

Port Cities Dynamics in North-Western France: the Cases of Dunkirk, Le Havre and Nantes-Saint-Nazaire

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The beginning of the twenty-first century has brought about multiple changes for French ports, such as increased competition and the loss of market share, as well as reforms that have reorganized the national port system. In this context, France's western coastline constitutes a major stake for the development of the country's foreign trade. Indeed, it is located in an ambivalent position, both closely connected to and at the same time competing with the Northern-Range. Since the large port reform of 2008, the three autonomous ports of France's western coast (Dunkirk, Le Havre, and Nantes- Saint-Nazaire) have become "Large Maritime Ports" (Grands ports maritimes), or "major seaports" in English. If their institutional governance subscribes to a general model, we can nevertheless observe local specificities which are reinforced by the contemporary merging of the ports of the Seine Axis (Le Havre, Rouen and Paris). Beyond the institutional dimension, therefore, the paper will analyse the decision-making mechanism and structuring of local leaderships according to the representations of the main stakeholders of the three port cities. For this purpose, the representatives of the stakeholders involved were interviewed during a series of consultations, aiming at defining the urban port governance processes in each territory. Thus, the articulation of the scales of power, private-public relations, opposition between port workers' unions, port authorities or organizations defending the interests of industrial port companies, are expressed through nuances that give substance to port dynamics, as complex as it is subtle.

KEY WORDS

- ~ Port-city
- ~ Planning
- ~ Governance
- ~ Stakeholders
- ~ Cooperation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The start of the twenty-first century has brought about many changes for French ports: increased competition and regression in the European hierarchy, reforms which have reorganized the national port order between the state and territories (ISEMAR, 2020), as well as privatization of the terminals. In this context, France's western coastline constitutes a major stake with regard to the country's foreign trade, and therefore enjoys an ambivalent position: it is both closely connected to and in competition with the Northern-Range, which stretches from Le Havre to Hamburg and corners a large part of European maritime traffic (Serry, 2019). In effect, from 1989 to 2006, traffic from European ports experienced an almost 60% growth, whereas French ports were mostly sidelined by this movement (Martel, 2015).

On a national scale, if Marseille is the largest port by volume, those along the western coastline (Dunkirk, Le Havre, and Nantes-Saint-Nazaire), taken together, represent 42 % of the traffic in 2017. The port of Le Havre is the largest container port. Together with the ports of Nantes-Saint-Nazaire and Marseille, Le Havre constitutes one of the two central poles in France's energy supplies. Dunkirk, for its part, like the port of Loire Atlantique, has become the support site for LNG (Russian, in particular); it remains a major pole in dry bulk cargo (as a result of its link to the steel industry), while positioning itself on containers.

These sectorial dynamics have taken place in a general context of port reterritorialization. The 2008¹ port reform, therefore, is a significant example of institutional change, differently impacting port communities. The three autonomous ports have become "*grands ports maritimes*" (GPM) or "major seaports" in English. They are among the seven large seaports and, as such, government agencies, assuming the functions of governance, as well as the development of the port domain which they own. Their mission is to foster "harmony" between the host territory and local stakeholders. Coordination between ports on the same coastline or waterway artery is also greatly encouraged.

The institutional governance of the three GPM (major seaports) studied subscribes to a general model: "a management board", which takes on the institution's direction, as well as its management; represents "a supervisory board" which determines the institution's strategic guidelines and exercises permanent oversight over the management board; and an advisory body: "the development council". We will not elaborate here on the composition of these three organs that group together state officials, territorial authorities, public institution personnel, qualified individuals as opposed from consular chambers, large firms or associations, etc. Above and beyond the institutional dimension, it will be a case of studying the decision-making organization and representations of the leading stakeholders of the three "port communities".

In this paper, we conducted thirty or so interviews² from 2017 to 2019 with different stakeholders in order to allow a comparative analysis between the three French ports.

