



Maurizio Arnone

Maurizio Arnone, Head of the "Urban Mobility and Logistic Systems" Research Area at LINKS Foundation in Torino / Italy, recently held an interview with "Radio 24" about the Italian strategy of improving the competitiveness of Italian seaports. This is closely related to the development of the Rhine-Alpine Corridor.

Italian ports: how can they fill the gap with the ports of the Northern range?

The European seaports handle around 4 billion tonnes of freight each year and these figures are steadily growing, despite the setback due to the covid pandemic.

Most of these goods pass through the ports of the Northern Range even if the final destination is North West Italy. There are many reasons for that, for example these ports are fast in operations and well connected to the hinterland, both by rail and inland waterways, and are well integrated with the terminals that handle the goods stored in the containers.

Italy is striving to balance this scenario and attract international freight in the Italian ports mainly because, nowadays, freight transport generates few advantages and several impacts on our regions. For example, the trucks arriving from the north of Europe pass on our roads and cause traffic congestion and pollution but generate little economic value. That is because we still carry out few operations on goods that create employment and added value, such as container consolidation/deconsolidation, goods labeling or packaging, production of semi-finished products. These operations are mainly carried out in the ports of the Northern Range even for goods originating and destined in the economic heart of Italy.

The challenge, however, lies not only in rebalancing these figures, supporting the economic recovery in the post-covid era, but it lies mainly in achieving it in a sustainable way for the environment and for the people who live in our cities and regions.

In my opinion, there are 4 key actions to achieve this goal:

1. collaboration;
2. intermodal transport;
3. innovation;
4. policies.

Cooperation. The Regions of North-West Italy have set up a steering committee, involving also the Ministry of Transport and RFI, to plan a course of actions aimed at building a synergic interregional logistic system. Moreover, these Regions are part of the Interregional Alliance for the Rhine-Alpine Corridor EGTC, together with the Port of Genoa and other relevant international players, such as the Port of Rotterdam and the Province of Gelderland in the Netherlands, or the Regions of Frankfurt and Mannheim in Germany. They are cooperating to promote the sustainable development of their regions.

The second word is intermodal transport, a word that we find also in the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

To foster rail transport, it is necessary to renew the existing infrastructures, so that they guarantee the European standards that make intermodal transport competitive with road transport. The infrastructures are not only the railways but also the ports and the intermodal terminals, that must have characteristics such as to reduce transport costs. For example, railways with slopes that require the use of 2 or 3 locomotives increase the transport cost, or the length of stations below 750 m does not allow to make long and cheaper trains per unit of transported goods.

To address these problems, big projects such as Terzo Valico, which is part of the TEN-T network financed by the European Commission, are crucial as well as smaller but strategic projects, such as the modernization of the connecting lines between Lombardy and Switzerland.

The third word is innovation: investing in research and digitalization is a key action.

Technology can enable not only the automation of processes and transport and the use of clean fuels, but also the exchange of information between all the actors in the transport chain, by connecting ports, railway companies, terminals and road hauliers.

The full visibility of operations and travel times, even delays, and having information on goods that are transported is crucial to being fast and efficient.

Finally, the policies, which are crucial for supporting the enterprises, especially in this difficult period.

For example, the Piedmont Region added 600,000 € of its own resources to the national “ferrobonus” to support companies that start to operate new freight trains and another three years of financing are about to be launched.

Moreover, the “Genoa decree” set up the “simplified logistics area” of the “port and dry port of Genoa” to streamline bureaucratic procedures and attract companies in some strategic areas of the north west of Italy, in order to limit the soil consumption and create a synergic system of inland terminals integrated with the ports.

Concluding, I am confident that, if all the relevant decision makers and stakeholders will collaborate towards a common goal, they can effectively accelerate the sustainable development of our regions, that is essential in this period of recovery from the economic crisis generated by the pandemic.