

Our Baltic, 29 September 2023 - Palanga, Lithuania
Keynote speech by HELCOM Executive Secretary Rüdiger Stempel

Commissioner, Ministers, distinguished delegates,

Let me begin by thanking you for the opportunity to talk here today and to join you for this important event in such a beautiful location, only a few steps away from our Baltic.

As any realtor will tell you, location really does matter and I greatly appreciate this venue, so close to the sea. I deal with the Baltic Sea every day, since that is what my job is all about. My office looks out on the Sea, I can even see a small stretch of Baltic Sea waters from my apartment, and I have more or less traveled the length and breadth of this region. And yet I never experience a sensation of overload. I never tire of the Baltic Sea. I continue to be enthralled by its beauty, by its ever-changing face, by its unique marine life, by the variety of the landscapes surrounding it – indeed, by the sheer magnificence of this relatively small but very special sea that, in more ways than one and since time immemorial, has defined this region.

But as the Executive Secretary of HELCOM, the only international organization dedicated exclusively to the protection of the Baltic Sea, I also get a glimpse below the surface of the Baltic, both literally and figuratively speaking, and therefore I also see another, darker side of the story. I see the vulnerability of this small, brackish outlier of the great Atlantic Ocean, semi-enclosed and surrounded by a catchment area four times the size of the sea itself, an area that is home to 85 million people. I am painfully aware of the multitude of pressures it is subjected to and of the damage those pressures inflict on an ecosystem poorly equipped to cope with them. I watch that ecosystem staggering under the blows it is receiving and I cannot but acknowledge that it is us, the people living on its shores, who are administering most of those blows. By doing so, we risk causing irreparable damage to what is unquestionably not just one of the main sources of our prosperity and well-being but, in fact, one of our most important life support systems.

The extent of the problem is impressively documented by the most recent HELCOM Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea. The third of its kind, and therefore termed HOLAS 3 in HELCOM-speak, it covers the years from 2016 to 2021, offering a snapshot of the condition of the Baltic Sea in the period assessed. Five thematic assessments, dedicated to the topics of economic and social analyses, spatial distribution of pressures and impacts, hazardous substances, marine litter, underwater noise and non-indigenous species, biodiversity and eutrophication were published earlier this year. The summary report, entitled “State of the Baltic Sea 2023,” will be launched on October 31st, together with a dedicated “State of the Baltic Sea” website. Unfortunately, the results of the assessment are sobering.

Consider this: The status of biodiversity and pressure-related indicators is insufficient across the entire Baltic Sea and throughout most of its ecosystem components. Only a modest number of biodiversity indicators show acceptable levels in parts of the region and none of them do so across all spatial units evaluated. Eutrophication, long the most important threat facing our sea, remains at unsustainable levels and the same holds true for other pressures such as hazardous substances,

the introduction of non-indigenous species or fishing. Meanwhile, the effects of climate change, already more pronounced in our region than the global average, continue to increase.

However, it is not my intention to sound the Doomsday trumpet. While the outcomes of HOLAS 3 certainly offer no reason to rejoice or to be complacent, they do in fact indicate that progress is being made on some fronts. Some of you will be aware of the HELCOM vision of “a healthy Baltic Sea environment with diverse biological components functioning in balance, resulting in a good ecological status and supporting a wide range of sustainable economic and social activities.” While it would be unrealistic, or even disingenuous, not to concede that we are still far (very far!) from realizing that vision, I am confident that we have the means at our disposal to do so. The brand-new HOLAS 3 allows us to establish a baseline against which future progress can be assessed. And we have a clear roadmap for achieving that much-needed progress: our 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan (2021 BSAP).

The 2021 BSAP is HELCOM’s strategic program of action. It is an update of the original HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan, adopted in 2007, which was aimed at achieving good environmental status (GES) for the Baltic Sea by 2021 – which, clearly, we did not. Nonetheless, the 2007 BSAP did yield significant results and allowed us to make some headway on the road to GES. Consequently, the Contracting Parties decided to build on that foundation and update the original plan instead of reinventing the wheel. The result is the current, 2021 BSAP, adopted at the Lübeck Ministerial Meeting in October 2021. It maintains the same level of ambition as its predecessor and retains all Actions contained in the 2007 plan that remain to be implemented, while including new Actions intended to better address issues previously insufficiently covered, and also dealing with emerging issues. The elaboration of the 2021 BSAP was informed by a sufficiency of measures analysis critically reviewing the Actions agreed on – a pioneering exercise that, as far as we know, has not yet been duplicated elsewhere.