2. GENERAL PATTERNS OF PORT CITIES GOVERNANCE AND METHODOLOGY

Traditionally, links between ports and territories have been based on port-city relationships, recognizing the strong correlation between port and urban development. There is frequently a connection between the size of a port and the size of the conurbation in which it is situated (Rodrigue et al., 2016). However, this correlation has eroded over the last decades, specifically because changes to international trade have compelled ports to transform themselves, and more often, to distance themselves from the cities (Serry, Loubet, 2021).

¹ Law n° 2008-660 of 4 July 2008 on port reform

² These interviews are part of a series of over 120 interviews conducted in the framework of RIN research: PORTERR – Ports et territoires (*Ports and Territories*), (supervisors LOUBET and SERRY) funded by the Conseil Régional de Normandie; partners: Université Le Havre-Normandie (UMR CNRS IDEES, LITIS) / INSA de Rouen (LITIS) / EMN / NEOMA.

The usage of the concept of governance in the port field has been the subject of plentiful research (Brooks et al., 2017; Cahoon et al., 2013; Debie et al., 2013; Notteboom et al., 2013; etc.). This research has facilitated in delineating the political, territorial, economic, organizational, or institutional dynamics at work. Port governance varies, with methods of management that are progressing towards a gradual intensification of the private sector. Governance differs according to which port model is adopted, on which depends the evolution of private and public sector roles: from the service port (public service), based on political centralism, where the state controls its port strategy, to the private service port. Nevertheless, the landlord port is the port model which is being taken over in the majority of large European ports (Verhoeven, 2010), with a strong public-private sector partnership, since the superstructures, but sometimes also the infrastructures, are delegated to private operators in keeping with the “terminalization” of seaports (Slack, 2007).

Moreover, ports can now be conceived as a “node for contacts and contracts” (Notteboom, Winkelmanns, 2002), giving rise to a complex network of stakeholder relationships (Daamen, 2007). Also, as a consequence, the development of the landlord port arrangement, together with the globalization of handling operations, raises the question of management and strategic control of urban-port development (Serry, Loubet, 2020). The Latin model of this pattern is currently dominating the French configuration: the port is clearly under the influence of the State.

Associating the port and the city, two objects with irregular outlines, adds a complexity to the analysis. According to C. Ducruet (2004), the port-city itself is not subject to a consensual definition. Port cities are spaces where stakeholders confront one another’s projects, but where conflicts of use arise, especially between urban and port or industrial functions, given that stakeholders are driven by conflicting interests (Serry, Loubet, 2021). These stakeholders’ interactions are of variable geometry: public-private relationships, institutional interference, effects of competition, differences in points of view between people of the sea and people of the land (Foulquier, 2009). Such a range of levels and multiplication of the number of “interested parties” form the general framework which structures the different modes of governance of world port systems (Comtois, 2014). The field of action has therefore intelligibly expanded, integrating an overall perspective of a port community, making it possible to extend the subject to local and regional bodies, chambers of commerce, and professional organizations, closer to the Hanseatic model of governance (Lévêque, 2014). These changes come within the scope of circumstances marked by the private sector’s reinforcement of its position in the port sector. Therefore the methods of territorial governance differ across countries, and also sometimes inside one state.

In fact, the French port system is characterised by quite a recent phase in devolution that has modified public and private responsibilities in port management and supervision. The role of the State remains important in the port governance structures, especially for the overall management and supervision of the big maritime ports. However, these overall changes are transposed in a variety of ways, depending on the realities of each port (Debie, Lacoste, Magnan, 2017).

With a view to capturing some of these differences, we have developed and applied the following methodology. We have used in this paper a textual analysis of the discourses of the stakeholders of port city governance in order to identify the relationships, as well as the strength of the links between the port and the city (and, more generally, the surrounding territory). We have therefore conducted a campaign of semi-structured interviews in the studied port cities. Therefore, about thirty interviews were made with the stakeholders in each port, with a sample constructed in the same way: elected officials, representatives of port authorities, directors of port companies, heads of Chamber of Commerce and Industry, trade unions, experts, and academics.

