Croatia – a coastal and maritime country

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Abstract: Croatia, through its geographic position, is a Mediterranean/Adriatic and Central European/Danube state. As an Adriatic coastal state, it has a long maritime tradition, which is apparent in its well-developed shipping (2.4 million GT), the high-quality ship-building industry (among the top six in the world) and through its numerous sea ports, of which many were established in ancient times. The leading national port is Rijeka, which is at the same time an important transit port for Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The exceptionally indented Croatian Adriatic coast with its attractive archipelagos and favorable climatic and oceanographic conditions in the coastal sea offers very advantageous conditions for comprehensive tourist utilization. This is particularly true of nautical tourism, which is complimented by a larger number of constructed and well-equipped yachting ports/marinas on the coast and islands.

The complexity of Croatia’s geographic position

Taking into consideration its peninsular shape with two very indented coastal fronts (the Atlantic and Mediterranean), as well as its location by a warm sea with a mild climatic belt, Europe is the most maritime continent on the planet. Thus, it follows that the majority of European countries are by their position either Atlantic or Mediterranean, while only a smaller percentage – primarily Central European countries – are located entirely within the continent, without direct access to the sea. However, some European countries have an even more complex geographic position, as they consist of two transit-geographically located regions. This is true of the Republic of Croatia, which is both Mediterranean and Central European, or more precisely: an Adriatic-Mediterranean and Danube Basin-Central European country.

For every country, access to the sea creates a great advantage over land-locked countries, as the sea is the largest and most inexpensive, and thus the most unrestricted and accessible, transportation route. With regard to trade with overseas countries it is the only possible route. As a result of this, countries without access to the sea must use the transit services of maritime countries and their ports for their overseas trade.

In this light, the transit-geographic position of Croatia in the European Mediterranean front not only provides Croatia with direct and unrestricted transit links with the whole world, but also, due to the deep penetration of the Adriatic Sea into the European continent, makes Rijeka an important port of transit for Central European countries such as Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The port of Ploče is at the same time vital for Bosnia-Herzegovina (Roglić 1964; Klemenčić 1992). This also indicates the exceptional importance of the trans-European transportation route, which leads to Rijeka through Budapest and Zagreb. The Zagreb-Rijeka route (with a connection to Dalmatia) also represents a key tie between the two major parts of Croatia: the Pannonian and Adriatic. In this the vital transit importance of the Gorski Kotar-Lika “Croatian doorway” must be stressed (Figure 1).

Croatia as a coastal country

*An indented coast with attractive islands*

The specificity of the Croatian Adriatic coast, which is very indented and has numerous islands, is best seen when compared with the neighboring Italian coast. The length of the Croatian coast in a straight line from its most northwestern point (Cape Savudrija) to its most southeastern (Cape Oštri) point is 530 km. The actual length of the coastline is 1,777 km, which makes its coefficient of indentedness 3.3. However, when the length of the island shores, 4,078 km, is also added, the total length of the Croatian
coast is 5,855 km, and the coefficient of indentedness increases to 11 (Stražičić 1987).

Therefore, the Croatian Adriatic coast is among the most indented coasts in the world, and its specificity is not only in its numerous islands, of which it has over one thousand (67 inhabited), rather it is their indentedness and proximity to the coasts. Their arrangement in island chains also forms numerous well-protected channels. All of the advantages of such a coast, particularly in regard to nautical tourism, logically leads to a comparison with the Greek coast and the scattered Aegean islands.

A spacious coastal sea

Like other coastal countries, Croatia also possesses its “coastal sea”. This includes “internal sea waters” and “territorial waters”. While every coastal country has its territorial waters, only those coastal countries which possess an indented coastline and islands have internal waters. The Croatian “internal waters” include the sea between the coast and the line which connects its outlying islands. This line, which represents the outer boundaries of Croatia’s internal waters, continues toward the open sea of the 12 nautical-mile belt of Croatia’s territorial waters. This belt continues all along the Croatian coast, from the mouth of the Dragonja River to the entrance to the Boka Kotorska Bay. According to international maritime law, the coastal sea is an integral part of state territory, so that Croatia’s state border on the sea is actually the outer border of its territorial waters (Rudolf 1988). The full sovereignty of the Croatian state exists in this region, just as it does on the 56,538 km² of the land surface area of the Republic of Croatia. The total area of Croatia’s territorial waters (not including the islands, which are part of the land area) is 31,421 km² (Lapaine et al. 1993). From this, it can be seen that the total surface area of Croatia’s state territory, including the mainland, island and sea portions, is 87,959 km².

The continental shelf, on which Croatia has the