

EU Policy for inland waterway transport :

- Ongoing and forthcoming
developments

Expert Meeting on the Development of Ports and Port Operations
23.04.2026

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NAIADES III Action Plan 2021-2027



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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

NAIADES III:

Boosting future-proof European inland waterway transport

2 core
objectives

8 policy
flagships

35 action
plan
measures

[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0324R\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0324R(01))



NAIADES III Action Plan 2021-2027: 2 core objectives

This initiative aims to set an “Inland Navigation Action Plan 2021-2027”, aligned to the multi-annual financial framework to meet objectives of the green deal and strategy and is focussing on:

(A) shifting more freight transport to inland waterways

(B) an irreversible path towards zero emission

Both underpinned by a paradigm shift towards further digitalisation, as well as accompanying measures to support the current and future workforce.



IWT Policy : ongoing initiatives

Trans-European transport network TEN-T

Regulation (EU) 2024/1679

- minimum requirements for good navigability at specified reference water levels :
 - at least 2.50 m channel depth for rivers, canals, lakes, lagoons, inland ports and access routes
 - minimum height under non-openable bridges of at least 5.25 m
- Specified **Reference Water Levels (RWL)**, shall be established on the basis of the number of days per year on which the actual water level exceeded the specified reference water level.



Divine Project 2025-2028

Inland Waterway Transport digitalisation vision :

By **2035**, with the aim of achieving safe, seamless and sustainable inland navigation, inland waterway transport in the European Union is a competitive, resilient, attractive, innovative connected, cyber secure and digital by default mode of transport for freight and passengers which is fully harnessing the potential of digital technologies and emerging solutions, thereby allowing effective data-sharing between all parties of the chain, thus enabling seamless integration with other modes of transport as well as automation, by embracing the latest digital achievements and contributing to a better functioning of the Inland waterway single market.

IWT will be part of the concept of Physical Internet. It will help overall time efficient, sustainable transport flows and support other modes to decongest.



Divine Project 2025-2028

- Overall objective :

To develop a concrete **Implementation Plan and Roadmap** for the IWT Digitalisation Vision, defining how the sector can become fully digital, connected, automated, and sustainable by 2035.

DiVINE promotes close public-private cooperation, cross-border coordination, and alignment with existing EU policy and data initiatives such as the European Mobility Data Space and River Information Services (RIS).



E-tools for inland navigation

- **Commission will propose amendments to Directive (EU) 2017/2397 and Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/182 on models in the field of professional qualifications in inland navigation for inclusion of e-tools (Q3 2026)**
- **CESNI standards for e-tools** (functional and technical requirements) currently being developed – **ongoing work since 2023**
- Once the **e-tools standards** will be finalized in CESNI, they will be **incorporated to delegated acts**, supplementing the amended Directive 2017/2397. The **finalization** of the e-tools standards is **planned by 2029**.



RIS Directive (EU) 2025/2482

- Entered into force on 01/01/2026 and must be transposed by MS by **02/01/2029**
- **New elements :**
 - Scope of application (inclusion of inland ports of TEN-T)
 - European RIS Environment
 - Feedback mechanism
 - Dynamic reference to ES-RIS



AVIS STUDY – (2024-2027)

- Contribute to the development, demonstration and deployment of holistic, smart and automated shipping concepts.
- Specific objectives
- Define the minimum requirements in technical, operational and regulatory terms to guarantee safe and secure navigation for automated vessels in different levels of automation on European inland waterways
- Demonstrate and validate the findings by means of several pilots making use of EU Space data from Galileo, EGNOS and Copernicus.
- Pilot Projects on the Danube (Lower Danube - May, Middle Danube – June)