The interview guide has been structured around several sub-parts common to all types of stakeholder, namely the role and place of the actor within the port community, the impacts of municipal activity on his organization and activities (or if necessary the impacts of port activity on the organization and activities of the

actor), the decision-making process within port governance, the nature of the forces involved in the port organisation, as well as the relations with other scales of territories.

Content analysis was the method of the qualitative analysis that we have chosen to use for the collected speeches. Their compilation has allowed a comparative analysis highlighting the convergences, divergences, and strong trends. In order to confirm the results, a statistical processing of the interviews has been carried out, using two textual statistics software: "Alceste-Société Image" and "NVivo".

For NVivo, the main interest is to build a cloud of the most frequently used words in all of the interviews in order to identify those referring to city-port relations in a broader territorial framework.

Concerning Alceste, all the interviews have been compiled in a corpus in order to facilitate its integration into the software. It allows to process a large volume of textual data, while offering a wide choice of analytical processing. Thereby it is possible to create networks of forms around the chosen key words, in order to identify the words most related to them in the discourse. Thus, in the network of forms of the word "port", with the fifteen most strongly connected words (cf. Figure 1), the shorter the line, the higher the co-occurrence between the two words (Raulin, Loubet, Serry, 2020).

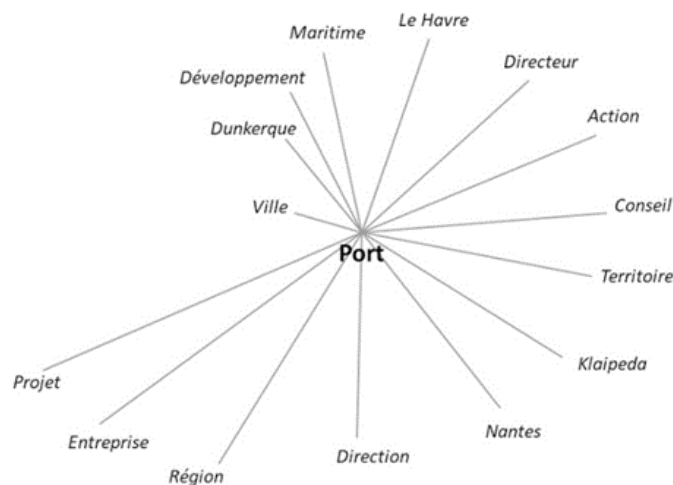


Figure 1. The network of shapes of the word "Port"

The results agree with our starting postulate, namely the particularly close links between the city and the port.

3. DUNKIRK: A GOVERNANCE STRUCTURED ON "APPEASING" COOPERATION

An independent port under state control for over forty years, the major seaport of Dunkirk (GPMD) in 2017 was the fourth largest port nationally in terms of global traffic, and is placed second in our sample (cf. Figure 2).

As regards the municipality, it has a population of almost 87,000 inhabitants within an urban area close to 255,000 inhabitants. Both territories have experienced continuous demographic decline: the municipality for over thirty years and its metropolitan area for over ten years (despite the peri-urbanization). Closures of factories which provided hundreds of jobs at the end of the eighties (Chantiers de France in 1987, Total in 2010, etc.) explains this trend and the deficit in economic attractiveness.

The expansion of the industrial port zone towards the periphery of Dunkirk has led to several urban areas being isolated. The geographic proximity between this zone, the residential districts, and seaside resorts represents a challenge in terms of social acceptability of industrial port activity and can be a source of conflicts over its use. These questions of the port-city interface are central to the dialogue between local authorities and the GPM.

The governance of the port community, therefore, includes a diversity of stakeholders, including the state, which remains the most influential stakeholder in the community, namely in its capacity to direct the port authority via the Management Board and regarding the GPM status of the port.

