

My visit to Rotterdam this week reinforces my conviction of the huge potential that our ports have for growth in the years ahead – growth for Europe, making the most of our ports as trade gateways and building on our long and successful tradition in trading goods by sea. Ports are truly engines of economic development and sources of prosperity for our cities, regions and countries.

Rotterdam, Europe's largest port and the fourth largest in the world, is an excellent example. It is not only a port, it's a vast industrial complex which employs tens of thousands of people directly or indirectly. It is the main entry and exit point for the EU's international freight trade flows and also a major re-distribution centre. Rotterdam's economic importance is demonstrated by the fact that the goods and services produced in the port account for more than 3.3% of Gross National Product of The Netherlands.

Even against the backdrop of sluggish economic growth elsewhere, I still expect ports to see continuous growth in the years ahead. This means that in the next 20 years or so, our many hundreds of seaports will face major challenges in terms of productivity, investment needs, sustainability, human resources and integration with port cities and regions.

They will also have to handle a lot more tonnage. Take the next generation of ultra-large container vessels, for example, some of whose capacities are truly massive. Some of our older ports may find it hard to adjust to accommodate them, to provide the adequate depth, crane reach and shipyard space.

We know that many EU countries are going through tough economic times and have limited financial resources. Expanding and extending ports is not always possible, or even a priority. Sometimes there are capacity constraints which can cause chronic congestion, both at the ports and in their hinterland connections. Often, such bottlenecks are a result of low efficiency and sometimes due to restrictive labour regimes operating inside the port.

Europe's ports need to be better integrated into the wider logistics chain and network of other transport modes in the hinterland such as road and rail. This is crucial if they are to be properly efficient and compete globally against rival ports in North Africa or in Asia – particularly China.

Our ports should act as major logistics hubs which connect waterborne and land-based transport, to deliver cargo smoothly door-to-door. If, for example, ports are well connected to inland waterways - one of the cleanest means of transport – then they also make transport more environmentally sustainable.

If Europe's economy is to recover and enjoy long-term growth, we cannot afford to have constraints in the seaports sector, so vital for the supply of energy and the exports-import trade balance. Existing port capacities and infrastructure will have to adapt to serve the logistics needs of European industry and the expected rise in freight traffic.

For this, we need to look closely at our ports' efficiency and performance if sea transport is to keep playing its part as a backbone for the EU economy.

Today, seaports are the transit point for more than 90% of Europe's freight exchanges with the rest of the world and 40% of those in the internal market.

We should now set a more coherent policy on ports and maritime infrastructure. The framework for this is laid out in the Commission's recent White Paper on transport, which puts special emphasis on strengthening the principles of the EU internal market as we work towards building a Single European Transport Area.

For the future, I believe that we need to improve access to our ports.

At the European Commission, we have tried to address some of these problems before, particularly on market access to port services, but ran into considerable opposition some years ago when the European Parliament rejected our proposed legislation twice. As a result, the Treaty rules on market access to services provision do not apply in the port sector, so that national markets can sometimes not be as open to competition as they might be.

Ensuring that there is a competitive and open environment in port services provision, for example, is crucially important for seaports to adapt to new economic, industrial and social requirements. While many ports operate in a competitive environment, technical-nautical and cargo-handling services are often restricted to monopolies, or just to a few established operators. So we need to review port restrictions on provision of services, especially given the fact that many Member States continue to favour national port strategies which focus exclusively on national, not European, needs. I am looking at bringing forward proposals on port services in 2013.

We can help our ports stay competitive by cutting more red tape; the Blue Belt pilot project, a priority programme which explores new ways to facilitate short sea shipping, is already helping to reduce the administrative burden in ports.

We should also improve the transparency of port financing to avoid any distortions of competition and make clear exactly where public money is going. This will encourage more private investment, vital if the ports sector is to grow. Investors will also need legal certainty from some solid regulation on port concessions. And public procurement markets must be kept open, for access to port land, for example.

Europe's ports must make sure they are able to develop, respond to the scenario of change and take the fullest advantage of the expected growth in the sector.