

2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment

Riga, Latvia • 25 April 2024

Minutes of the 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment





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Minutes of the 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment

Opening and welcome

- 0.1 The 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment (Baltic Sea MM 2024) was hosted by Latvia, as the HELCOM chairmanship 2022-2024 in Riga, Latvia at the National Library of Latvia on 25 April 2024. The Ministerial Meeting was followed by the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Convention in the afternoon of the same day.
- The Ministerial Meeting was attended by ministers respectively high-level representatives of the EU and the Contracting Parties to the Helsinki Convention that are Member States of the EU (H9), by Chairs and Vice-Chairs of HELCOM Groups, and the following Observer organizations: Baltic Farmers' Forum on Environment (BFFE), Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC), Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation (BSSSC), Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB), Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO), OSPAR Commission, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/Minamata Convention on Mercury and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). In addition, representatives of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Baltic Sea Region Spatial Planning Initiative (VASAB) participated as invited guests. The list of participants is included as **Annex 1**.
- 0.3 The Meeting was chaired by the Chair of the Helsinki Commission, Ms. Evija Šmite, Latvia.
- 0.4 Ms. Inga Bērziņa, Minister for Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Latvia and Mr. Rüdiger Strempel, Executive Secretary of the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), welcomed the participants to the Ministerial Meeting. Welcoming words are included as **Annex 2** and **Annex 3**.

Agenda Item 1 Adoption of the Agenda

1.1 The Meeting <u>adopted</u> the Provisional Agenda as submitted to the Meeting, included as **Annex 4**.

Agenda Item 2 Introduction

2.1 The Meeting <u>took note</u> of the keynote presentation "State of the Baltic Sea 2023 — now that we know, where do we go?" by Ms. Jannica Haldin, Deputy Executive Secretary of HELCOM, included as **Annex 5**.

Agenda Item 3 Ministerial Debate

- 3.1 The Meeting considered the following supporting documents:
 - HELCOM 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP)
 - The third HELCOM holistic assessment (HOLAS 3) 2016-2021
 - o State of the Baltic Sea 2023 in brief
 - o State of the Baltic Sea 2023 summary report
 - Thematic assessments 2023

HELCOM Thematic assessment of economic and social analyses 2016-2021
HELCOM Thematic assessment of spatial distribution of pressures and impacts 2016-2021
HELCOM Thematic assessment of hazardous substances, marine litter, underwater noise and non-indigenous species 2016-2021



HELCOM Thematic assessment of biodiversity 2016-2021
HELCOM Thematic assessment of eutrophication 2016-2021

- 3.2 The Meetings <u>took note</u> of the background document HELCOM publication "From global targets to regional actions Global Biodiversity Framework and Baltic Sea Action Plan".
- 3.3 The Chair presented the following questions for the Ministerial Debate, which was conducted in two rounds:
 - I. What do the main findings of the State of the Baltic Sea 2023 report mean for the implementation of the HELCOM 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan? Based on these results, are there topics or sectors where you see a need for prioritized implementation or specific action?
 - II. How can we continue and reinforce the successful implementation of HELCOM goals notwithstanding the current geopolitical situation in the Baltic Sea region?
- 3.4 The Chair thanked the EU and the Contracting Parties present for their contributions to the Ministerial Debate and the guidance provided for future HELCOM work. The details of the debate are reflected in **Annex** 6.
- 3.5 The Meeting <u>considered</u> the draft Ministerial Declaration of the 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment and the draft Statement on the geopolitical situation, as submitted to the Meeting based on the outcome of IC HELCOM 2-2024.
- 3.6 The Meeting <u>considered</u> the draft updated Science Agenda based on the outcome of IC HELCOM 2-2024.

Agenda Item 4 Statements by HELCOM Observers and Invitees

4.1 The Meeting <u>took note</u> of the statements by the following HELCOM Observers:

Intergovernmental organisations

- Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), delivered by Ms. Helena Tuuri, Chair of the Committee of Senior
 Officials of Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) during the Finnish Presidency of the CBSS, 2023-2024 (full statement in Annex 7);
- Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO), delivered by Ms. Nea Westerlund, Fund Manager
 of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) Fund (full statement in Annex 8);
- OSPAR Commission, delivered by Ms. Carole Durussel, Deputy Secretary of OSPAR (full statement in **Annex 9**);