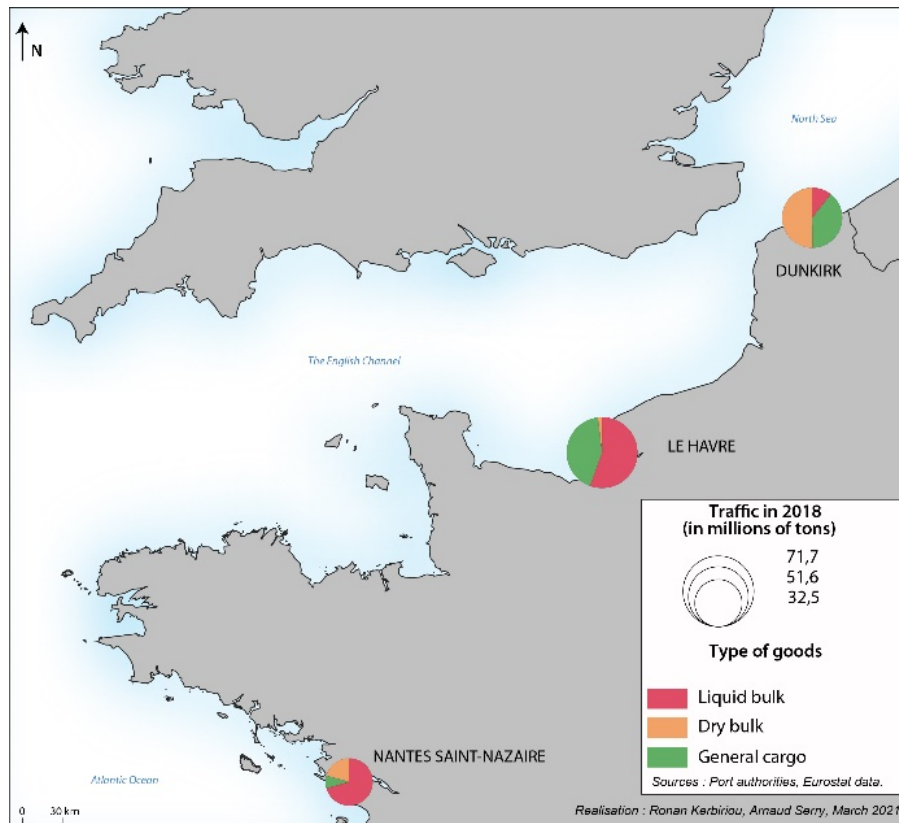


Figure 2. Port traffic in the ports of Le Havre, Dunkirk and Nantes-Saint-Nazaire in 2018

This state leadership, however, relayed by the port authority, is not incompatible with a substantive cooperation with the local authority. The management board and the Urban Community of Dunkirk (Communauté Urbaine de Dunkerque - CUD) are seen as closely tied partners. In addition, in terms of port issues, the intermunicipal level seems to dominate the local level in the stakeholders' discourse.

Ranked as second of the major stakeholders is the trades union in charge of defending the interests of the port businesses, the Maritime and Commercial Union (l'Union Maritime et Commerciale - UMC). The Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) works with the same purpose by supporting all the industrialists in the community. The last mentioned stakeholders, and notably the most important of them all (Arcelor Mittal), play a non-negligible role in the decision-making process.

The dock workers and port workers, with the use of their unions, most notably the CNTPA-CFDT union, also have a significant influence on port development. However, according to the representatives of the organizations interviewed, it would appear that the social climate is fairly "good", and that in the past the unions regularly contributed to the appeasement of social relations in return for certain concessions. According to the

people interviewed, the capacity of the stakeholders to negotiate seems to explain the quality of the social climate. On one hand, the unions are aware of the hazardous nature of excessive demands, in terms of port competitiveness, on the other hand, the *GPMD* subscribes in part to the union demands, for example, regarding cultural and social policies (construction of a motocross circuit for the use of the dockworkers' union members, hunting concessions, etc.). But above all, the relational system in question is said to be based on a form of pragmatism on the part of the stakeholders. In a declining territory, they understood that they were part of a community with a common destiny. The position of the "major non-port", and the fragility of the socio-economic fabric, forced the local stakeholders to cooperate in order to "survive".

