

# Unleashing the potential of the Vistula Lagoon

Interview with Urszula Kowalczyk of the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk, the Leader of the project "Opportunities and Benefits of Joint Use of the Vistula Lagoon – VILA"



**Cooperation within the project VILA between coastal communities of the Vistula Lagoon region is directed at full realization of its economic potential as well as creating an attractive tourist-recreational complex. About the project's objectives we talk with its Leader, Urszula Kowalczyk of the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk.**

***What are the main goals of the VILA project and the most promising potential of the Vistula Lagoon?***

The main aim of the VILA project is to strengthen the economic and social cooperation in the Vistula Lagoon area. This will be done through forging a long-term development strategy focused on the whole region in question, encompassing strategic goals, sustainable development rules, directions of modernizing the infrastructure as well as a public-private-partnership model suitable for using in the region – ways in which local and central politics could cooperate and encouraging the municipalities to play a bigger role in developing the area. Solitary collaboration actions across the Vistula Lagoon have been carried out for many years but the area requires something more to fully unleash its potential. The region's geographical position creates conditions not only for advancing tourism or so-called small border traffic, but can also contribute to making freight volumes go up as well as environmental protection easier and more efficient. A long-term strategy can significantly boost the prosperity of the local citizens, increase their mobility and secure a stable development pace.

***What is the role, tasks and research objectives of the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk within the project?***

The MIG is Project Leader and its task as such is to foresee coordinating the works, promoting the initiative and realizing the project's primary targets together with partners from Poland and Russia. Currently, the Maritime Institute in Gdańsk along with the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal

University and the Atlantic Department of the P.P. Shirshov Institute of Oceanology of the Russian Academy of Sciences are working on evaluating the natural, economic and social conditions of the Vistula Lagoon. The appraisal will help to pursue sustainable development in the region.

***What are the most important challenges facing Polish-Russian cross-border cooperation and the main political barriers standing in the way of sustainable development of the entire Vistula Lagoon?***

Intensifying cross-border cooperation depends upon the character of the border itself. There are three types of bordering regions – integrated, collaborating and isolated. After Poland's accession to the Schengen area, the Vistula Lagoon is unfortunately the third – the isolated type. Thereby the Poland-Kaliningrad Oblast border negatively impacts socio-economic development of both bordering territories. Present undertakings are therefore focused on strengthening bilateral cooperation, beginning with facilitations for the flow of people and goods. In this regard small border traffic, put into practice last year, should also encompass maritime trade. Other international initiatives easing undisrupted traffic will also be very much welcome. Additionally, we cannot forget about actions designed to combat local difficulties which are as important as breaking political deadlocks. In this context I mean, e.g. going through stereotypes, overcoming language barriers or changing the mindset of citizens.

***What actions are needed in the fields of transport and environmental protection?***

Approximately, one million people live in the nearest vicinity of the Vistula Lagoon, out of which about 70% are located on the Kaliningrad Oblast's side and 30% in Poland. This number stands for an economic potential and it would be a shame to waste it. Therefore, a long-term strategy is necessary to point out key priorities in the areas of infrastructure and environmental protection. For instance, a unified set of protection standards would greatly contribute to lowering the pollution of the Vistula Lagoon's waters, as their condition today decreases both the touristic value of the region and local citizens' standard of living.

***How do you see the future of the Vistula Lagoon?***

All the knowledge obtained during the project will be handed over to all interested parties, as to make the best use of it. The project's guidelines and recommendations will be further developed and implemented into real life after completion of the initiative. This will be especially valid for those solutions which facilitate the introduction of the EU's rules concerning sustainable development of transport. All in all, the world is changing its face, presenting new opportunities of which we should take advantage. This also holds true for the Vistula Lagoon region and our joint actions cannot only make our lives easier, but can also secure the prosperity of next generations living here.

Lena Lorenc



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