**Welcome speech of President Tarja Halonen at the HELCOM Jubilee Session on 5 March 2014, Marina Congress Center**

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. Welcome to the participants of the 40th Jubilee Session also on behalf of the host country of HELCOM - Finland, being Depositary of instruments of ratification of the Helsinki Convention by the nine coastal countries and the European Union, as well as hosting the HELCOM Secretariat in Helsinki.
2. We need to protect the world’s oceans and seas, which are currently deteriorating at a quick pace, due to overexploitation of their resources and lack of integrated management of human activities.
3. Each of the oceans and seas has its own challenges to tackle. These challenges are related to natural characteristics, historical pollution problems and the geopolitical and economic situation of the surrounding states. However, the need to put more emphasis on oceans and their importance is common. The Baltic Sea Region and HELCOM work hard to contribute to the global efforts for oceans and seas. HELCOM is in fact one of the “matured” regional sea conventions, celebrating its 40th anniversary together with UNEP’s Regional Seas Programme.
4. Despite many years of cooperation and many accomplishments, the Baltic Sea has not yet restored the status of a healthy sea. This is due the sea being very fragile. It is also sensitive to pollution and pressures from human activities, which constantly grow. Therefore special protection measures that are sometimes more stringent than elsewhere are necessary. They need to be tailor-made to the specific environmental problems such as eutrophication or the threat of low biodiversity. This special regime has been recognized, for instance, by the International Maritime Organization, by which the Baltic Sea received a special status for discharges and emissions of certain pollutants from ships.
5. Many seas in the world struggle due to political and economic situations. But in our region we enjoy economic prosperity and stability, which puts even more expectations on us. Despite economic downturns from time to time, the Baltic Sea coastal countries have what it takes to be persistent, ambitious and forward-looking in their efforts to save the sea. They can apply good marine and maritime governance, maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal management. And they should not be tempted to compromise the marine environment for short -term economic gains or unsustainable business and activities. Instead, they should invest in the good status of the marine environment, which will pay off in the future.
6. The role of the civil society can be underlined. We can observe growing environmental awareness, which affects consumer behavior and daily choices. In the end societies are the “guardians” of protection efforts not slowing down and being high on the political agenda.
7. The HELCOM organization has a legal basis, established procedures, transparency and professionalism. This needs to be coupled with higher political support to fully utilize the potential of a cooperation platform. Also all the members should be involved on equal footing and strive for harmonized implementation of the same and sufficient standards though out the region.
8. I have some personal observations on the recent years’ work to protect the Baltic Sea and what has changed. The work of the states is very important, but not enough. In order to achieve effective measures to clean our Baltic Sea, we need all actors of society onboard. The public sector and its activities are a good basis for the work, but if citizens themselves and their organizations are involved, the reforms are much faster. People will improve their everyday behavior. They might consume less and buy ecologically better products. With this they create better markets for sustainable development – finally they vote for smarter politicians. The business sector is rather sensitive to consumers’ demands, and some of the business people are interested in sustainable development by themselves.
9. We all know this, but the knowledge has been used rather seldom in the environmental protection of Baltic Sea. A few years ago, in 2010, we held for the first time a Summit of a new style in Helsinki. I started building up it with NGOs and corporations, and when it looked good I and our Prime Minister of that time Mr. Vanhanen invited the Heads of States and Governments to Helsinki to work together in order to speed up the implementation of the Helcom decisions.
10. The basic structure of the process was built according to the UN’s Global compact idea, and the implementation was pretty similar to Bill Clinton’s Global Initiative. The difference was that we did not aspire for any new agreements, but we wanted to achieve faster what we have already promised to do.
11. WHY? Simply because people very often argue that international agreements or promises does not mean anything in practice. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE? People are sometimes too impatience, but too often they are right.
12. In the Summit we got about 150 promises. The BSAG (The Baltic Sea Action Group), an independent foundation, has followed commitments and their success. Many of the commitments have succeeded. Both are important to study.
13. One of the best results has been the modernization of the waste water system of St Petersburg and its surroundings. It is also an excellent example of international cooperation (between Russia, Finland and the EU). You can freely copy it.
14. I specially encourage cities and other municipalities to strengthen their national and international cooperation. At the municipal level, implementation and the change of practical knowhow can be achieved.
15. I would like to very warmly thank all of you for the work you have done and wish you a successful meeting.