International cooperation

- Recognition of Serbian documents in accordance with Directive (EU) 2017/2397

Recognition of Serbia documents in accordance with Directive (EU) 2017/2397

- The Republic of **Serbia submitted request for recognition** of certificates of qualification, service record books and logbooks according to Article 10(4) of Directive (EU) 2017/2397 in **December 2022**
- Condition : the issuing of such documents is subject to requirements that are identical to those laid down in this Directive.
- The Commission hopes to publish the implementing act **before summer 2026**
- Recognition process for UA is currently ongoing



EU Ports Strategy

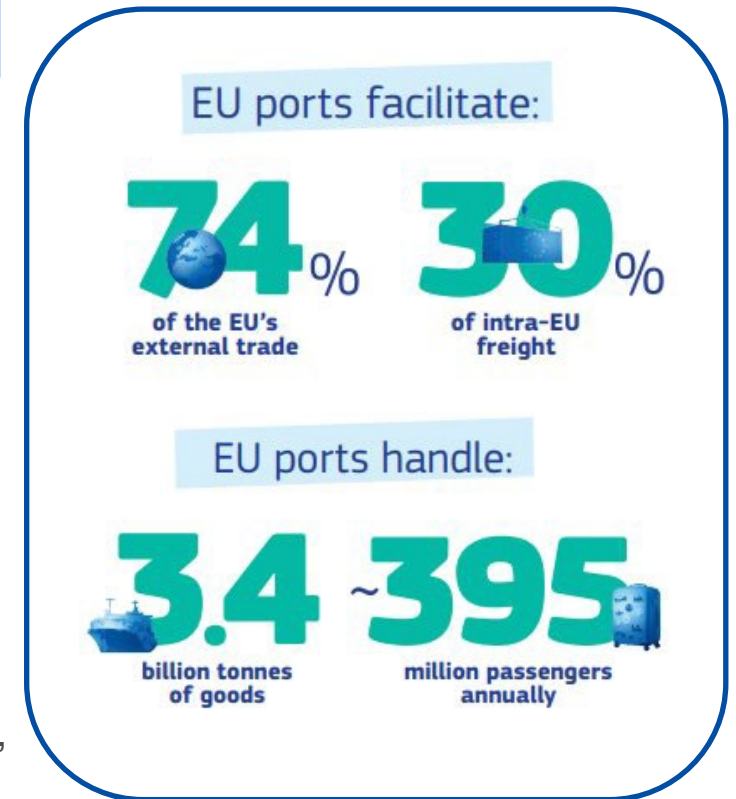
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The strategic role of EU ports

Ports are **critical infrastructure** at the heart of Europe's economy, security and sustainability.

- **Gateways to global trade** : EU ports handle over **3.4 billion tonnes of goods** (74% of EU external trade) and nearly **400m passengers annually**.
- **Drivers of competitiveness and industrial strength** : Ports underpin the EU's export capacity, supply chains and logistics networks, supporting around **423,000 direct jobs** and generating approximately **€90 billion turnover** .
- **Energy and climate transition hubs** : Around **40% of cargo handled is energy-related** , positioning ports as key platforms for electrification, offshore wind deployment, hydrogen imports and alternative fuels infrastructure.
- **Anchors of the blue economy and coastal cohesion** : Ports sustain **coastal, island & OR communities** , fisheries, maritime clusters and regional economies, contributing to territorial cohesion and sustainable blue growth.
- **Pillars of resilience, economic security and defence** : Ports are **strategically dual-use infrastructure** , critical for supply chain resilience, **military mobility** and protection against cyber, hybrid and organised crime threats.