International non-governmental organisations

- Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC), delivered by Mr. Jarek Zielinski, Executive Committee Chair of BSAC (full statement in **Annex 10**);
- Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB), delivered by Ms. Bettina Taylor, Co-Chair of CCB (full statement in **Annex 11)**;
- World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF), Ms. Johanna Fox, Director of the WWF Baltic Sea Programme (full statement in **Annex 12**).
- 4.2 The Meeting also <u>took note</u> of the statements by the invited guests from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), delivered by Mr. Boris Erg, IUCN Regional Director for Europe ((full statement in **Annex 13**) and the Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea (VASAB), delivered by Ms. Alda Nikodemusa, Head of the VASAB Secretariat (full statement in **Annex 14**).
- 4.3 The Meeting <u>thanked</u> the HELCOM Observers and Invitees for the statements which testify to the long-standing cooperation between HELCOM and its Observer and partner organizations, noting that the



statements contain food for thought, and <u>expressed</u> the wish and hope for the good cooperation to continue also in the future, as it is a key element in reaching our joint objective of protecting the Baltic Sea.

Agenda Item 5 Adoption of the Ministerial Declaration and Statement

- 5.1 The Meeting <u>adopted</u> the Ministerial Declaration of the 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment, included as **Annex 15**.
- 5.2 The Meeting adopted the Statement on the geopolitical situation, included as **Annex 16**.
- 5.3 The Chair <u>thanked</u> the EU and all Contracting Parties present for the successful adoption of the Ministerial Declaration and Statement as these will pave the way for the coming years of HELCOM cooperation, a crucial period, given that the second half of the implementation phase of the BSAP is approaching and redoubled efforts will be required.

Agenda Item 6 Closure of the Meeting

- 6.1 The Meeting considered and adopted the draft List of Decisions.
- 6.2 The Meeting thanked Latvia for excellent hosting of the Meeting.
- 6.3 The Minutes of the Meeting were finalized in consultation with the Chair and will be submitted to the participants of the Meeting.



Annex 1 List of participants

- *) Head of Delegation
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Annex 2 Welcoming words by Ms. Inga Bērziņa, Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia

Madam Chair,

Executive Secretary,

Dear colleagues and HELCOM partners,

- It is my great pleasure and honour to welcome you to Riga!
- The Ministerial meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment followed by the celebration of the 50th
 anniversary of the Helsinki Convention is the major and culminating event during the Latvian
 Chairmanship of HELCOM.
- This meeting is taking place in an unprecedented geopolitical situation that has never been experienced in the history of HELCOM. It was a great challenge for Latvia as the Chairmanship, and, I think, to all of you.
- However, we the Member States of the European Union together with the European Commission, were able to mobilise and continue the regional cooperation so needed for the Baltic Sea environment.
- Of course, this would not be possible without the support of our trusted partners, including scientific community and non-governmental organisations.
- Today, we will discuss the findings of the latest state of the Baltic Sea report. Unfortunately, they show only little or no improvement.
- Therefore, we have to work harder and better toward our shared vision of the healthy marine environment.
- The Ministerial Declaration of this meeting notes progress achieved in the implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan. However, it also stresses the need to tackle the crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.
- I am confident that we will be able to agree on the next steps needed to fully implement the Plan and to improve the state of the Baltic Sea.
- Our reaffirmed commitment to continued cooperation within HELCOM and with other organisations regionally and globally will also contribute to this aim.
- I am looking forward to productive discussion. I wish you an inspiring exchange of views and experiences!
- I hope that the exchange of ideas will also be facilitated by this venue, which has both national importance and symbolic meaning for Latvians. National Library is also known as the "Castle of Light", which represents the wisdom and determination to achieve the goal.



Annex 3 Welcoming words by Mr. Rüdiger Strempel, Executive Secretary of HELCOM

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!



Annex 4 Agenda

Opening and welcome

Agenda Item 1 Adoption of the Agenda

Agenda Item 2 Introduction

Agenda Item 3 Ministerial debate

Agenda Item 4 Statements by HELCOM Observers and Invitees

Agenda Item 5 Adoption of the Ministerial Declaration and Statement

Agenda Item 6 Closure of the Meeting

Family Photo and Press Conference



Annex 5 Keynote presentation by Ms. Jannica Haldin, Deputy Executive Secretary of HELCOM

Honoured ministers, high level representatives, madam Chair, esteemed participants in this Ministerial Meeting, my name is Jannica Haldin, I'm the Deputy Executive Secretary of HELCOM and the coordinator of the Third Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea.

