

Policy brief on potential measures to prevent marine plastic pollution from balloons and confetti

Celebrate better

Baltic Marine Environment
Protection Commission

Policy briefs



The problem

If used irresponsibly during celebrations or outside events, balloons and confetti can become litter that end up in the marine environment where it can cause harm to wildlife and contribute to the release of microplastics and potential harmful chemicals. After being released, balloons and confetti can be transported long distances by wind, waves, and ocean currents, making them difficult to clean up and track to their source. When in the environment, they don't easily break down and can cause harm many years after they were first released. Because balloons are elastic and often come with strings attached, they are particularly harmful to birds and other animals. The pieces are mistaken for food and ingested, or the animals are entangled, causing suffocation, starvation, and internal injuries (SOU, 2018).

There is limited data on the amount of balloons and confetti litter found on beaches in the Baltic sea area, and even less information on how much is released in connection to celebrations and events etc. Beach litter data shows that balloon litter is widely distributed on beaches around the Baltic Sea, although not in large numbers. However, the data is both inconsistent and limited, due to different methodologies used in HELCOM countries.

As confetti is not included in the HELCOM beach litter monitoring protocol it is not possible to make accurate estimations of the amount of confetti litter on the beaches in the HELCOM area.

Unfortunately, there is also not sufficient data to give confident estimations of the amounts of balloons and plastic confetti released to the environment in the HELCOM area.

Regulatory framework

The Directive (2019/904/EU) on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment (also known as the single-use plastics (SUP) directive) is designed to reduce the volume and therefore pollution from a selection of products commonly found during monitoring of European beaches. Balloons are addressed in Articles 8(3) and 10 of the directive, by extended producer responsibility and awareness raising measures respectively. Specifically, Member States are required to ensure that producers of balloons cover at least the costs of awareness raising measures regarding their products, cleaning up litter resulting from their products and the associated transport and treatment of the litter, as well as costs of data gathering and reporting under the Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC).

The HELCOM contracting parties have little national legislation that specifically address balloon or confetti littering, in addition to what is required through implementation of the SUP directive. Sweden has introduced a ban on using plastic confetti outdoors and a target to reduce balloon littering to negligible levels by 2030. The target will be followed up through annual litter measurements. The EPR scheme under the SUP directive will oblige balloon producers to effectively contribute to achieving the goal and also to bear the cost of cleaning up balloons that become litter as well as collection and treatment that will enter into force in 2025. In some countries, such as Germany, Denmark and Sweden, balloon releases require permission from aviation authorities; however, this is due to concerns for air traffic. Denmark has stopped giving permits for this mass release of balloons for environmental reasons.



In most HELCOM parties, littering from balloons and confetti, including outdoor mass releases, is forbidden under national nature protection laws or waste acts regulating littering in public places and in nature. However, litter laws are apparently difficult to enforce in practice. Fines can be issued for littering, but few people are prosecuted for littering.

In addition to legislative measures, there have been some local initiatives to reduce littering from balloons and confetti in the HELCOM area, including information campaigns to raise awareness

and restrictions on balloon and confetti releases at the municipal level.

There are several alternatives to outdoor releases of balloons and confetti. Examples are soap bubbles (also from machines) in different sizes, flowers, reusable products like kites, windsocks, flags, banners, garden spinners, pin wheels etc. Other alternatives could be planting trees or flowers, candles and luminaries (such as a glass jar containing a light can be used. Instead of confetti made of plastic, flower petals or fresh or dried leaves could be used as well as

confetti made from natural sources such as plants and flowers.

The Baltic Assembly is a regional organization that promotes intergovernmental cooperation between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. At the 41st session of the Baltic Assembly held in 2022, the Baltic States resolved to help minimize their environmental footprint by agreeing “on a common approach of the Baltic States regarding moving towards the rejection of fireworks, balloons, plastic confetti and other environmentally harmful activities”.

Key messages

Policy options to reduce balloon and confetti litter in the Baltic Sea.



Better enforcement of national littering laws: Littering is illegal under nature protection laws or waste acts in HELCOM countries. Thus, one option to reduce the littering from balloons during e.g., celebrations and events is to strengthen enforcement of the national littering laws, so intentional releases of balloons is not happening. Information campaigns directed to the public and those that organize such events may increase awareness and compliance of the littering laws. An increased risk of getting caught and fined for littering may also increase enforcement, however one must balance the costs and resources from the legal authorities.



No permission of mass releases of balloons: Permits for intentional mass releases of balloons should not be granted by the aviation authorities



Ban on using plastic confetti outdoors: Sweden is the first HELCOM country to address this issue by implementing a national ban on using plastic confetti outdoors. This is done through the national implementation of the SUP Directive. The Swedish regulation expands the ban on various disposable plastic products to include the use of plastic confetti outdoors. This approach could be followed by other countries by amending national legislation to include restrictions on the use of plastic confetti



Improved monitoring: Balloon litter is already included in the HELCOM monitoring protocol, but different litter lists are used, and data is scarce, making it difficult to identify the sources and develop mitigation measures. If litter lists were better harmonized between CP's, this may make it easier to identify major sources and develop preventive measures. In addition, monitoring of balloons in cities or waterways, closer to the sources can also contribute to important information. To follow up on the effect of the single-use plastic directive, balloon sticks need be separated from balloons. Confetti is considered mesolitter and is not currently monitored. Consideration should be given to whether confetti could be included in existing or future beach litter monitoring programs to get an idea of its presence.



Local policy initiatives to celebrate better: Initiatives at the municipal level on litter free celebration and events could help to strengthen enforcement of the national littering laws. Outdoor confetti and balloon releases should not be allowed and if balloons are used it should be done in a responsible way to minimize the risk for releases to the environment.



Awareness raising: Campaigns directed to the public as well as companies and local governments that organize celebrations and events could have great impact on balloon and confetti littering. The campaigns should inform about the environmental problems that can be caused if balloons and confetti litter end up in the environment and make them aware that safer alternatives exist, for example blowing soap bubbles or using kites, flags and banners. Links to material developed by HELCOM can be found [here](#).

Further information

[The intentional release of balloons and confetti in the Baltic Sea Area. Scoping Study: A collection of existing information, regulation and best practices. Baltic Sea Environment Proceedings No. 195. HELCOM \(2023\).](#)

[#CelebrateBetter campaign materials](#)