**Statement by the Chair of the Helsinki Commission Ms. Helle Pilsgaard on the occasion of the 40-year Jubilee of the 1974 Helsinki Convention**

**Helsinki, 5 March 2014**

Your Excellences, Mr Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Like contracts in ordinary life, treaties between states have always been an indispensable tool of diplomacy.

To become party to a treaty, a state must express its willingness to undertake the legal rights and obligations contained in the treaty. In other words, it must “consent to be bound” by the treaty. This is done through a concrete act, by ratification.

All of us, the nine states of the Baltic Sea coasts as well as the European Union have expressed such consent to be bound by the Helsinki Convention, the basis of the HELCOM cooperation.

However, after the signature, ratification and entry into force of an international Treaty a diplomatic process becomes a process of substance, of concrete action.

On the 22th day of this month, in two and a half weeks’ time, the process started by the first Helsinki Convention will have been in motion for forty years. Four decades we have worked together to eliminate pollution in order to restore the Baltic Sea and preserve its ecological balance. The Contracting Parties to the Convention were international forerunners. They – we - provided a positive example to countries in the world’s other regions on how to protect shared waters.

Many lessons have been learned over this period. They have been documented in the minutes of various meetings and in Ministerial Declarations. The latest declaration was adopted in last year’s ministerial meeting in my home town, Copenhagen.

The experiences from the first decades of working within HELCOM helped to elaborate the revised Helsinki Convention, which was adopted in 1992 and is still in force. This was a major milestone in HELCOM work. Since then, the Convention and its Annexes are under regular review and update.

*So where are we now?*

As this Jubilee part of the annual HELCOM meeting is also a birthday celebration I think one should follow the normal birthday procedure and start in the positive.

When I see the results achieved by HELCOM I must say that one should indeed not be ashamed. On the contrary, one should be proud and happy of what has been accomplished, already during the cold war period.

HELCOM has been both a pioneer and world leader in a wide range of fields, such as:

* monitoring and setting targets for pollution loads,
* assessing the status of the environment,
* reducing environmental impact of shipping, and optimizing our regional preparedness capacity to respond to pollution incidents.

I would like to mention a few concrete achievements.

Firstly, according to the best available figures we have reduced nutrient pollution to the Baltic Sea quite dramatically, by half, from the times of the signature of the Convention.

Secondly, the status of a number of Baltic Sea species, previously in decline, has been restored. Thirdly, the area coverage of the Baltic Sea marine protected areas has reached the globally set goals.

The professional standard of HELCOM work is very high. This is recognized both within and outside the region. I would say the same goes for the efficiency of the HELCOM Secretariat.

The co-operation within the Helsinki Commission is constructive and solution-orientated in relation to both Delegations and Observers, and is based on equality and consensus. I find the HELCOM work also pleasant.

The host country of the Commission, the Republic of Finland, has always been very helpful and generous to the Commission and its Secretariat.

I could mention many other positive aspects of the HELCOM work, but time does not allow me to elaborate further on these matters. I should therefore only express the hope that my reflections will remain valid also for the next forty years.

However, even HELCOM is not perfect.

I think we all know that there are shortcomings in our work. We also have a pretty good notion of where to find them.

Most of all, we need to intensify our efforts to implement the 2007 Baltic Sea Action Plan. Otherwise we will not be able to reach a healthy sea status by 2021. Until now, one third of the measures and actions that we have agreed on, have been accomplished. Not judging if this is a good or a poor achievement, I would like to say that we can do better.

In the case of eutrophication, we have within HELCOM agreed on concrete figures on the needed reductions to reach a Baltic Sea without excessive eutrophication. We have likely the world’s best regional monitoring programme for land-based pollution and know where the pollution is coming from.

These reduction figures provide a joint frame for tackling our major transboudary problem. However, it will only work if each country maintains its commitment and integrates the efforts on national level. This requires utilizing the necessary legislative and financial instruments.

Thanks to recent HELCOM work on Red Lists we also have good information at hand about biodiversity issues. This information will enable us to speed up the progress towards the goal of favourable conservation status of biodiversity. And while we are on the right path with regard to addressing maritime activities, hazardous substances require both more research and intensified actions.

This being said, it is always possible to modernize working methods and do things better also on the administrative side. As expressed in the beginning of the Danish chairmanship of the Commission, one of our main goals is to renew our cooperation, to make a more dynamic and effective HELCOM. Some results of this reform process can already be seen in the new website and improved data and information services, but this is only the start.

In this 35th meeting of the Helsinki Commission, we will discuss a relatively mature proposal for a streamlined HELCOM, including a new working structure as well as other changes in the concrete working practices. The changes to come will enable us to better answer the current needs of the Contracting Parties. This includes creating synergies in implementing other obligations of the Contracting States.

The other urgency is to intensify our cooperation in the field of agriculture and fisheries in implementing ecosystem approach. It is clearly of utmost importance, as inputs from agriculture have proven to be a particularly difficult matter to address and fisheries remains one of the main pressures negatively impacting coastal and marine ecosystems. HELCOM should continue to engage in finding viable solutions for these challenges, alongside the efforts to reduce NOx (oxides of nitrogen) emissions from the greatly increased shipping in our region.

Dear Friends,

I would like to congratulate us all for the anniversary of our signature of the Helsinki Convention. Obligations emerging from the Helsinki Convention, both the original one and the current one from 1992, are something that binds us together. They show we are mature enough to commit to responsibilities - and shoulder them both in times of economic upturn and recession. By having each other and by having confidence in each other, we can really make a difference.

Thank You.