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German shipping: sustainably into the future as a strong maritime hub

Today, the German Shipowners' Association (VDR) released up-to-date figures on the state of the shipping sector in Germany. After two very good but atypical years, the markets have normalised with adequate rates, noted President Gaby Bornheim and Managing Director Martin Kröger. Now it is necessary, they continued, to further strengthen Germany's ability to compete as an international shipping hub, to intensify efforts to train and secure young men and women for the sector, to operate the German merchant fleet in a climate-neutral manner by 2050, and to safeguard Germany's access to free, safe sea routes and global trade.

Geopolitical situation

The war that has now been waged in Ukraine for a year continues to have impacts on international ocean-going shipping. For example, 364 seafarers and 62 vessels have been stranded in Ukraine. "We are deeply concerned about the seafarers who still haven't been able to return home after a year of war in Ukraine," Bornheim said. "We appeal to all parties involved to allow the seafarers to return to their home countries as soon as possible."

The war has also changed the markets for shipping far beyond the borders of the Black Sea, Bornheim added. For example, approximately 40% of the global merchant fleet transports energy, and this figure has been gradually rising. Thus, it is certain, Bornheim continued, that given the regime of sanctions which have been imposed on Russia – which are fully supported by the German maritime shipping sector – there will be a long-term shift in ports of call and trade routes, especially for the transport of energy by sea.

Germany is in the process of completely reconfiguring its import infrastructure for liquefied natural gas in a very short period of time and with a clear focus on sea transport, Bornheim noted, adding: "The best preparation for changing supply needs and future crises is for Germany to bolster its merchant fleet and to strengthen its leadership role as a major maritime nation. This will give Germany the reliable access it needs to international trade, raw materials and primary products from all over the world. There is no doubt that shipping is critical infrastructure, and it also ensures that the population is supplied in the event of a crisis."

German maritime sector: The leader in container shipping

According to the figures, Germany currently operates the seventh-largest merchant fleet in the world. With regard to container ship fleets, Germany holds first place, ahead of China, in terms of the number of container ships owned and managed from Germany. At the end of 2022, a total of 1,839 ships (prior year: 1,917 ships) with a combined gross tonnage of 44.8 million (prior year: 46.1 million) were registered in German shipping registers. A large proportion (approx. 48%) of the ships in Germany's merchant fleet now fly the flag of an EU country, especially the flags of Portugal, Cyprus and Malta. The number of ocean-going vessels sailing under German flag currently stands at 278 (prior year: 275).

The number of seafarers subject to social insurance contributions in Germany once again recorded a slight increase, to 7,079 (prior year: 6,927). In addition, the number of German nationals working as seafarers rose by 200 people, to 4,540. "We mainly attribute this welcome employment effect to the currently positive market environment and hope that



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this trend continues,” Kröger said.

Year of Training – focus on attracting the next generation

Kröger noted that it was also pleasing that the number of sea apprentices newly coming on board slightly increased, to 377 (prior year: 355). However, he added that demand for well-trained young workers continues to be very high and cannot be adequately met at this time, which is why additional efforts are needed on this matter. Forecasts by international shipping associations have projected a global shortage of nearly 90,000 maritime officers by 2026. “The pool of trained junior staff is getting smaller and smaller, and the competition for young talent is getting stiffer and stiffer,” Bornheim said. “This could result in a loss of knowledge, which in turn could lead to a considerable weakening of Germany’s status as a maritime hub. Safeguarding maritime know-how in Germany for the future remains one of our most important tasks. This is why we, as the VDR, are proclaiming 2023 the ‘Year of Training’. We need to get a lot more talented young men and women interested in maritime shipping again.”

As part of the Year of Training, the VDR will focus in 2023 on highlighting the diverse career opportunities in maritime shipping as well as on encouraging more young men and women to choose this career path.

Shipping as the most efficient means of transport

Furthermore, the shipping industry meets one of the greatest investment challenges of all time: successfully transforming shipping into a carbon-neutral mode of transport within the next 30 years. As Kröger noted, the world shipping industry has sent a clear signal that it aims to be climate-neutral at global level by 2050. Shipping is already the most efficient means of transporting goods internationally.

“For us, it’s no longer a question of ‘if’, but only of ‘how’,” Kröger stressed. “As a sector, we have come to be far more ambitious than many countries in the world in terms of transforming the shipping industry. But we won’t be able to successfully switch our ships to carbon-neutral operation on our own.”

“An initial means of fostering climate neutrality is using ships that are more fuel-efficient,” Bornheim said. “But to fully achieve the target we have set for ourselves, we will also need a revolution in fuels. The shipping sector needs alternative fuels that are available readily and in sufficient quantities as well as produced from solar, wind or geothermal energy in the so-called power-to-liquid process. And since shipping does not produce fuels, it will only be possible to search for these kinds of solutions together with others and on a global scale.”

About the German Shipowners’ Association

The German Shipowners’ Association (*Verband Deutscher Reeder, VDR*) is responsible for representing the common business and social policy interests of German shipping companies at federal and state government level as well as in relation to European and international bodies. Founded in 1907, the VDR merged with the Association of German Coastal Shipowners in 1994. With a membership of around 200, the VDR represents the majority of Germany’s merchant fleet. For more details, visit www.reederverband.de.

Press photographs of Dr Gaby Bornheim and Dr Martin Kröger: <https://www.reederverband.de/en/press/press-images.html>

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