



Interview with Witold Wróblewski, Mayor of Elbląg

# The sea is a must

by Przemysław Myszk

**Throughout its history Elbląg has always been associated with water, handcraft and trade. The modern city didn't lose its energy and continues to value hard work and active partnerships as a way to reach socio-economic growth. We talk to the city's Mayor Witold Wróblewski about the executed strategies to realize Elbląg's potential.**



■ **As a Hanseatic town Elbląg has experienced dynamic economic and cultural growth. Have these traditions survived?**

Certainly. We do our best to emphasize the ties between Elbląg and the sea. We are now facing the challenge of maximizing the benefits and further developing Elbląg port's potential, both in freight handling and passenger traffic as well. The animation of the port involves not only intensified import and export of goods by water, but also activation of shipping and tourism. Both directions of growth require adequate developments and technical arrangements. With this in mind, we are planning to dredge the entrance channel, build a turning basin, bridges on the Elbląg River and on the Jagiellonian Canal together with a dedicated road system, an embankment in Radomska Street, a railway siding and a cargo terminal. Furthermore, we need to maintain dynamic international collaboration and establish a joint, cohesive development policy for the entire Vistula Lagoon area.

■ **How will the Vistula Spit cross-cut influence the city in a short- and long-term perspective?**

The ship canal across the Vistula Spit, which our city has been advocating for years, is one of the main drivers of water transport and international shipping development for the Port of Elbląg and other ports of the Vistula Lagoon as well. It will provide direct access to the Baltic Sea and will make the waterway connecting Elbląg to neighbouring ports shorter. I am sure that the project will not only increase the cargo handling capacity of our port, but it will also make Elbląg a more attractive tourist destination. The cut will open the way to the Lagoon, to the port and further on to the Masurian lakes via the unique Elbląg Canal, becoming an excellent element for promoting our city. I do hope that the project will come to pass.

■ **How would you sum up the collaboration with Kaliningrad Oblast, as far as small border traffic is concerned? How has the current trade fight between the West and Russia changed this matter?**

Last year we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our partnership agreement with Kaliningrad. Over these two decades, the region was gradually opening itself to us as its closest neighbours. The small border traffic provided an excellent opportunity for people living on both sides of the Polish-Russian border to get to know each other. Obviously, business aspects of the agreement are no less important. The last months have shown that despite the tense situation and the dropping value of the ruble, the traffic, although weaker, exists. I hope that this is a temporary situation.

■ **Which areas of the Polish-Russian co-operation in the Vistula Lagoon region are strong and what needs to be improved?**

The mentioned 20-year collaboration with Kaliningrad Oblast occurs in a variety of areas – to name just business, culture, sports and education. Furthermore, we work on joint projects together, including those which focus on benefitting the Vistula Lagoon and realizing its potential. The Union of Lagoon Municipalities based in Elbląg is an important partner for the Polish-Russian contacts. I will not deny, however, that there is still a lot to be done. The cleanliness of the Vistula Lagoon's water and joint efforts to prevent the pollution is an important issue. The question of including sea border crossings to the small border traffic programme is also worth discussing. This will enable an intense passenger traffic between Elbląg, Baltiysk and Kaliningrad.

■ **In 2018 Russia will be organizing the World Football Cup, with some of the meetings to be held in Kaliningrad. How is Elbląg going to attract football fans and become their possible base camp?**

We shall surely do our best to maximize this opportunity and make football fans visit us and stay here longer. Elbląg might be a perfect starting point for those planning to watch the games in Kaliningrad. We shall work together with people from the travel, hotel and catering business to prepare a tempting offer. We boast many attractions here and are willing to promote them.

■ **Are there any plans to use river cruise ships or any other elements or activities that might add value to Elbląg as a travel destination and the capital of the region?**

Elbląg is situated on an international water route connecting Western European ports to the Russian part of the Vistula Lagoon and further by the Kaliningrad Oblast rivers to the Curonian Lagoon, the Nemunas Delta and the Baltic Sea. During the past years we have participated, together with other towns, in the Żuławy Loop (Vistula River Delta) project. As a result, yacht marinas in the Vistula

Lagoon have been modernised. Modern infrastructure for sailors has been built in Elbląg, Tolkmicko, Braniewo and Nowa Pasłęka. The project has just been awarded the Friendly Riverside Grand Prix as a model example of how the water areas of neighbouring regions can be organized. Now, our task is to promote these places effectively, in order to attract as many water sports enthusiasts as possible.