I grew up by, on and in the Baltic Sea.

For me the Baltic Sea it is smooth cliffs, sunwarm under bare feet, the light drawing patterns on the sand in the shallows, the sound of the water lapping the shore in the late evening, the ancient creak of the ice heaving on a crisp cold night, or the oppressive anticipation of a storm rolling in.

There is probably no place that has shaped who I have become in the same way as the Sea. It has, as you might imagine, played no small part of why I have ended up here in front of you.

And while my picture of the Baltic Sea has changed over time, as my understanding has broadened, the Sea of my past, the one in my memory, is still there.

In Swedish we have a saying: a picture can tell you a story of a 1000 words. The Status of the Baltic Sea assessment provides us with exactly that, a picture, a snapshot if you will, of what the situation has been for the Baltic Sea between the years 2016-2021.

Regrettably, it is not the pretty picture we had hoped to see, nor is it aligned with the picture of the Baltic Sea I have in my mind.

The third holistic assessment shows that pressures on the environment, including hazardous substances, eutrophication, extraction of species and the introduction of non-indigenous species, remain above sustainable levels.

We can also increasingly see the effects of climate change across the region, something which is highly likely to play an increasing role in future of the Baltic Sea.

The sea teaches us about the reality of connectivity, for good and bad. Each species links to others, weaving a web of resilience, a safety net that extends far beyond the shores of our sea, onto land and which directly affect our society. The species that inhabit the Baltic Sea, and the connections they have, do not recognise our anthropogenic borders, but neither do the pressures we put on the marine environment, and pressures impacting one species create ripples across the foodweb, fraying the links holding it together.

As a consequence of decades of unsustainable use, the assessment now shows cases of inadequate status in biodiversity and the foodweb across the full extent of the Baltic Sea. Only a few biodiversity indicators have acceptable levels in parts of the region, and none in all areas.

This threatens populations, habitats and the functioning of the ecosystem, increasing the risk of further unravelling our safety net by reducing the resilience of the ecosystem against further environmental changes, climate change included.

While the sea might know no borders, it has a long memory, one much longer than ours. While the holistic assessment shows the picture of what the situation looked like in the last six years, that picture has been painted over decades. We are facing the legacy of those who came before us, and while the actions taken over these decades might be history for us, it is the present for the marine environment.



My, and your, picture of the sea is, at its core, largely defined by our memories and previous experiences. But this means that our collective view of the Baltic Sea only stretch back one generation, changing the picture of what a healthy Baltic Sea was like for every generation that passes. This is referred to as shifting baseline syndrome, and has been shown to have major impact on our relationship with the world around us.

Shifting baselines might make it challenging for us envision the reality of what a healthy Baltic Sea will look like, but even without a clear picture of what our future should look like, we can through collectively understanding the patterns underneath the problems, enable change.

And while at first glance the snapshot provided by the State of the Baltic Sea report looks dark, that is not the full picture, and the results are not the only aspect of the assessment I wish to highlight.

In the past 6 years our knowledge about the Baltic Sea ecosystem, and policies to support it, have developed substantially, and as an endeavour, HOLAS 3 is an extrodinary example of what can be achieved through true regional cooperation and long-term commitment.

From millions of data entries, through the 59 indicator reports, 14 integrated assessments, 5 thematic assessment reports, and the State of the Baltic Sea summary report, the holistic assessment represents the most comprehensive assessment ever produced for the Baltic Sea.

It builds on the vast knowledge and experiences developed among HELCOM countries over several decades and now covers every known major pressure and each part of the ecosystem.

Close to 1000 experts from all across the Baltic Sea have been included in the review process and over 9 months we have processes almost 3000 comments to ensure the robustness of the information presented.

With improved data availability the confidence in the results, as well as the possibility to use them for management have also significantly improved. Such advancements are of key importance in unlocking a sustainable future. It is not enough that we understand what is happening, we also need to understand why it is happening, and how we can change it.

The results show, unequivocally, that at the core of the poor status we can see across the Baltic Sea ecosystem there is one common denominator: us.

