

50th Anniversary Celebration of the Helsinki Convention and HELCOM

Keynote speech: Pekka Haavisto

Dear fellow friends of HELCOM and the Baltic Sea,

It is both an honor and a pleasure to be speaking here in the 50th anniversary celebration of the Helsinki Convention and HELCOM here in Riga.

We live in a time of a great transformation. Even in Europe we are no longer part of the same security order we got used to after the Cold War.

At the same time we have an even more serious threat upon us. Climate change and the crisis in our ecosystems requires immediate action everywhere on the planet.

The work of HELCOM is needed, today and in the future. It is crucial both for the wellbeing of the Baltic Sea, but also for the security in the area, and also in a broader, global context. Wellbeing of nature is a prerequisite of the wellbeing of mankind.

Unfortunately, world politics and all the ongoing conflicts and crises don't take the environment into account. War and conflict have an immense effect on nature and the climate.

We already know that the environmental cost of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine will be dramatic. The effect will be reflected on the Baltic Sea as well.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has also been bringing war closer to us. We know the potential tensions around Kaliningrad, and we have been witnessing the hit against Nord Stream pipeline and the damage caused to the Balticconnector between Finland and Estonia. What goes on in the Baltic Sea has an effect on the environment, but also on the security of the area.

A stable and secure Baltic Sea would benefit all the coastal states, not to mention the marine life itself.

Dear audience,

The roots of HELCOM, as we know, go all the way back to the Cold War. In the 1970's and 1980's, when almost all international relations between the West and the East were on ice, it was the Baltic Sea, which brought us together.

HELCOM was one of the first and one of the only forums for exchange of information between the coastal states. The role of this, of HELCOM being a forum for states from both sides of the Cold War, cannot be emphasized enough. Looking back, the founding of HELCOM seems like a small miracle. I doubt similar success could happen now, in today's world.

The fact that the Soviet Union could take part in HELCOM, share at least some of its information on the Baltic Sea, was crucial for the success of the HELCOM work. It must also have had a larger impact on the security and cooperation of the coastal states and the West and the East in general.

Going back to the early history of HELCOM, we might ask ourselves if all data given to the organization was reliable. In the early days, we perhaps viewed the state of the Baltic Sea and marine life through rose-tinted glasses.

Now we know what is threatening us.

I have always paid tribute to those environmentalists and marine scientists, who at the very early stage raised the environmental concerns around the Baltic Sea.

And of course, in 1972, the United Nations conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm was the first world conference to make the environment a major issue. I was 14 that time, so I did not participate, but my best friend who was 15 went to Stockholm.

He brought back a leaflet which was printed on recycled paper. We looked at it like a miracle - the future was in our hands.

In 1992 I had the opportunity to co-chair in a large forum called "Our Common Environment" in St. Petersburg. More than 600 environmental activists from all parts of the former Soviet Union participated. You could feel how the environmental spirit was coming out from a closed bottle.

Today we know how important public participation and the citizen's movements are for environmental awareness, and how citizens have also acted in a key role to push us decision makers forward on environmental decisions. Speaking about the Baltic Sea, the role of the citizens in the riparian countries has been and will be crucial.

Even though cooperation with all the states around our Baltic Sea at the moment seems impossible, I believe that one day it will be possible again. For that day to come, we have to work hard and keep relevant institutions alive.

The work of HELCOM could be the first step towards cooperation. It won't happen today, most likely it won't happen tomorrow, but when the day comes, I hope that HELCOM will be there to continue its work with great energy. Of course, we must first see to securing the Ukrainian independence.

The Baltic Sea brought us all together despite the Cold War. It can bring us together once again.

Dear friends, the work of HELCOM and the spirit of the Helsinki Convention is still needed. I wish for an impactful next 50 years of work for the wellbeing and security of the Baltic Sea.

Thank you.