550 ports

connecting Europe and beyond*

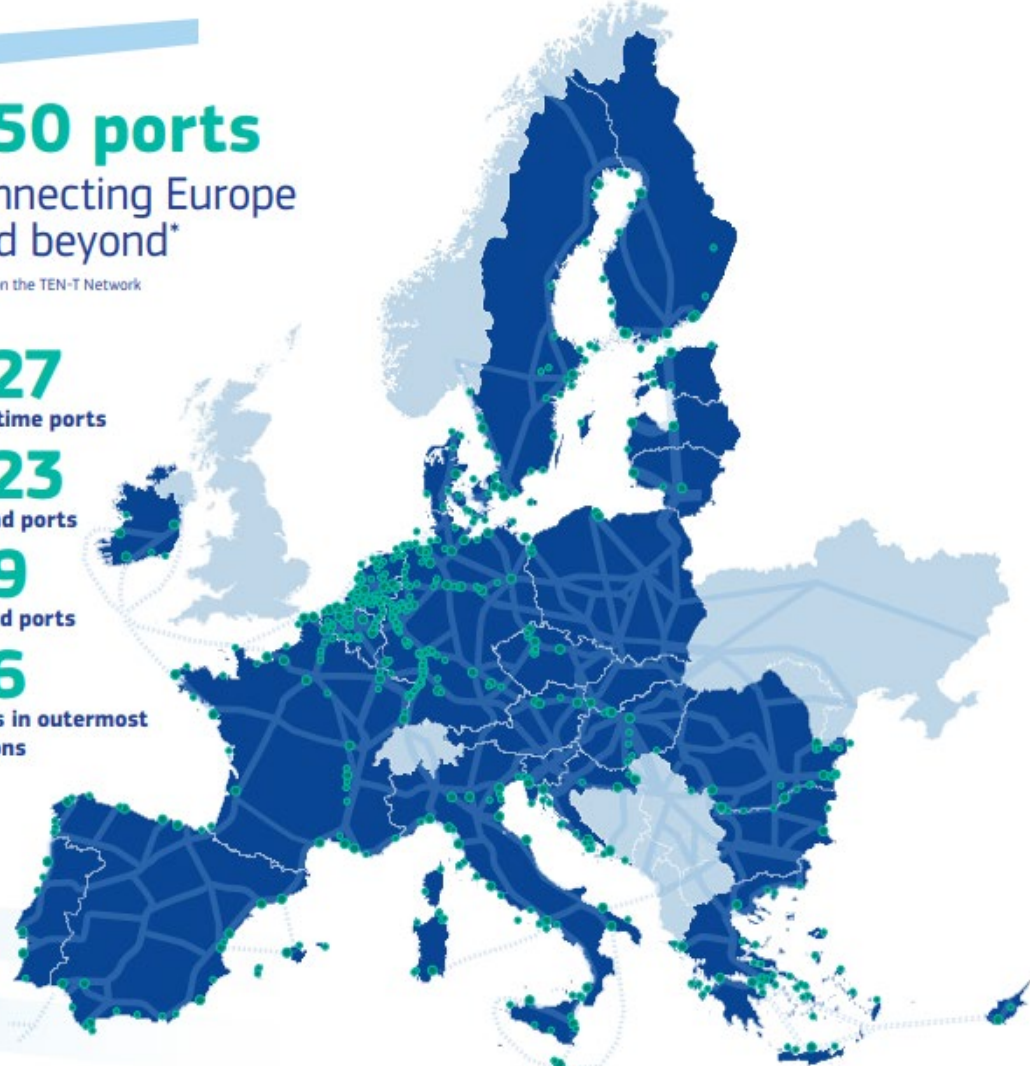
*Ports on the TEN-T Network

327
Maritime ports

223
Inland ports

99
Island ports

26
Ports in outermost regions



EU ports in numbers

Europe's economic security, clean industrial transition and global connectivity depend on **strong, competitive, sustainable and secure ports**.



108	Germany	8	Bulgaria
58	Netherlands	8	Estonia
50	Italy	8	Hungary
49	France	6	Ireland
42	Spain	5	Poland
41	Greece	4	Austria
27	Sweden	4	Malta
20	Belgium	3	Latvia
19	Croatia	3	Lithuania
19	Finland	2	Cyprus
18	Portugal	2	Slovakia
18	Romania	1	Luxembourg
17	Denmark	1	Slovenia
9	Czechia		



EU Ports Strategy: 5 pillars

Boosting the competitiveness, security and sustainability of EU ports

The Strategy supports EU ports by

Strengthening competitiveness, innovation and digitalisation.