The region follows next in the ranking of stakeholders according to their leadership. It aims to benefit from its location on one of the big European North-South transit routes to attract logistics implantations in Dunkirk, but also Lille and Dourges (Frémont, 2018). More astonishingly, the CCI (Chamber of Commerce and Industry) Côte d'Opale which, having merged with the CCI of Dunkirk in 2010, also takes part in the decision-making dynamics, but appears first and foremost in making its priority the Port of Calais (whose management it provides).

Finally, at the margins of the decision-making process, are the different associations represented within the Development Council (ecologists, hunters, fishermen, etc.) who take part in discussions on port-city interface issues. In effect, this problematic constitutes a major challenge for the stakeholders questioned, in which the definition of perimeters and living environment represent the structuring elements.

The governance of Dunkirk's port community, therefore, demonstrates a close proximity between local authority and port authority (*GPMD*). The (growing) port appears to be integrated within the city (which is in demographic decline), predicating the maritime identity of a territory in search of attractiveness. The main industries (e.g. Arcelor-Mittal), as well as l'Union Maritime et Commerciale, play an important role in the decision-making process. As regards the region, it has little leadership at its disposal at present. However, the willingness of its president to promote the port of Dunkirk could reinforce the influence of this authority.

At another level, the intermunicipal scale (*CUD*) appears especially active on the questions of the port-city interface. The *CAP 2020* project, therefore, specifically illustrates the force of this theme by strongly mobilizing the different stakeholders of Dunkirk port community's stakeholders on environmental (pollution, noise, etc.) and urban (planning, land management, etc.) issues. The future building of a Port Centre also testifies to a willingness on the part of stakeholders to enhance the port activity.

4. THE THE PORT COMMUNITY OF LE HAVRE IS OPEN TO THE WORLD WITH A GOVERNANCE PROMOTING AN INFORMAL DECISION-MAKING BODY³

The port of Le Havre is the largest port in our study with its 72.7 million tonnes of traffic in 2017 (dominated by liquid bulk and containers). Its activity is located at the gateway of the foremost French logistics space and a nearby market (Paris region), comprising fifteen million inhabitants (Serry, 2019). Rather than "the port of the Le Havre region", it resembles more "the port of Paris". The *GPMH* is a port at the head of the estuary, accommodating the largest ships, which is one of the pillars of importance and diversity of the traffic for servicing the Ile-de-France hinterland (Frémont, 2013). Yet this traffic can experience important variations. In fact, Le Havre's traffic has stagnated over the last two decades, seeing the port is losing its market share in the North European range (Serry, 2018).

³ This analysis of the Le Havre case takes up the elements developed in the *Revue d'Économie Régionale et Urbaine-RERU*, 2020/4, "Logiques d'acteurs et développement territorial dans les villes portuaires moyennes. Le cas du Havre et de Klaipeda", Loubet Lilian, Serry Arnaud. ©Dunod Éditeur. Available at: <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-d-economie-regionale-et-urbaine-2020-4-page-635.htm>

The second pillar of this openness to the world is the territory itself, notably at the scale of the city and the port in their estuary (Frémont, 2013). Le Havre, with approximately 170,000 inhabitants in 2017, is a city in which port activity has a major economic impact. According to INSEE (French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Research), the industrial port of Le Havre employed 30,200 salaried workers in 2014, 13,470 of whom worked in the maritime and port cluster.

This territory is one of those industrial and port cities situated in declining regions that are sometimes described as “shrinking cities” (like Genoa, Palermo or Aberdeen) (Wolff, Fol, Roth and Cunningham-Sabot, 2013). However, if Le Havre’s urban area (288,973 inhabitants in 2017) has seen continuous decline (Cauchi-Duval, Cornuau, Rudolph, 2017), it has been limited.

As regards the port-city interface, port activity has become progressively isolated while distancing itself from the urban centre.

Once again, the state can be seen as the most influential stakeholder. The geo-economic importance of Le Havre, but also the past of the Prime Minister (Édouard Philippe at the time the data was processed), as former mayor of Le Havre, explains the particular interest given to the development of this port community. The presence of senior officials in all the decision-making scenes (in particular the chairmanship of the port’s management board) has therefore enabled the central authority to ensure its control.