There is no pressure currently facing the Baltic Sea that does not stem our activities. Activities which are occurring at a number and an intensity beyond what the ecosystem can tolerate. Now, while the sea might know no borders, it does have boundaries. There are no unending resources. And when we use more than the ecosystem can provide we are taking from the next generation. This is no imaginary debt, it is a very concrete one, the consequences of which we can see in in every result in the assessment. The situation we are facing is not something that happened to us, it is something we did, and are doing.

This does however, come with a very concrete silver lining. When we know that our activities are what underpins every pressure on the Baltic Sea, it means we have the power to change it.

If we limit the impact from the activities we can control, the ecosystem will start to rebuild, the Baltic Sea will heal and improve the resilience to face pressures which are harder to control. While the complexities surrounding this can be challenging, at its heart it is as simple as that: if you stop breaking it, it stops breaking.

And this is what measures is all about. Possibly the most important thing the latest status assessment show us is that when we have the right measures, and when we implement, **they work**.

We see these signals in the results of the assessment, first in the pressure related indicators because these react directly to changes in our behaviour.



While the results of the assessments might not reflect it, in other words we might not yet have reached the threshold value for good status, we can see positive trends where measures have been implemented across the region, for example for some of the hazardous substances included in the assessment. Also for input of nutrients where, for example, the assessment shows a reduction of phosphorus of 28% overall, and up to 49% in the Gulf of Finland, compared to the reference period.

While we can see that measures are working, they only work when they are implemented. The poor status of many species and habitats in the Baltic Sea reflects their response to many environmental pressures acting in combination, rather than to individual pressures. In practice this means that to see a change in the status for the ecosystem, as opposed to a change in individual pressures, we need a combination of measures.

And, with the exception of a few measures such as habitat restoration, the reality is that the most effective, and cost efficient, measures to alleviate the pressures are those that target managing our activities, so that they are within the boundaries the ecosystem can tolerate.

It is easier to stop nutrients from entering the marine environment than it is to remove them once they are there.

Adaptive management is about iteratively improving management, but not in the way that we start with limited management and then move to more management, rather that we manage activities precautionarily and then, with more information, there is a possibility to be less precautionary.

So where do we start? What measures are needed, you might ask? Luckily, when it comes to measures the Baltic Sea Action Plan specifies our shared objectives and agreed actions and measures for the Baltic Sea.

The State of the Baltic Sea report provides us with an opportunity to reflect on how our current measures affect the Baltic Sea environment and assess the urgency and need for implementation of the Action plan. The assessment also enables us to tune our management efforts and helps each country in their efforts to ensure that we are doing the right thing in the right place at the right time.

Next year we are half way to 2030, the target year of the Baltic Sea Action Plan, and it will also be the first full scale reporting on the level of implementation of the Action Plan across all the countries around the Baltic Sea.

But already now the Baltic Sea Action Plan and the results of the holistic assessment make it clear that achieving good environmental status of Baltic Sea ecosystems requires transformative change across all sectors affecting the sea.

We need to acknowledge that systems don't break, they only react. They function to produce the outcomes they are designed for, or have evolved, to produce. And our system of unsustainable use has led us here. So, it isn't a question of fixing a broken system, it is about actively replacing a system that does not serve us. Because make not mistake, the system that put us in this situation does not serve us. The economic and social analysis in the holistic assessment show that our failure to secure good status is costing us.

Fishing has lost 20% of the jobs in the regions since 2014, and this year yet more stocks collapsed. Even growing sectors like coastal and marine tourism are estimated to be missing out on 9 billion euros per year due to poor status. And that is just one sector.

Beyond the market value, the non-market recreational benefits for the Baltic Sea countries amount to at least 33.7 billion euros on average per year, following a conservative estimation approach. And there is potential for more, would status be improved.



We know enough. What we need now is scale and speed. Ultimately, the recovery of Baltic Sea biodiversity is entirely dependent on how well we can manage our activities to ensure that they are truly sustainable, both in the near future and in the long term. Considering the high costs of inaction, achieving a healthy Baltic Sea is also an investment in the sustainable economic and societal development of our region.

We are facing the consequences of the actions of those that came before us, and it is no easy thing. But what about our legacy? What will we hand over to our children or grand-children. At the UN Ocean Decade conference a few weeks ago one of the keynote speakers said that right now we have a once in a planet chance. And while we might not be able to fix the whole planet, the Baltic Sea is our contribution, our responsibility, and we actually can fix it. If we choose to.