Establishing **guiding principles for EU funding & investments in third-country ports**, developing **guidance on foreign ownership of EU ports**, and promoting **innovation**.

Advancing the energy transition, sustainability and clean industries.

Taking measures to promote **electrification & improved grid connection**. Setting out a **new roadmap for competitive small and medium-sized ports**.

Protecting and securing ports.

Combatting **drug trafficking & emerging threats**, port worker **background checks** & third-country **port assessments**, sharing **cybersecurity best practices**, & conducting an EU-wide security risk assessment.

Promoting social cohesion, skills and quality jobs.

Supporting **small & medium-sized ports** by promoting innovation, clean energy, security & connectivity, developing a **skilled workforce** & providing guidance on **maritime safety** & alternative fuels.

Facilitating access to finance and investment.

Clearer & more **coordinated funding principles** while facilitating access to advisory services & de-risking tools, with particular attention to the needs of small & medium-sized ports.



Pillar I – Competitiveness, Innovation & Digitalisation

Key elements

- Competitiveness:
 - EU ports compete for global trade, investment and logistics flows.
 - Level playing field with 3^d country ports.
 - **Efficient hinterland connections and logistics chains are essential advantages.**
- Economic security
 - Risks and opportunities of foreign ownership and influence in strategic port infrastructure.
 - Digital systems and logistics platforms are part of strategic infrastructure.
- Innovation & digitalisation
 - New technologies (AI, automation, clean technologies) boost efficiency and sustainability.
 - Digital solutions optimise port calls, logistics chains and data sharing.

Flagship Actions

Support the digital and green transformation of European ports through **innovation**, **promoting scale -up, replication and uptake** of innovative port equipment and technologies.

Develop **guidance to Member States with criteria for assessing foreign investments in ports & a framework for mapping and monitoring foreign investments in ports.**

Use **guiding principles for EU funding and investments in third country ports** (Annex 1).

Recommendations to Member States

- Play a leading role in setting global technical standards.
- Prevent, mitigate and tackle the risks associated with foreign ownership and control of strategic dual-use port infrastructures.
- Streamline land use planning and permitting procedures for additional areas for port use and take-up of innovation in ports.
- Aim for a balance between return on investments for private operators and suitable contractual obligations.

Pillar II – Energy Transition, Sustainability & Clean Industries

EU ports are central to the **decarbonisation** of maritime transport and industry. They are key **gateways for renewable energy, hydrogen imports and clean fuels**, and essential to achieving EU climate and energy objectives

Key challenges



- Investment needs for OPS and alternative fuels infrastructure
- Grid capacity constraints in major port areas
- Slow and complex permitting procedures
- Risk of fragmentation and uneven deployment across Member States

Flagship Actions

Accelerate permit -granting and provide faster assessment procedures for strategic energy, recycling and decarbonisation related projects, through the Grids Package and the Environmental Omnibus.

Accelerate port electrification, provide timely and non-discriminatory access to the grids.

Promote partnerships for energy cooperation in and around port areas for sustainable use of energy, including hydrogen.

Recommendations to Member States

- Prioritise port electrification and grid reinforcement in national energy plans.
- Allocate a part of ETS revenues to maritime decarbonisation investments across the maritime cluster, incl. sustainable infrastructure and OPS.
- Streamline permitting procedures for strategic port energy projects.
- Facilitate coordination between transport, energy and industry authorities.

Pillar III – Protect & Secure Ports

EU ports are **critical infrastructures** for trade, energy supply and military mobility. Growing threats from organised crime, cyberattacks and hybrid risks require stronger protection of port operations and logistics chains.

