Geopolitics, energy transition, and the Pomeranian region

by Andrzej Urbaś

We recently had the chance to sit down with Wojciech Tyborowski, Director of Invest in Pomerania, and chat about how the current geopolitical situation in and around the Baltic Sea region may influence investor moods. It also allowed us to learn more about their new initiative – the Invest in Pomerania Academy and what it holds in store for the maritime transport sector.

■ ***The current, dynamic geopolitical situation in Europe is one of the leading topics. Have you noticed any impact on investor moods related to expanding their business to Poland, particularly the Pomeranian region?***

From the investor's perspective, it is a continuation of the situation with COVID. We have a high level of uncertainty impacting the investors differently, depending on the sector they represent. Some have a more optimistic outlook towards the future, but then there are others, like the automotive sector, who might not yet be in a drastically difficult spot, economy-wise, but their outlooks for the future are very uncertain. Many of their projects are on hold, waiting to see how the situation plays out. As long as the war continues, uncertainty will be a major factor when considering investment decisions.

■ ***The War in Ukraine is probably going to last for a longer time. Is there a risk for investors to steer away from Poland in the future until the conflict is resolved?***

I am mostly afraid that at some point, the business sector will get used to the fact that there is a war being fought in Europe, and it will become just another part of the current economic reality. The reason why I consider it sad is because of the human aspect. The business perspective may seem cold considering the tragedy at hand. But companies will probably consider it as another variable when planning their future moves. Whether the conflict will steer investors away from Poland depends on how the war develops. Should anything happen near the Polish borders, that might become a risk factor for the decision-makers. If the conflict retains its current form, the associated risk level will be significantly lower. The companies will somehow find a way to incorporate it into their decision models, but it shouldn't become a significant factor.

The current uncertainty is very high; nobody knows how long the war will go. Companies are observing the situation very carefully, and we can only wait and see what the future will bring.

■ ***Invest in Pomerania has recently announced the Invest in Pomerania Academy project. Could you tell us more about it, specifically about training for maritime transport professions?***

The idea of the Academy is to provide an opportunity for people who are considering changing their career paths. People who already know what they want to do would like access more training which will enable them to start a career in a different sector. Right now, we are targeting IT and the maritime industry. The latter encompasses port and offshore specialisations, as these are central to our strategy of growing business in Pomerania. The idea is to provide training for people with no previous work experience in a given sector or who lack specific qualifications to apply for a job in an entry-level position in the chosen sector.

In terms of maritime, we focus mainly on training for operators, who might find employment in terminals, working with different kinds of equipment, such as cranes or machinery used to carry cargo around the ships. The choice to provide this kind of education is based on research we have conducted among the companies active within the maritime sector, asking them directly what type of employee profiles they will be looking for in the future.

■ ***The maritime economy sector, as a whole, needs a workforce, especially the shipbuilding and the rapidly developing offshore wind industries. Does Invest in Pomerania plan to expand the training programs of the Academy to cover areas?***

We intend to do so. Right now, it is being discussed with the Marshal's Office of the Pomeranian Voivodeship and the European Commission because we will be applying for the financing of this project during the next EU budget perspective. We will have more information on that by the end of this year. We hope to expand the Invest in Pomerania Academy's scope to cover the shipbuilding area and dive deeper into the offshore sector.

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It is already visible to us that the latter will require a different set of competencies in the future. At present, we focus on skills that might help with the construction of offshore wind farms. In two or three years, we will shift that focus toward the competencies required to operate them. So yes, we also think about and wish to introduce this in the future.

- ***The energy transition is another hot topic. What opportunities do you see in that regard, specifically for Pomerania? How is the region preparing for the shift?***

There are two major areas in which the region is making preparations. One of them is, of course, the offshore sector. Besides our activities related to supplying future talent, we have a couple of other major initiatives linked to establishing scientific infrastructure for future development. The Offshore Wind Energy Competence Center is being created in the town of Rumia by the Rumia Invest Park. Naturally, this is happening in cooperation with the Marshal's Office. Then there is also the R&D centre constructed by the Maritime University in Gdynia. The Gdańsk University of Technology also leads various scientific initiatives. As you can see, a lot is going on, a direct answer to the fact that offshore wind will be the next dynamically developing sector in the region.
Hydrogen is the second area in which preparations are being made in the context of the energy transition. We already have the Cluster of Hydrogen Technologies in Gdańsk run in close collaboration with the Marshal's Office. Hydrogen can play a vital role in changing the energy mix and stabilising renewable energy supply. Offshore wind alone might not be sufficient, and that's where hydrogen comes into play. These are the two major areas for us and the region, and that's where the preparation efforts are focused.

- ***Last but not least, while there are still a couple of months left in 2022's tank, can you tell us a little about Invest in Pomerania's plans for the next year?***

In 2023, we will be shifting our focus towards the offshore wind sector, that's for sure. The IT sector will also be very high on our priority list as well as electronics. We will direct much effort toward further developing the Invest in Pomerania Academy.
Additionally, several projects started over the last two or three years will be coming to an end. These were primarily linked to providing financial support to small and medium companies to support the construction of new production and manufacturing facilities in the region.

We are also planning a couple of economic missions, mainly to the United States and Asia, with a focus on South Korea. These naturally depend on the COVID situation; right now, we hope that it will remain stable. That said, you can't predict the future, but fingers crossed that everything goes as planned! ■