I have an 8 year old daughter at home. By making the right choices now we can turn the direction of our sliding baseline. We can leave the next generation memories that shape a picture of a Baltic Sea that is healthier than the one we see, rather than the opposite. Richer, more diverse and healing. It is time to start mending our safety net instead of taking it apart. Because our failings inevitably become our children's reality.

The first step to fixing a problem is understanding what causes it. We know that now. And the second is to fix it. And that is why we are here.

Thank you.



Annex 6 Debate by Ministers and High-level Representatives of the Contracting Parties

Note: The Ministerial Debate is reflected verbatim, based on the transcripts of the statements as received from the respective Contracting Parties.

First question of the Ministerial Debate:

I. What do the main findings of the State of the Baltic Sea 2023 report mean for the implementation of the HELCOM 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan? Based on these results, are there topics or sectors where you see a need for prioritized implementation or specific action?

Latvia

Ms. Inga Bērziņa, Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development

- To deal with the triple planetary crisis affecting the Baltic Sea we need action at all levels: local, national, and regional.
- Latvia agrees with the conclusion of the HOLAS 3 report that we need to facilitate ecosystem-based management of the Baltic Sea and to increase its resilience to climate change. We believe that these are focal areas for HELCOM in the coming years.
- Integration of the climate change considerations in our assessments, decision making, and actions is essential. We welcome the ongoing work that will lead to better integration of climate change during revision of HELCOM policies.
- In the coming years, Latvian researchers will study impacts of climate change on the marine ecosystem within the EU¹ funded project.
- In our opinion the HOLAS-3 report indicates another priority area marine litter. Plastics and microplastics is a principal environmental challenge for the Baltic Sea, including the Gulf of Riga.
- We all shall target our actions at the whole plastic life cycle its production, consumption, disposal, and reuse. I believe that each of us can share some successful measures that are already implemented and linked to the Baltic Sea Action Plan.
- Two years ago, Latvia introduced deposit system for glass, PET and metal items. Since then, amount of beverage packaging found in rivers and beaches has significantly decreased, reducing macroplastic pollution. The data show that in 2024, 87 % of PET packaging was returned to the deposit system.
- To promote circularity, our Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development together with 22 partners are implementing the EU LIFE Integrated project² aimed at reducing generation of waste and promoting secondary use of resources.

¹ European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund

² LIFE integrated project "Waste To Resources Latvia" (01.11.2021 – 31.12.2028)



- Latvia also contributes to the research of microplastic pollution. Recently a microplastics laboratory has been established by one of our scientific institutes. In recent years Latvian researchers studied microplastic pollution in beach sand, lake sediments, wastewater, and sewage sludge.
- In our opinion, one more topic for priority action is marine biodiversity and ecosystems.
- The HOLAS-3 report highlights that marine ecosystems continue to be negatively impacted by multiple
 and cumulative human pressures. Interest in the use of the sea and its resources is growing, among
 the other things stimulated by the "blue economy" and Green Deal targets.
- At the same time the HOLAS-3 report, and research show that an immediate action is required if we want to protect marine life and to secure ecosystem services.
- Ecosystem based maritime spatial planning that also considers climate change effects, can enhance biodiversity conservation and strengthen marine ecosystem services, establishing a network of marine protected areas.
- One of the LIFE projects in Latvia will create a basis for establishment of a new marine protected area in the Exclusive Economic Zone. In this way, we hope to reach the ambitious EU and global target of protecting at least 30% of marine habitats.
- In the interim assessment of the Latvian Marine Spatial Plan, we pay special attention to the protection of biodiversity and the development of offshore wind energy.
- Dear colleagues. The health of the Baltic Sea is directly linked to the wellbeing of the people living around it.
- I truly believe that we would live up to healthy and sustainable Baltic Sea if we integrated the latest knowledge into all our actions and secured sufficient and timely funding to meet the targets.
- In this regard we welcome HELCOM initiatives to engage in the large-scale EU funded projects to support implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan.
- But also, all of us have to renew our commitments to its implementation. I hope that today's discussion will help us to agree on the priorities and serve as a basis for further work towards implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan.

Denmark

Ms. Ida Hannibal, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Environment

- It's an important milestone that we now have a new thorough holistic assessment to guide our work.
- First, as we have just heard, hazardous substances remain to be one of the top pressures in the Baltic Sea. Discharge of scrubber wash-water from ships is a significant source of hazardous substances, such as heavy metals and tar substances, this contributes to the high pressure on the marine environment.
- The hazardous substances from scrubber wash-water accumulate on our seabed and are absorbed into the ocean's food chains and end up in the fish we eat. So Denmark truly believes we need to do more.



