanology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Administration of the City of Baltiysk and the Polish partner – the City Commune of Elbląg.

One of the project’s specific objectives is a joint assessment of the natural and social conditions that make a sustainable development of the Vistula Lagoon possible. Another goal is to prepare a detailed catalog of the existing infrastructure in ports and harbors as well as an overview of the infrastructure development plans in the future. All this to enhance the knowledge and bring a new approach to planning and management of ports and infrastructure in the region, which can result not only in a real increase of cargo flows in the Vistula Lagoon, but also in a closer cooperation in the field of environmental protection. The assessment of the current state of transport cooperation and the possibility of improving the waterways will help create a cross-border forum to facilitate communication, solving common problems and make business contacts.

A conference opening the research project VILA, entitled “Vistula Lagoon – prospects of development and use of socio-economic potential in the framework of Polish-Russian cooperation”, took place on January 14, 2013, at Marshall’s Office of Pomorskie Voivodeship in Gdańsk. The aim of the conference was to discuss the challenges of exploring the potential of the Vistula Lagoon by the entities representing the Polish and Russian research institutions, local governments, businesses and residents of the region. During the meeting, the participants debated on the region and its ports’ role in the Polish and the Kaliningrad Oblast’s transport systems, the state of cross-border cooperation in the region and its major challenges as well as the potential and the future of the Vistula Lagoon.

The kick-off conference will be followed by various seminars on e.g. evaluation of natural and socioeconomic conditions of the Lagoon; transregional teamwork between Polish and Russian partners and preparation of a spatial planning characteristic with development of a handbook with recommendations of water use for the Vistula Lagoon. The initiative’s action plan foresees also, among others, a study visit to Polish and Russian Baltic ports, creation of catalogues of existing port and harbour infrastructure in the Lagoon as well as a roadmap for future common activities.

Lena Lorenc

LEAD PARTNER: Maritime Institute in Gdańsk (MIG)



Comprising of five research departments and one independent section, MIG is an R&D Institute with over 60 years of experience, carrying out complex research projects for the Polish maritime administration and economy and performing tasks connected with the coastal situation of the country. The research problems comprise land-sea transport logistics, electronic data interchange (EDI) technologies in international maritime transport and trade, forecasting the marine economy, sea and coastal tourism as well as problems concerning the safety of ships and the marine environment.

Atlantic Branch of P.P. Shirshov Institute of Oceanology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ABIORAS)



The P.P. Shirshov Institute of Oceanology is the oldest and largest Russian research centre in the field of oceanology. The main objectives of the Institute lie in a complex study of the world’s oceans and the Russian seas based on the idea of the entire physical, chemical, biological and geological processes observed in them, laying scientific foundations for forecasting the Earth’s climate variability, rational use of marine resources and safeguarding ecological security in the interests of mankind’s stable development.

Immanuel Kant State University of Russia (IKBFU)



The Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University was established on October 13, 2010, on the basis of the Immanuel Kant State University of Russia by a decree of former President of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev. The University conducts research in fields which are pivotal to the development of science and technology in the Russian Federation, such as: biosciences, rational nature management, information and communications technologies, strategic technologies (fundamental material science and nanosystems) as well as transport and space systems.

City Commune of Elbląg (EM)



City of Elbląg is the basic unit of local government, established for the organization of public life on its territory. The areas of activities within the competence of the municipality include: city planning, real estate management, environmental protection and nature conservation, supporting and promoting the idea of self-government. City of Elbląg is represented by the mayor. According to the Statute of the City, the mayor directs the current affairs of the City Commune of Elbląg and represents it externally.

Administration of the Municipal District of Baltiysk (AMDB)



Baltiysk is a seaport town and the administrative centre of the Baltiysky District of Kaliningrad Oblast. The purpose of the Administration of the city is to create comfortable living conditions for its citizens. Its role and involvement in implementing the proposed action includes, among others, providing assistance in organizing and holding conferences, working meetings and analyzing information on the current state of transport – economic processes and outlooks on developing coastal tourism, elaborating on recommendations for waterside infrastructure development.