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The new port authority of the “lower thyrrenian”: an opportunity for the strait of Messina metropolitan area

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Abstract

The article starts from the “National Strategic Plan of the Harbours and Logistics”, approved by the Italian Government in July 2015, setting out the development strategies of the Italian port system and providing, among the other things, the redesign of the governance of the Italian port system. The old existing 24 Port authorities are replaced by 15 Authorities of port- system, in which different ports are combined in order to create an efficient port system able to compete and succeed in the overall system of commercial traffic in the Mediterranean Sea.

Within this framework, the creation of a new Authority is provided, which incorporates the former Calabrian Port System with the old Port Authority of Messina. In this way we are going to create a large port system, centred on the area of the Messina Strait, comprising 10 ports, including the transshipment port of Gioia Tauro, which represents the core of the entire port system, and the port of Messina, the most important passenger port in Italy and one of the most important as regards the cruise sector. The article analyses the development perspectives that this system can offer with regard to two important aspects:

the realization of the project -already imagined in the late '60s- for an Integrated Metropolitan Area of the Strait, including the two metropolitan cities of Messina and Reggio Calabria;

the transformation of the port of Gioia Tauro, from an exclusively transshipment port into an Intermodal Logistics Pole, which will be the central strategic hub of a large logistics platform of the Strait Area, whose implementation should be a great opportunity for the development of the entire Mezzogiorno.

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1. A new governance for the Italian port system

The Italian Council of Ministers definitively approved in July 2015 the National Strategic Plan of the Harbours and Logistics (PSNPL) whose purpose is:

"To improve the competitiveness of the port and logistics system, to facilitate the growth of cargo traffic and people, and the promotion of intermodal freight services, also in relation to the rationalization, the reorganization and regrouping of existing Port Authorities".

The Plan draws an overall strategy for the revitalization of the port facilities and logistic sector, starting from the characters that affect the performance of Italian ports; the latter are seen as trading gates for the territorial and economic systems, and according to the Euro-Mediterranean agreements, the global geo-economic scenarios involved, the development of demand of traffic in the various segments, and the involved existing supplied infrastructures and services. The Plan calls for action to boost the port sector and logistics to be pursued through policy actions at national character - both sectoral and transversal to the various involved production areas (logistic, administrative and infrastructure)- with the aim to recover economic competitiveness for the "Italian sea system" in terms of productivity and efficiency, with a particular reference to the same as the priority factor of development and cohesion of the South of Italy, also in terms of sustainability and innovation.

In the first part of the Plan, among the other things, the main factors undermining the international competitiveness of the national port system are examined, including the persistence of overly complex and inconsistent rules in relation to procedural and administrative processes. The plan also anticipates some trend scenarios of application on the basis of macroeconomic, geopolitical and social analysis, useful as reference to some hypothesis of organization changes in logistics and transport sectors. On the basis of the issues developed, the PSNPL identifies an integrated strategy, divided into ten strategic objectives, articulated in; specific simplification and streamlining of procedures; strengthening of services and improvement of infrastructure performance.

Among the shortcomings the Plan identifies the current structure of the Italian port governance, shaped by the 84/1994 Law, linked to the "one docking size" of the governing bodies of the ports, namely Port Authorities. A new model of governance, based on the unification of existing port authorities, is then proposed, replacing the old ones Authorities with the new Port-System Authority (ADSP); in this regard the plan proposes the establishment of 15 Port-System Authorities (replacing the current 24 Port Authorities).

According to this national framework, the construction of a Port-System Authority is proposed, called, in its latest version, of the "Southern Tyrrhenian sea", bringing together the entire port system of Calabria (the latter Port Authority of Gioia Tauro, including the ports of Corigliano, Crotone, Vibo Valentia, Villa San Giovanni and Reggio Calabria) and the port Authority of Messina, including the ports of Messina-Tremestieri and Milazzo. Thus it is to be created a large and complex port system that, despite the name of "Southern Tyrrhenian sea," overlooks the Ionian coast of the Strait of Messina and Calabria, and is going to become the largest Italian port system with 10 different ports bordering on three seas and holding two national records, the most important port of transshipment (Gioia Tauro) and the most important passenger port with over 8 millions of users per year (Messina).

The choice of this unification, coming at the end of a continuous series of changes of opinion (a first hypothesis saw Messina merged with Catania and Augusta), raised several concerns both on the Calabria that on the Messina side; however these concerns were argued mainly in "political" terms, but none came into the merits of the territorial and economic issues that the choice entails. A choice that deeply affects two different but integrated considerations that we will try to develop within these brief notes:

- the role of the area of the Messina Strait in the international transport and logistics system, in the light of the new centrality of the Mediterranean sea in the global commercial traffic system;
- the perspectives of a concrete realization of the project of the integrated Metropolitan Area of the Strait.

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