- I can announce that the Danish government, two weeks ago, has reached a "broad political agreement" to ban the discharge of scrubber wash-water in the Danish territorial waters (out to 22 km from the Danish coast), starting next year.
- But we believe that we should all do more together.
- In HELCOM we should prioritize to ban discharges of scrubber washwater in the Baltic Sea. We hope you agree.
- Secondly, the State of the Baltic Sea also clearly demonstrated that the entire Baltic Sea continues to suffer from too many nutrients. While this is not surprising, it is quite worrying.
- Over the last several decades, we have achieved significant nutrient input reductions overall. However, in more recent years, the positive trends have, in some cases stagnated or even worsened.
- Therefore, we must all increase our efforts in order to reach the agreed Maximum Allowable Inputs and the National Nutrient Input Ceilings. For that reason, we strongly support the fact that the new ministerial declaration reiterates the pledge to our common Nutrient Input Reduction Scheme.

Estonia

Mr. Kaupo Läänerand, Deputy Secretary General on Maritime Affairs and Water Resources

- To begin with, it must be said, that a great work has been done with the latest third regional holistic state assessment of the Baltic Sea. This very good and comprehensive overview of the ecosystem however revealed also gaps in our knowledge in certain areas.
- For instance, the impact of underwater noiseand hazardous substanceson the environment and the overall effects of climate change on the marine environment are still difficult to assess.
- We still lack threshold values for determining good environmental status in some areas, and there are still gaps in basic data for assessing the status.
- Therefore we acknowledge the need for continued regional cooperation among our authorities and scientists within HELCOM to successfully implement the Baltic Sea Action plan.
- In addition to supporting scientific cooperation, we strongly encourage the consideration of a costeffective approach in these developments.
- Secondly we see, that although marine litter is not currently the most pressing issue in the Baltic Sea, the latest assessment indicates that the situation is not very favorable and there are signs of deterioration.
- For Estonia, it is important to continue actively preventing marine litter at the regional level, and in the future, unified monitoring requirements for microplastics, thresholds including those for biodiversity, should be established.
- We believe it is important to continue researching and evaluating the effects of marine litter so that more targeted measures can be implemented in the future.
- Thirdly, it is important for us to continue establishing a network of marine protected areas in the Baltic Sea through joint cooperation. Creating synergy in this field is crucial.



- Effective and sustainable management of marine protected areas and habitat restoration deserve priority attention, as this can also improve the current situation of depleted fish stocks and protect endangered species.
- Additionally, it is important for us to enhance our pollution response capabilities in the following years. We have recently witnessed threats to underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea.
- We must be aware of the threat of terrorism and enhance continuous monitoring to prevent the worst possible consequences for the marine environment. Shadow fleets are a new and stressing threat in the Baltic Sea. Joint training is important to be continued, like BALEX delta.
- Furthermore, the safe disposal of old wrecks and addressing sources of danger in the sea (such as UXOs) are increasingly important topics that require emphasis.
- Finally we must admit, that considering the economic scale in environmental conservation activities is becoming increasingly important.
- Meaning, that assessing socio-economic impacts is becoming more crucial –the effectiveness of measures and their costs should definitely be considered more closely while planning implementation and also during implementation of measures!

European Union

Mr. Patrick Child, Deputy Director General for Environment

Let me first highlight that the report on the state of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS 3) is a remarkable tool demonstrating in itself the added value of regional cooperation. HOLAS helps us build a solid and informed roadmap for future HELCOM work.

The picture is however not rosy: despite all efforts already achieved, the state of the Baltic Sea is either not improving or doing so very slowly. The pressures on the Baltic Sea remain intense, leading to high levels of pollution, eutrophication, loss of biodiversity and excessive resource extraction, including through unsustainable fishing practices. And the impacts of these pressures are exacerbated by climate change. It is probably not exaggerated to affirm that the Baltic Sea is among the most "pressured" seas in the world.

