

Shipping is delivering on climate change

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Opinion

The international shipping sector is doing its part to contribute to global climate change efforts, writes Violeta Bulc.



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In April, more than 100 countries agreed on an initial strategy to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from shipping at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

This was a significant achievement for the EU and its member states, which played an instrumental role in brokering and securing the agreement with international partners.

The agreement is another example of the EU becoming a stronger global actor to spur substantive and credible climate action. By defining an objective of at least 50 per cent GHG reductions by 2050, compared with 2008 levels, international shipping has become the first industry sector to agree

globally on an absolute emission reduction aim.

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The agreement also comes with a comprehensive list of potential reduction measures, including short-term measures. Undoubtedly, the IMO and the shipping sector were indispensable in setting this precedent. Yet reaching this agreement was no easy feat.

I had the opportunity to be part of the discussions and to interact with some of the key parties during the first day of the negotiations that led to this remarkable outcome. I met with EU member states representatives, who, despite some initial divergence on negotiating tactics back in Brussels, entered the discussions on solid and ambitious grounds.

I am proud to say that, following EU coordination and throughout the negotiations, the member states remained united and played a pivotal role in gathering the required political support during the negotiations.

Four MEPs - José Ignacio Faria , Dubravka Šuica, Jytte Guteland and Bas Eickhout - who engaged in many side meetings at the IMO, also supported the EU delegation.

"The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) agreement is another example of the EU becoming a stronger global actor to spur substantive and credible climate action"

The outcome was also aided by good cooperation of many EU member states with other like-minded partners including several Pacific Islands States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Mexico. The Marshall Islands for instance - one of the world's biggest flag states and a remote small island state - are heavily impacted by climate change.

Their population is facing increasing difficulties in growing crops and drilling for drinking water, as increased floods increase salinity. Bridging the gap between positions on key issues such as emission reduction objectives and guiding principles of the strategy required a negotiation effort.

Several major flag states questioned whether it was appropriate to set a number for the emission reduction objective before data on fuel consumption and emissions become available. Their reticence was dispelled by the industry representatives, who publicly voiced the sector's readiness to accept numbers as indicative targets for reductions in the future.

Many developing countries expressed concerns over the possible impacts of new emission reduction measures, for example, on their trade. To address such concerns, the Commission, the EU member states and MEPs present reaffirmed, in their outreach meetings that the EU is willing to consider further capacity building and technical cooperation to assist implementing future measures.

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Therefore I am pleased to see that the EU-funded, IMO-managed project which led to the establishment of the maritime technologies cooperation centres network was expressly acknowledged in the strategy as a capacity building project.

This is an example to others, including international financial institutions. Crucial factors in brokering the deal were the tireless efforts of IMO Secretary General, Kitack Lim, in encouraging inclusiveness and consensus in the discussions.

With this support in the background, the resolute chairmanships of Sveinung Oftedal of Norway, the Chair of the working group on reduction of GHG emissions from ships, along with Hideaki Saito, the Chair of the marine environment protection committee, made it possible to draw a line and build upon the support of the overwhelming majority of the IMO States present.

Not everyone was fully on board with the text of the adopted IMO strategy. The US, following on their recently announced plans to withdraw from the Paris agreement, and Saudi Arabia, given what the prospect of decarbonisation may mean for their main export product. Both expressed formal reservations to the adoption of the IMO strategy.

While the strenuous negotiations at MEPC 72 delivered a result that kept the IMO in the driving seat for defining an emissions agenda for international shipping, the real work, developing and adopting reduction measures, starts only now.

The full cooperation of both the EU and also all IMO member states is needed to agree on short-term measures with immediate emission reduction effects before 2023. Preparations on longer term actions should also begin.

I am optimistic that shipping is delivering its share to the global climate change efforts under the Paris agreement and the EU institutions are determined to strive for ambitious objectives, and continue the effective cooperation with our partners.

About the author

Violeta Bulc is European mobility and transport Commissioner

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