

## Vassilios Demetriades, Cyprus Shipping Deputy Minister

**H**e may only have been in the post for three months but the new Cyprus Shipping Deputy Minister, Vassilios Demetriades, has already set about drawing up a long-term road map and announcing a raft of new measures to make Cyprus shipping more attractive and more efficient for clients.

A series of green initiatives which reward those actively taking steps towards a zero carbon future will be launched by the end of the year and the Deputy Ministry will continue its efforts to support crew changes during the coronavirus pandemic.

It has been a busy initiation for Mr Demetriades, who was appointed in July following a cabinet reshuffle which saw then Shipping Deputy Minister, Natasa Pilides, announced as the new Energy Minister. But it is a role which he is relishing and one he had the necessary experience to commit to.

It was 22 years ago that Mr Demetriades first entered the doors of the then Department of Merchant Shipping in Cyprus as a Merchant Shipping Officer before moving to Brussels as the first Maritime Counsellor of Cyprus in 2004. He served in that post until returning to Cyprus in 2009 and was Head of the EU Affairs Unit at Cyprus' Ministry of Transport, Communications and Works, which was in charge of shipping and integrated maritime policy at the time, and stayed until 2013.

He moved back to Brussels, seconded as a national expert from Cyprus to the European Commission, where he spent the last seven years, firstly, responsible for the European Sustainable Shipping Forum, before spending a year with the Cabinet of the Cypriot Commissioner, dealing with education, youth and culture. It was the only period in his career he was not dealing with maritime issues directly, but even then he was still promoting maritime as a profession and liaising with key stakeholders in the industry to make sure training courses were catering for the ever-changing needs of the industry.

For the past five years, Mr Demetriades worked as a policy officer in the Directorate General of Mobility and Transport of the European Commission, coordinating the EU maritime transport strategy and its revision as well as the EU's external maritime transport relations.

One day in early July he received a phone call from President Nicos Anastasiades offering him the role of the Shipping Deputy Minister.

"I have a long experience in the sector and I will try to inject my Brussels experience back home. It is a challenging exercise, but I really like that," he told *SMI*.

"When you get such a proposal from the President of the Republic, to have that role for a sector where you have the experience and you have dedicated your career path, then you really can't say no!"

Natasa Pilides was credited as doing an excellent job as the first ever Shipping Deputy Minister. Is he worried that he has big shoes to fill?

"I have been working really closely with Natasa the last couple of months and we used to chat a lot and exchange views every time she was in Brussels. She did a great job and was the first Shipping Deputy Minister to have to deal with a lot of issues especially focusing on the promotion of Cyprus shipping.

"You can say that Natasa raised the bar, but I welcome the challenge."

Mr Demetriades told *SMI* of his desire to create a long-term road for the maritime sector.

"I am a great believer in a holistic approach. That is why I came up with the idea – when I was Head of the EU Affairs unit in the Transport Ministry - to have the Limassol Declaration in 2012.

"The idea was to have a holistic approach in Cyprus of blue growth starting with that Limassol Declaration. I have noted with a lot of satisfaction that a lot of people in the maritime industry are now working towards that.

"It is all about changing the mindset," he said citing that the sector in Cyprus needed to look beyond shipowning and shipmanagement. "It is all about how we build around these traditional shipping activities to develop a cluster and then for the entire maritime and marine sector, we need to focus on other industries that are relevant to the sea and try to integrate them."

"What I have decided to do is have a long-term strategy for shipping, maritime and marine affairs in Cyprus, and to this end we have already created a theme within the Shipping Deputy Ministry (SDM).

"What we are doing now is to take stock of what we have achieved, and what we have accomplished in the last 20 years until 2020."

The SDM will look at the challenges ahead and go out to stakeholders and the public with meetings and

brainstorming to formulate a new vision for Cyprus shipping for the next two decades.

This exercise will materialise towards the first half of 2021, and at the next Maritime Cyprus conference (10th-13th October 2021) he will present the Cyprus Shipping vision for the next two decades.

"This will be a visionary document which will also be flexible enough to be updated in four of five years time," he said. "I want Cyprus as a shipping nation and a maritime nation not to be reactive to developments but to be proactive. It is important to invite all the stakeholders in Cyprus to engage - we want to build the future together."

The SDM is reinforcing its commitment to environmental initiatives and one already announced is a tonnage tax rebate for vessels demonstrating further reductions of the attained Energy Efficiency Design Index (EEDI) or reductions of the total oil consumption in two consecutive reporting periods.

Other plans include opening up the Registry to develop Cyprus as a place for pleasure craft and yachts, and the redesign the registration policy to make it more attractive for merchant shipping.

All this is being done against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, which Mr Demetriades says has caused operational issues and financial difficulties for the maritime sector in Cyprus, as with many other countries.

However, he said Cyprus was one of the first countries to recognise seafarers as essential workers and between May and the end of September around 5,000 seafarers had been repatriated or able to return to work through Cyprus.

On financial difficulties, the SDM has also introduced some special measures including deferring payment deadlines for tonnage tax and remote audits and it is working with other ministerial departments to see what else can be done.

"Brussels has already signalled that any recovery funds that would be dedicated to the sector have to be linked to the green and digital transformation of the sector. Having this in mind, we are working with Cyprus Shipping Chamber and Cyprus Union of Shipowners because they need a lot of investment on that," he said.

He said the lesson learned from the pandemic was the need to digitally transform the sector in an accelerated way to be able to work and respond to the requests of the industry, to make operations more efficient and to be able to grow in an integrated and holistic way. "To that end, we are planning to speed up our processes to digitally transform our service. Our plan is to have a one-stop shop here in the Deputy Ministry." ●