The 2021 BSAP comprises 199 individual Actions, contained in four thematic segments on biodiversity, hazardous substances and litter, eutrophication and sea-based activities, as well as a horizontal topics segment dealing with overarching issues ranging from climate change to monitoring to financing, to name but three. The thematic segments are centered around specific goals. They are aimed at achieving a Baltic Sea ecosystem that is healthy and resilient, unaffected by eutrophication, hazardous substances and litter and where sea-based activities are carried out sustainably. All Actions have individual target years for their implementation. Some have already been implemented and the last ones will need to be realized by 2030 – a target year chosen to coincide with that of the UN SDGs. The Plan is based on the concept of ecosystem-based management and the principles of adaptive management. It is, therefore, to a certain extent a work in progress.

Time does not permit me to go into greater detail regarding the various goals and related actions laid out in the Plan, so I will limit myself to only one item of particular interest in the context of this conference – the issue of hazardous submerged objects, including unexploded ordnance (or UXO). While this threat is not necessarily a core issue for HELCOM, it is undoubtedly relevant and increasingly pressing and our organization has been addressing it for many decades, starting in 1993 with the establishment of the HELCOM Working Group on Dumped Chemical Munitions (HELCOM CHEMU), tasked with preparing a report on the locations and potential impacts of

submerged chemical weapons on the marine environment. Since 2016 this issue has fallen under the remit of the HELCOM Expert Group on environmental risks of hazardous submerged objects (HELCOM SUBMERGED), which has compiled information about dumped munitions and works towards assessing the related risks and, in 2022, finalized a Thematic Assessment on Hazardous Submerged Objects, which also covers UXO. One of the two Actions the 2021 BSAP specifically devotes to the topic of submerged munitions (Action S35) refers to this assessment, which is to be maintained as a living document, with the related information in the HELCOM Map and Data Service to be regularly updated as of 2024. Action S34, for its part, provides for the development of Best Environmental Practice (BEP) for comprehensive risk assessment of munitions by 2025 and the implementation of Best Available Techniques (BAT) for their environmentally sound and safe management by 2028. In addressing this threat, HELCOM recognizes the potential benefits of cooperation with other relevant regional organizations, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), and recently our organizations have joined forces in this regard, as demonstrated by the expert roundtable on dumped munitions in Kiel, Germany in December 2022, organized by the CBSS Secretariat in collaboration with the European commission and the Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are EU Member States, under the auspices of the then German Presidency of CBSS.

These are only a few brief insights into the past and current activities of HELCOM. However, I believe they also serve to highlight a further aspect of our work: its close alignment with that of the EU. The EU is of course, a Contracting Party to HELCOM and, for those Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are also Member States of the EU, our organization also serves as an implementing platform for their commitments under EU legislation and policies. The “Our Baltic” process, which we are here to take stock of and further develop, is a case in point. Of the 45 commitments undertaken by Member States in this context, only four are not related to the work of HELCOM, while all others are addressed either through the 2021 BSAP or through other activities carried out in the framework of our organization. More than a quarter of those commitments have already been implemented, while all others are currently under implementation.

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TIME Magazine recently described the oceans as the most important place on earth. And there is no denying that our corner of that place needs some serious tidying up. If it were otherwise, we would not be here today. But we ARE here today. And that in itself is a good sign, as it testifies to the importance we attach to protecting our marine environment and to our determination to continue to work to protect this treasure on our doorstep – and to do so in concert. Undoubtedly, while much has already been achieved, much remains to be done. Major efforts and transformative change across all relevant sectors will be required to give the Baltic Sea a new lease on life. The work ahead may seem daunting. But instead of dwelling on what has not been achieved or despairing at the magnitude of the tasks still facing us, let us be encouraged by the progress that has been achieved and inspired by our common vision of a Baltic Sea in good environmental status – a Baltic Sea at its best. We have a long way to go. But if we go it together, we will get there.

Thank you very much for your attention!