



**Statement by Rüdiger Stempel, Executive Secretary of HELCOM
2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment
Riga, Latvia, 25 April 2024**

Dear Ministers, High-level Representatives, Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

Welcome to Riga and to this 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment!

On October 20th, 2021, ministers from around the Baltic Sea gathered for a HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in Lübeck, Germany. As those of you who attended that meeting will recall, it was pervaded by an atmosphere of cautious optimism, as the world gradually seemed to be emerging from the devastating COVID-19 pandemic and hopes ran high that—in our region as elsewhere—a return to normalcy was imminent.

Today, a mere two-and-a-half years later, both the pandemic and that sense of optimism seem to many of us like distant memories. COVID-19 has indeed abated. But we were denied the return to business as usual that so many had yearned for. Instead, history has returned to our region, which has descended into geopolitical turmoil that few people would have dared to predict at the beginning of this decade. Meanwhile, the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution is making itself felt with ever greater urgency, as each year breaks the record temperatures of its predecessor, as an estimated 10,000 species become extinct every year and as the United Nations warns that, if we continue at the current rate, there will be more plastic than fish in the oceans by 2050.

And while I trust that nobody in this room assumed that the crisis was taking place elsewhere while our region was an environmental Shangri-la, I do suspect that the results of the most recent HELCOM Holistic Assessment (HOLAS 3) may have come as a bit of a shock to many of us. In a nutshell, and to quote the State of the Baltic Sea 2023 report, which summarizes the findings of HOLAS 3:

“The Baltic Sea is under increasing impacts from climate change and biodiversity degradation catalyzed by eutrophication, pollution, land use and resource extraction. Little to no improvement of the Baltic Sea environment occurred during the assessment period from 2016 to 2021.”

After 50 years of joint efforts to protect the Baltic Sea, this is not what we would hope to see. So, should we despair? Certainly not! As the great Charlie Chaplin noted, “Despair is a narcotic. It lulls the mind into indifference.”

And indifference is the last thing we need at this crucial moment. Rather, we need to act. To quote the HOLAS 3 Summary Report once more:

“Transformative changes are needed in all socioeconomic sectors interacting with or affecting the Baltic Sea environment. Actions are needed both to stop current negative trends and to protect and restore ecosystems.”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is precisely why we are meeting today. We are gathered here to pave the way to future action for the benefit of the Baltic Sea and those who live on its shores. For all of us. Following the roadmap and using the toolbox provided by the 2021 BSAP and equipped with the enhanced knowledge generated by HOLAS 3, we can better target and prioritize our policies



as we move forward in pursuit of our quest for good environmental status for the Baltic Sea, even against the backdrop of the challenging geopolitical situation we are faced with today. And that quest can yet be successful! Because, while the results of HOLAS 3 may be sobering in many ways, there is no denying that the work of HELCOM has yielded results. Today's Baltic Sea is no longer the cesspool it was when we began our journey back in 1974. And this too is reflected by HOLAS 3, which confirms that regional measures to reduce pressures on the Baltic marine environment do work and do have a beneficial effect on the Baltic Sea, if and where they are duly implemented.

Consider the following: While the overall condition of the Baltic Sea has not improved in the period assessed by HOLAS 3, inputs of nutrients—long considered the primary environmental threat to the Baltic Sea—and certain hazardous substances have reached sustainable levels in some parts of the Sea. And while biodiversity in the Sea is undoubtedly still under assault, there is an uptick in biodiversity conservation measures and our region is on track towards reaching the 30 by 30 target. These and other success stories should encourage us to persist in our efforts to realize our joint 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 economic and social activities.” We are not yet there, but we are getting there. And this is no time to relent. Now is the time to redouble our efforts!

Dear Ministers, high-level representatives, Madam Chair, distinguished delegates, I believe we should look back with pride, but without complacency, at what has been achieved in 50 years of HELCOM history. And we should acknowledge the debt of gratitude we owe to those on whose shoulders we stand, who gave their all for the Baltic Sea and whose knowledge, tireless work and passion for our common cause of saving our common Sea have shaped the history of our organization and allowed it to advance its mission. We owe it to them to carry on their legacy and finish the job. We owe it to future generations. And we owe it to the Baltic Sea itself. Thank you very much!