



The Vistula Lagoon – prospects for development

Choose wisely

by Marcin Burchacz and Rafał Koba, *VILA project*

There's no such thing as one definite and inevitable future path for the so-called Vistula Lagoon subregion. There is a considerable potential for development as well as a serious threat of a downgrade scenario taking place. As always, maintaining the status quo is an appealing answer to all those who are reluctant to set a bold plan and to encourage others to believe in a better future.

Bearing in mind the subregion's social and economic characteristics, it seems that both the Polish and the Russian parts of the Vistula Lagoon lack advantages which would guarantee fast and sustainable growth. Therefore, strong external stimulation is required.

The Polish side

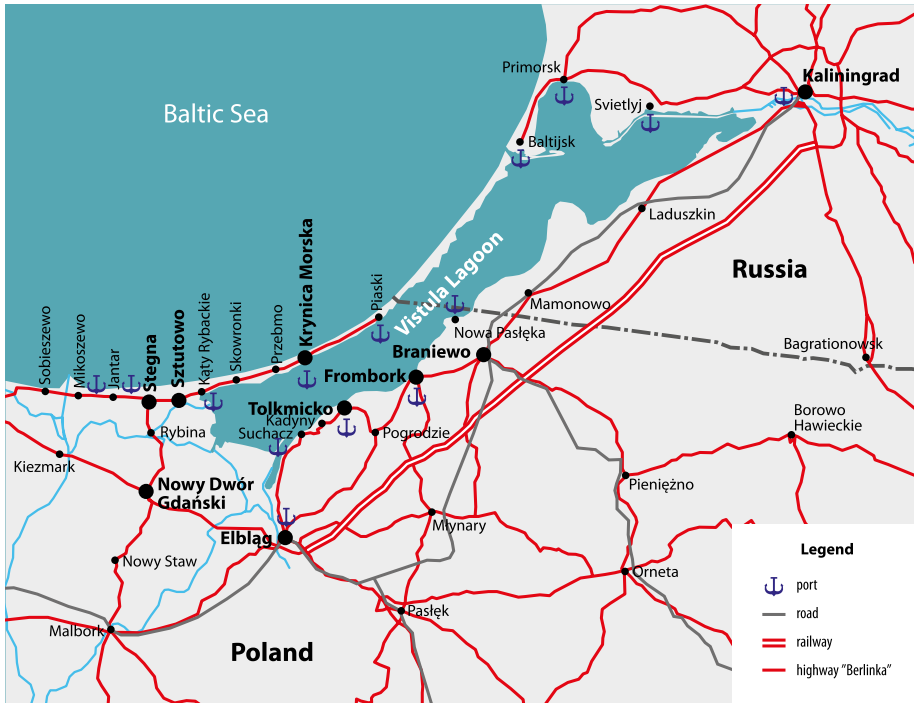
Three basic scenarios can be taken into account here. First, the pessimistic one, assuming that the local border traffic's organizational and legal solutions between the Kaliningrad Oblast and certain parts of the Warmian-Masurian and Pomeranian Voivodeships might be withdrawn

or limited. Second, keeping the status quo. Third, the optimistic variant, provided further measures aimed at facilitating cross-border traffic between Russia and the European Union.

Let's stick for a while to the last option which envisages gradual liberalization of border regulations. The next step would be 72-hour non-visa traffic between the Kaliningrad Oblast and the Polish part of the subregion. The final step would be lifting visa requirements between Russia and the EU. Such a scenario would result in a dynamic development of cross-border cooperation based on the effect of scale. Growth might then be expected across all elements of the subregional economy, accompanied by an inflow of domestic and foreign investments.

The planned construction of a ship canal across the Vistula Spit is yet another element that may potentially have a significant impact on the social and economic situation of the whole subregion. A study prepared by the Maritime Office in Gdynia in 2013 examines three





variants of waterways providing access to the Vistula Lagoon on the Polish side.

The first variant talks about leaving the existing water connections between the Polish side and the Baltic Sea via the existing inland waterways in the Vistula Delta and through the waterway across the Russian part of the Vistula Lagoon and the Strait of Baltiysk for vessels with a draught of up to 1.8 m. In other words, this would mean maintaining the status quo.

The second option foresees clearing the existing inland network of waterways connecting the Vistula Lagoon and the Port of Elbląg to the Bay of Gdańsk and the Baltic Sea by technical modernization and an upgrade of the existing inland waterway network so as to accommodate the referenced ship measurements given by the Elbląg Sea Port Authority.

And finally, the third scenario. Constructing a 5 m deep ship canal across the Polish part of the Vistula Spit and dredging the existing water lanes of the Vistula Lagoon and the Elbląg River (to the Port of Elbląg) would eventually allow vessels with a draught of up to 4 m, 20 m wide and 100 m long to enter Elbląg port. Additionally, with this solution in place, virtually all yachts sailing in the Baltic Sea would now gain full access to the ports and marinas of the Vistula Lagoon. Studies carried out under the VILA project show that the last option is the only one which might actually stimulate development of the entire subregion.

The Russian side

Different scenarios should be outlined for developing the Russian part of the Vistula Lagoon subregion. This is due to the structure and

the nature of the economy and administration, as well as to political factors governing the Kaliningrad enclave. The first two are similar to the Polish side – status quo and the pessimistic one.

According to the optimistic scenario, the subregion would develop actively owing to the implementation of all significant short- and mid-term infrastructural projects planned, with maximum focus on the interests of the local business. These comprise: construction of a deep-water seaport, completion of the Baltic transport loop express road, set-up of the Kaliningrad south-western by-pass, establishing a network of harbours and marinas on the Vistula Lagoon as well as developing transport & tourism infrastructure in small towns of the subregion ahead of the 2018 FIFA World Cup to be held also in Kaliningrad. Furthermore, this scenario envisages elimination or a maximum reduction in border zones and areas subject to entrance restrictions, thereby easing the implementation of foreign and domestic investments. The successful development of the Russian side also depends on how the problem of free cross-border navigation in the Vistula Lagoon waters will be solved, including the 72-hour visa-free stay facility.

One other important success scenario condition is minimizing the military role of the Kaliningrad Oblast, including transfer of this area's administration from the defence to civilian sectors (dealing with production and social needs). In this scenario, the Russian part of the Vistula Lagoon subregion will transform from a centrally-peripheral economic area (with one centre – Kaliningrad) into a polycentric structure with several specialized hotspots capable of absorbing

nearby resources (this group may comprise Baltiysk, Guryevsk, Laduszkina, and Mamonovo). A system like this will be more stable, facilitating sustainable and integrated growth in the region by reducing inequalities in the social and economic development of different areas situated within the Russian part of the Vistula Lagoon subregion.

The painful process of transformation triggered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, deepened by the financial crises of 1998 and 2008, has come to an end and the Kaliningrad Oblast's economic portrait is now complete. Further development will not be based on legal or tax preferences guaranteed by the special economic zone status here, but on more efficient use of all internal and external growth factors, the EU neighbourhood being the most important among them.

Intensification of cross-border cooperation and development of all forms of international collaboration in the Vistula Lagoon is necessary for stable internal development of both parts of the Vistula Lagoon subregion. Taking maximum advantage of the geographic and economic location, in combination with the material support provided by the EU, national and regional authorities, will ensure further stable growth of the entire area, based on making the most of the opportunities offered by the Vistula Lagoon.



Photos: VILA

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 from 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.