If one is to believe the stakeholders questioned, the port management entrusted to senior officials to penalise the territorial and port development. “Just passing through” and “no real local anchorage” means they have trouble establishing an ambitious, long-term territory-based strategy.

Regarding the municipal bloc (City-centre and intermunicipal scale) it is in an ambivalent position. It appears to have limited power. But on the other hand, the many informal relations between the GPMH management board’s chairman and the mayor (president at the intermunicipal scale), enable the latter to weigh significantly on the strategic directions involving the port. This dynamic is reinforced in view of the closeness between the present mayor and his predecessor, the current prime minister.

In this context, the “quadripartite” (a powerful decision-making body, informal but known by all) materializes the relations of cooperation between the state representatives (namely the port director) and the mayor.

As a consequence, this example testifies to the capacity of the stakeholders to build formal and informal scenes which are likely to reconcile the various projects. At Le Havre, harmonizing port and urban projects benefits from the regulation of the “quadripartite”. A strong local authority (municipal and intermunicipal) guarantees mutual recognition between the stakeholders. Likewise, the municipal managers enjoy potential additional leadership, thanks to their role as mediators during social conflicts. The municipality fluctuates between a form of neutrality and a mission of appeasement between the port workers’ unions and the GPM management.

The unions, therefore, (CGT GPMH and CGT docker) emerge, after the state and municipality, as influential stakeholders. According to the stakeholders questioned, their leadership is very important in view of their blocking capacity and the effects of strikes on the vitality of the port.

As regards the private stakeholders (operators, logisticians, handlers, etc.), they do not appear to play a very influential role in decision-making entities. Likewise, other stakeholders mentioned in our interviews, who might seem to be the major ones, rank at the bottom of, or are not cited at all: the Regional Council, HAROPA (a port complex of the Seine axis), and ship-owners.

5. THE NANTES-SAINT-NAZAIRE PORT COMMUNITY: COOPERATION BETWEEN LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

In 1966 the ports of Nantes and Saint-Nazaire merged and became a “Port Autonome” (*Autonomous or independent port* - under the trusteeship of the state), before obtaining the status of *GPM* in 2008. It is the fifth largest French port in terms of overall traffic⁴, third in terms of bulk liquid⁵, and possessing the largest methane terminal in Europe (Montoir-de-Bretagne). Today, it is a logistics hub in western France. Its hinterland stretches over a large part of western France, thanks to a complex of transport networks (road, rail, river and airport freight). Moreover, an oil-pipeline (the Donges refinery) and gas pipeline network (the Montoir methane terminal), make it possible to supply crude oil and liquid gas to a large part of northern France.

As regards the city of Nantes, it is the sixth largest municipality in France with over 300,000 inhabitants, within a dynamic greater urban area of 961,000 inhabitants. It enjoys strong economic attractiveness. This demographic growth is accompanied by considerable pressures on land and property, especially on the outskirts. Geographically, the Loire passes through the conurbation of Nantes, which is situated at the head of its estuary. Several trunk roads serve the area, benefiting from a high-speed railway service (several T.G.V.s per day to Paris), as well as an international airport.

Saint-Nazaire is a city with a population of approximately 70,000 inhabitants within an urban area of almost 222,000 inhabitants. As opposed to Nantes, the Saint Nazaire conurbation has seen a lesser demographic growth and suffers from a poor image. However, the two municipalities constitute a major economic pole in western France, sixty kilometres separating the two conurbations. This geographic proximity brings with it a close relational and economic proximity, which has led to the merger of the two territories’ (CCI in 2008).

In terms of governance, the state, via the Port management board, appears to be the most influential stakeholder in the port community.