Moreover, the City of Elbląg collaborates closely with the regional government and the authorities of the Elbląg, Ostróda and Hława local administration units within the framework of joint activities intended to promote the Elbląg Canal. All these bodies have participated in a joint project and are now working together to support the process of integration within the land of the Elbląg Canal. For example, we are going to attend this year's ITB, the world's largest tourism trade fair in Berlin together, with a large stand promoting Elbląg Canal cruises and a variety of joint activities designed to encourage tourists to visit this truly unique gem. Neither can the Vistula Lagoon Railway be forgotten. I do hope it will be successfully reactivated, since, as previous years have shown, this picturesque route from Elbląg to Braniewo used to attract great numbers of tourists to the region. Boat trips from Tolkmicko to Krynica Morska and back were an additional attraction for those wishing to combine a cruise with sunbathing on the beach.

So, there are many ideas how Elbląg and its surrounding areas could become the tourist capital of the region. We are working together with the Elbląg Tourism Cluster on preparing an offer that would meet expectations of potential recipients and follow current travelling trends, such as weekend or culinary tourism. ■

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project 'Opportunities and Benefits of Joint Use of the Vistula Lagoon – VILA' is implemented jointly by Polish and Russian partners, within the framework of the cross-border Cooperation Programme Lithuania-Poland-Russia 2007-2013 and financed by the European Union. 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 in January 2013. This initiative is realized with the following Russian partners: the 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.

## Vistula Lagoon's newly published catalogue

# The guide to harbours

by Marcin Burchacz

**The VILA project has released a three-part publication with information on ports and marinas located along the Vistula Lagoon, which also contains a set of guidelines for further improving the attractiveness of this subregion.**

**T**he main aim of the 'Opportunities and Benefits of Joint Use of the Vistula Lagoon' (VILA) EU co-financed project has been to identify various measures which could strengthen the socio-economic cooperation between Polish and Russian partners to the benefit of the whole subregion. By nature, the development of maritime infrastructure is crucial in this regard.

### Three steps of progress

The VILA catalogue is divided into three parts. The first one focuses on the general characteristics of the Vistula Lagoon (its waterways and navigational infrastructure, incl. signs and safety requirements), tabling also hydrotechnical infrastructure development plans. The second part presents harbours located around the Vistula Lagoon, starting with the sea-river port in Elbląg, Poland, going then through various marinas along the southern coast to Kaliningrad Oblast, finishing up by the Vistula Spit. Altogether 19 harbours have been described, encompassing such details as location and surroundings, hydro-technical infrastructure, main functions (freight/tourism/recreation), available vessel services and

growth opportunities. The last section comprises the overall state of the subregion (incl. undergoing and planned investments) as well as recommendations for bolstering welfare of the Vistula

**Altogether 19 harbours have been described, encompassing such details as location and surroundings, hydrotechnical infrastructure, main functions (freight/tourism/recreation), available vessel services and growth opportunities.**

Lagoon such as upgrading the Polish harbours in Tolkmicko, Kały Rybackie and Krynica Morska to make them suitable also for cargo handling (agriculture products) or further modernizing marinas on the Russian side to increase their tourism attractiveness, to name just two of VILA's catalogue measures.

### No turning back

The prosperity of the Vistula Lagoon's hinterland is linked to its seaside, the development of the latter acting as a socio-economic flywheel for virtually everyone. Both ports and their surroundings will take advantage of improving transport-, tourism- and fishery-related services.

Polish and Russian regional cooperation is vital in this regard and here the catalogue also proposes a set of concrete actions to be undertaken, as e.g. establishing a maritime border-crossing checkpoint in Mamonovo on the Russian side, but also in Frombork or in Nowa Pasłęka on the Polish side, and including such crossings in the local border traffic agreement in general. Next, the reopening of a passenger line between Elbląg and Kaliningrad would be advisable, too, together with setting up similar liner pax services between other harbours in the Vistula Lagoon, while clearing the international E70 Vistula Lagoon-Curonian Lagoon inland waterway of more traffic wouldn't be a bad idea either.

VILA's harbours catalogue is a compact, yet comprehensive guidebook across not only today's state of the Vistula Lagoon, but also a far-reaching vision of this subregion. There's still a lot of work to be done, however, thanks to having a guide, we know in which direction to head. ■

