

Italy's Grimaldi urges Brussels to block Greek cabotage concentration

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Italian ro-pax specialist Grimaldi is urging anti-trust authorities to block an announced concentration on Greece's cabotage market.

The acquisition of a majority stake in coastal operator Hellenic Seaways by Attica Group would bring together the sector's number one and number two operators, creating a dominant player on passenger and freight trades in Greece, Grimaldi says.

The proposed deal has a European dimension and should therefore fall within the scope of the European Commission's competition authorities, says Group managing director Emanuele Grimaldi. "Greece is one of the favourite destinations for customers from all over Europe," Mr Grimaldi tells the *Maritime Watch*. The Naples-based group is "preparing a document" for DG COMP that will highlight arguments against the deal, which Mr Grimaldi says was struck "outside of normal parameters".

If approved, the acquisition would see Piraeus Bank and minority shareholders offload just over 50% of shares in Hellenic to Attica, operator of Blue Star Ferries and Super-Fast Ferries. Minoan Lines, controlled by Grimaldi, owns around 48% of Hellenic and had also been seeking to acquire control. "Our bid was the highest offer," says Mr Grimaldi. Officially, Piraeus bank is selling 40% of Hellenic shares.

The fact that the parties to the announced deal are recipients of state aid should ring warning bells in Brussels, as should Piraeus Bank's choice of buyer. "There was no level playing field. Piraeus Bank should be lending money not acting like a merchant bank," Mr Grimaldi continued.

The Grimaldi managing director said he has been unwillingly forced into a "tacit cartel" in Greece. Via its Hellenic stake, Grimaldi would block a full merger between the Hellenic and Blue Star, he said. "I don't not think there will be permission [for the deal] at a European level".

There was however a chance that Minoan could sell its Hellenic shares in exchange for traffic on other Greek routes. This might placate competition authorities, said the managing director.

Complicating matters further, Anek Lines, another Greek coastal operator, also has links to both Attica, via ship charter deals, and Piraeus Bank, via a shareholding.

The decision to sell Hellenic to Greek interests rather than Italian interests underlines the protectionist reflex seen elsewhere in Europe, said Mr Grimaldi. The French Government recently blocked the sale of a cruise ship builder STX to Italy's Fincantieri.