However, the recent creation of a port promotion cluster called “**Be My Port**”, has been seen to impact the decision-making process. It comprises the **GPM management board, the Union Maritime Nantes Ports (UMNP), the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI), the territorial authorities and their organizations** (“Agglomeration Community” of the St Nazaire region and the CARENE estuary of the Région Nazairienne and l’Estuaire-CARENE, Nantes Métropole, Département et Région), and the **PASCA association** (Plateforme régionale d’innovation des Pays de la Loire)⁶. This local initiative gathers together **public and private stakeholders** through a process of organization and federation of the port community. In addition to the promotional dimension, monthly exchanges and meetings all seem to contribute towards the process of reflection on the port strategy and the close proximity of the stakeholders.

The Chamber of Commerce and trade of Nantes-Saint-Nazaire is another important stakeholder in the decision-making process. Building an in-house group called “Port” illustrates, its capacity desires to federate the economic stakeholders of the port community.

Behind all the stakeholders previously mentioned, in view of the importance of their leadership, come the territorial authorities, municipalities, and inter-municipal groups, (reinforced by their presence within the “Be My Port” cluster, in particular), and the port unions. Just as in the cases of Le Havre and Dunkirk, the region represents one of the less influential stakeholders, even if the recent appointment of the President of the Région

⁴ Approximately 30 million tonnes in 2017 according to the Transport Ministry.

⁵ Approximately 20 million tonnes in 2017 according to the Transport Ministry.

⁶ This association develops the competitiveness of businesses and territories by optimizing logistics and purchasing strategies.

des Pays de la Loire at the head of the supervisory board (November 2019) might considerably strengthen the role of the region in the governance of this port community. In a territory that has seen strong opposition to the airport project of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, environmental organizations appear to be almost on the same scale as the region in terms of leadership.

Lastly, even if the state (through the board of managers, in particular), is the principal decision-maker of the GPM, the port community is characterized by real cooperation between public and private stakeholders, materialized by an active participation in the urban-port decision-making process. The setting up of the “Be My Port” cluster illustrates the ambition of the economic stakeholders to collaborate with the port authority and territorial authorities in promoting, and therefore being part, of strategic decisions. In this, the port community constitutes a territorial configuration or “spatial proximity” and “cognitive proximity” (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, 2008), and are thereby correlated.

6. CONCLUSION

In spite of the normalization of the modalities of governance concerning the landlord port model (Verhoeven, 2010), there is no single archetype. Each port is subject to political bodies of the various institutional scales in different ways, as well as to the influence of the strategies of private companies in terms of transport of goods. Involved also are a large number of national and local stakeholders, who are more or less influential according to the territories and contexts. Thus the multiplication of scales of the stakeholders determines the modes of governance of the world’s port systems (Comtois, 2014).

In view of the three communities examined, if one observes variations in terms of leadership and in the relations that structure the games of the players, certain consistencies appear. The high degree of state dependency seems to be common to all three configurations, bolstered by the twofold ministerial trusteeship in port terms. The state remains the most influential stakeholder, through the management, in particular, thus legitimizing the leadership of the “port authority”.

Beside this institutional dimension, the coordination of powers constitutes a dynamic which must be considered with great attention. The rather conventional mechanisms of “cross-regulation” can thus be observed (Crozier and Thoenig, 1975), where central powers, devolved and decentralized, intertwine. The cases of Le Havre and Dunkirk illustrate the desire of national representatives (one of whom was prime minister during the study, the other former mayor of Dunkirk and several times minister) to weigh on the urban-port governance of conurbations which they lead or have led. As a consequence, the strategic games of local power (municipality, EPCI – Public establishment for intermunicipal cooperation) vary according to the territorial configurations and leadership of the elected officials. In both the cases of Le Havre and Dunkirk, the political leaders benefited from strong relays from the state. This relationship extends to the privileged relationship that the municipality and intermunicipality maintain with the port authority. The local authority of the Nantes-Saint-Nazaire community seems to develop more of a “horizontal” cooperation within the cluster “Be My Port”, gathering together local economic stakeholders. However, in the three cases, the relationship between port authority and local authority is unstable, regularly put to the test in a context where the changes in international trade have transformed the ports by distancing them in general from cities. (Daudet and Alix, 2012). This leads to a geo-political urban-port development, which expresses itself rather conventionally through conflicts of use. In Le Havre, for example, the interests of the port authority (with its dual mission as land manager) can lead it to slow down the economic and industrial development of the territory. Likewise, we have seen that extending the industrial-port zone as far as the outskirts of Dunkirk, and the geographic proximity resulting from this, residential areas and seaside resorts are likely to become a source of tension. In this context, it must be noted that participating in drawing up urban planning documents improves local governance by constituting the tools for learning cooperation (Loubet, 2012).

