

'Greece's merchant fleet and the Community' from Europe (10 April 1981)

Caption: In his editorial of 10 April 1981, Emanuele Gazzo, Director of Agence Europe, calls for the implementation of a genuine common transport policy now that Greece has acceded to the European Communities.

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Greece's merchant fleet and the Community

We are not so naive — nor are our readers either — as to believe that the result of an “addition” automatically involves an increase in “strength”. However, it is true that many see matters in this way, especially when talking of the Community and its geographic and economic “dimensions” and population in connection with the new members. It is significant that for a long time there were some who pejoratively talked of “small Europe” when the Community had only six members (these days, many are those who think it was “stronger” when it was “small”). The prospect of extra square kilometres, a few more million inhabitants, several billion in GNP and a few million tonnes of steel more might make it seem as though the dizzy heights are near and cause some to shine with pride, but in themselves, factors such as these are no indication of prosperity or strength. They do, however — and this is what matters — give some indication of the “size” of some of the problems, thus highlighting the need for adequate means to deal with them.

This is especially true in the case of the merchant fleet flying the Community countries' flags. It has taken on quite another dimension, not to say structure, since Greece joined the EEC. Representatives of the Greek shipowners have been to Strasbourg to plead their cause before European MPs. They are not asking for much and are definitely not asking for subsidies, the Greek fleet traditionally being one of the “freest” in the world. What they wanted to do, was to dispel certain misunderstandings and prejudices. This question is one which deserves closer examination. The time has come to rethink or rather to create a common transport policy, a policy which is, after all, provided for in the Treaty of Rome. Article 84 of the Treaty of Rome states that the Council may decide on “appropriate provisions” for sea and air transport. The situation has changed somewhat since 1957. These days, it is more a question of what is meant by “common policy” in the field of shipping, and this in the more general context of European transport. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that by its very nature and traditions (despite the ups and downs of protectionism that still exist in some countries), transport has come to be very “internationalised” on a world scale. This, too, then has to be taken into account.

Despite what we have said, figures do count for something. The EEC's merchant fleet today is about 11 million gross registered tons (GRT), 39 million tonnes being accounted for by the Greek fleet. Then follows the United Kingdom (which had the world's largest fleet in its day), France, Italy, Germany, etc. The EEC's fleet together accounts for about 26% of the world fleet, and is considerably larger than those of Liberia (82 million GRT) and Japan (40 million GRT). We should remember that these statistics are a little distorted because “flags of convenience”, the Liberian and Panamanian, for example, also have to be taken into account. The figures give no hint as to who really owns vessels flying flags of convenience. Nevertheless, we do get a rough idea of how many EEC boats there are on our oceans and the extent of the EEC's interest in seeing international trade expand. What is needed is a policy with as few controls as possible, adapted to cater for the different sorts of traffic and conducive to qualitative expansion.

Anybody who has anything to do with the economics of shipping will know that the Greek fleet traditionally has a high number of relatively old vessels and that it is largely made up of “tramps”, boats which look for cargo and take it where they find it. This approach is not at all to be looked down upon. It meets a real market demand. The Greek fleet is run very skilfully by private enterprises who know their job and make full use of their assets, to the general good of consumers. It would be a serious mistake to try to impose too rigid regulations on the EEC's fleet — over and above those intended to ensure safety. There should be no major difficulties in adapting the rules on “conferences”. The Community could well make use of its large fleet as a bargaining counter in world-level negotiations and the fight to beat enemy number one, flag discrimination...

Let us therefore welcome Ulysses of Ithaca, and pay tribute to his resourcefulness and spirit of adventure, two things Europe needs so badly, today more than ever!

Emanuele Gazzo