Key challenges

- Organised crime infiltration in container logistics and port operations.
- Increasing cybersecurity vulnerabilities in digital port systems.
- Emerging hybrid threats (GNSS interference, drones, sabotage).
- Risks linked to foreign control of strategic port infrastructure.



Flagship Actions

Update and revise existing **guidance**, including on emerging threats, and promote a global level playing field for EU ports security.

Building on the work of the European Ports Alliance, establish **frameworks for third -country port assessments** & improve alignment of customs controls across EU ports together

Establish **framework for background checks** for port workers.

Establish a **forum** for Member States' cybersecurity and port authorities to **exchange best practices** & carry out an EUwide security risk assessment to identify the most pressing cybersecurity risks and appropriate measures mitigate them.

Recommendations to Member States

- Strengthen port security controls and inspections
- Improve cooperation between ports, customs and law enforcement
- Ensure full implementation of cybersecurity requirements
- Assess security risks related to foreign investments in ports

Pillar IV – Access to Finance & Investment

EU ports face significant investment needs driven by:

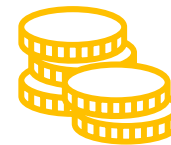
- Decarbonisation and energy infrastructure (OPS, clean fuels).
- Growing trade flows and larger vessels.
- Security, resilience & digitalisation
- Climate adaptation & sustainability

A mix of EU, national and private funding, supported by predictable regulatory frameworks and de-risking tools, will be essential.

EU support for port investments

- ❑ Since 2014, the EU has supported port projects with ~€10 billion in deployment funding and €200+ million in R&I.
- ❑ EIB Group has supported port projects with €2.8bn (2014-2025)

Next step : CEF will prioritise Onshore Power Supply (OPS) in a 2026 call.



Flagship Actions :

- Set overall priorities and conditions for all funding instruments (Annex 1).
- Engagement with national promotional banks and private investors.
- Improving access to financing and project preparation via EIB.
- Encourage the sector to “think out of the box” (by supporting ports to diversify into clean energy, digital and blue tech services- using targeted EU funding, advisory support and PPPs to de-risk innovative projects).

Pillar V – Social cohesion, Skills & Jobs

The green and digital transition will transform port operations. Ensuring **skilled workers, quality jobs and safe working conditions** is essential for the long-term competitiveness and **social sustainability** of EU ports.



Key challenges

- Ports vital for connectivity (arctic, coastal, islands, outermost regions).
- Workforce up/reskilling for digitalisation, clean energy and alternative fuels.
- Ensuring safe working conditions and quality jobs in port operations.

Flagship Actions

A new roadmap for competitive small and medium ports (Annex 2).

Strengthen dialogues and support the development of best practices and guidance on enhancing port-city relations.

Support upskilling and reskilling initiatives, incl. the development of a skilled next-generation workforce across all blue economy sectors, including ports, through actions under the Blue Generational Renewal Strategy.

Support social partners and relevant stakeholders to establish a Pact for Skills for the ports sector on upskilling, reskilling and inclusion of workers.

Prepare guidance on (i) onboard safety for workers and (ii) safe handling of new fuels .

Recommendations to Member States

- support infrastructure, clean energy and fuel, safety, and sustainability improvements for small and medium sized-ports.
- Ensure implementation and respect of Union and national labour legislation and collective bargaining agreements.

Process & Next Steps

Delivering the Strategy together



Extensive consultation carried out with all stakeholders, including Member States:

- Call for Evidence;
- European Ports Forum meetings;
- Strategic dialogues hosted by Commissioner Tzitzikostas.

See [Staff Working Document](#) (Stakeholder Consultation - Synopsis Report).



Cooperation with Member States

Successful implementation will be based on cooperation with:

- Member States and port authorities
- Industry and social partners
- Port and all relevant stakeholders.

“ To further support modal shift, the Commission will [...] propose an Action Plan on Inland Waterway Transport (IWT) for the period 2028-2034, which will also focus on inland ports.”