The articulation of the scales in port issues is expressed also in the relationship between state and region. The global and intermodal logistics generate structural changes that redefine the relationships between the port and its region (Comtois, 2014). The heightened competition between ports and/or transport corridors increases the concentration of logistical activities. For its part, logistical peri-urbanization accompanies urban spread. Ports consequently extend their activities and functional involvement even beyond their metropolitan or regional borders (Prelorenzo, 2011). In this context, decentralization of a port increases the role of the region, enabling it to have influence over port infrastructures, development of seafronts and the hinterland. The 2016 law for the Blue Economy has strengthened the presence of regional executives on the GPM board of directors, and the NOTRe law has consolidated regional competence in terms of economic development. The regional stakeholder, therefore, is encouraged to reinforce his leadership in the governance of the port communities. However, if one is to believe the three cases studied, the role of the region seems to be poorly identified. This pattern was highlighted in particular at Le Havre, whereas it tended to be reverse at Dunkirk and Saint Nazaire. Indeed, the desire of the two regional presidents (Région Hauts-de-France, Région des Pays de la Loire) to weigh more heavily on port issues, features powerfully in the analysis of the discourse. The recent appointment of the President of the Pays de la Loire region as head of the supervisory board (November 2019) has contributed to this dynamic.

If the public stakeholders play a major role, private organizations do so also; even though the question of their representation in the governance of the GPM has yet to be resolved (ISEMAR 2020). The entrepreneurial sphere and intermediate bodies (associations and unions), therefore, shape the territorial and port governance. Their weight, however, varies considerably according to the territories. Associations, for example, which are most often represented at the development council, have very little influence if our analysis is to be believed. However, according to the territorial configurations, the local culture (like in the Nantes-Saint-Nazaire region) will attach more value to these territorialized stakeholders being taken into consideration.

On another level, industrial and port businesses seem to find it equally difficult to be recognized by and within the port institutions, not having a seat (to their great regret) in the major decision-making scenes. Some entrepreneurial stakeholders have somewhat mitigated this deficiency by playing skilfully the relays provided by the consular chambers (CCI), the trade unions and organizations responsible for defending the interests of port businesses (UMNP at Nantes-Saint-Nazaire, UMC at Dunkirk).

To this "public" / "private" mistrust can be added a relationship between port authorities and port workers' unions, qualified by the stakeholders questioned as being unfavourable to the development of certain communities (e.g. Le Havre). Analysis of governance in port communities like Dunkirk has shown, however, that nothing was inevitable in this respect and that a common destiny could emerge in the face of imminent danger (economic survival). It is worth recalling, nevertheless, that the number of local social conflicts impacting port operations stem from national issues beyond the port environment. A port community like Le Havre, with its strong unionist tradition, is a sounding board for movements able to maximize the reach of their message by "blocking" the port and the adjacent refineries. Once again, local and national issues commingle.

In parallel with this governance, ship-owners play a rather solitary role in a context of multiplying areas of uncertainty, but also areas of freedom. Virtually absent from all decision-making entities, nevertheless, they exert appreciable power to influence. Their strategies, the size of their ships, the gargantuan proportions of their container ships that are sometimes observed; all this influences, indeed conditions, the economic models, port infrastructures and the strategies of other stakeholders. As a consequence, the questions of performance, efficiency, and competitiveness of port communities should be handled by enhancing the relationships between stakeholders. Their capacity to operate apprenticeships that are favourable to territorialized cooperation (Loubet, 2012) represents a fundamental component in the success of any project of port-city development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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