Luckily, there is still some good news to tell. First, there is a high level of awareness across the Baltic countries on the need to take strong and effective actions to preserve the Baltic Sea. This sense of emergency is a shared one - the population, the stakeholders and ultimately us, the authorities we represent. Second, the HOLAS report shows that, when implemented, measures do work. For instance, we have seen some good results for hazardous substances having progressively decreased at sea. The region is also on good track to do its part for the global target of 30% protected areas by 2030. A third piece of good news is that the HOLAS report broadly confirms the priority actions decided under the Baltic Sea action plan. It means we know where and what we have to do. We now need to put it in place. It therefore shows the necessity for immediate and targeted action and implementation. We need to accelerate our actions to reduce pollution at source, mitigate climate change and protect biodiversity.

You can rest reassured that the European Union is very active on all these fronts. Let me mention few recent examples:

- The EU has new rules on the treatment of urban wastewater – they were adopted by the co-legislators just a few weeks ago. It strengthens the treatment standards for nitrogen and phosphorus and imposes such a treatment for all facilities above 150,000 inhabitants. It also removes the possibility to



use 'natural retention' for nitrogen in the Nordic lakes. This will directly reduce nitrogen and phosphorus leaching into the Baltic Sea and help decrease eutrophication at sea. The new text was partly inspired by HELCOM's actions on stormwater overflows or nutrient reduction.

- Similarly we have revised the EU rules on industrial emissions. The stricter standards and strengthened measures to reduce pollution will also directly contribute to reduce the Baltic Sea contamination from industrial pollutants.
- You are also aware that we are also working on the review of the Marine strategy framework directive and we will soon be publishing our evaluation outcomes. The remarkable work of HELCOM, as well as other regional sea conventions will certainly be a source of inspiration for our next steps of this legislative review. Our intention is to reinforce the Directive so that it can help and support the work of the Regional Seas Conventions. Here I would like to take the opportunity to thank HELCOM and its contracting parties for the joint work we do in ensuring that our respective frameworks are compatible, also as we both seek to achieve good environmental status of the Baltic Sea. This common objective drives us forward together.

To sum it up, I clearly see a win-win situation here: implementing EU law helps EU Member States reaching the objectives of the Baltic Sea action plan and conversely, this action plan will help EU Member States achieve good environmental status required by our rules, and more widely, the objectives of the Biodiversity strategy for 2030 and the Zero pollution action plan, just to name two initiatives under the European Green Deal. It also supports the delivery on the EU and international commitments, for instance the EU Biodiversity strategy for 2030, Biodiversity beyond national jurisdictions (BBNJ) and the Kunming-Montréal Global biodiversity framework whereby 30% of the marine areas should be 'effectively conserved and managed'.

Finland

Ms. Sara Viljanen, Senior Ministerial Adviser, on behalf of Mr. Kai Mykkänen, Minister of Climate and the Environment

Let me begin with the sincere apologies sent by our minister, Mr. Kai Mykkänen, who was supposed to be sitting here instead of myself, but unfortunately got ill in the very last minute. Mr. Mykkänen will join us online later today, for the opening of the afternoon session, but unfortunately he was not in a position to join this debate, so as Finland's Head of Delegation to HELCOM, I will be delivering the following statement on his behalf.

As you all know, we will celebrate HELCOM and its 50 years of regional cooperation later in the afternoon, but right now, I wish to recognize the great value of the recently published State of the Baltic Sea Report, HOLAS-3. This globally appraised holistic assessment of the state of our home sea provides us with the best possible background information, when looking into the future and into the measures needed, to protect this unique sea area of ours.

While the report itself is of outstanding quality, the message it brings is less so. State of the Baltic Sea Report shows only little or no improvement in the marine environment, and in general, the state of the Baltic Sea is far from good.

Eutrophication continues as our main challenge, and combined with progressing climate change, these overarching problems effect almost everything in the marine environment, and require us to act urgently.



HELCOM and its Contracting Parties have already made significant strides towards a healthier Baltic Sea, by significantly reducing the nutrient loads of our catchment area, but we have not done enough yet. For example, we struggle to finish the work we started in the 1990s, when HELCOM agreed on a set of pollution Hot Spots, and on a program for their removal. Also in Finland, we still have one remaining Hot Spot to tackle.

The last remaining Hot Spot in Finland is caused by agricultural pollution, from the drainage area of the Archipelago Sea in Southwest Finland. This unique sea area is rich in biodiversity, but heavily burdened by eutrophication. Our government has put the removal of this Hot Spot high on its agenda.

There is a long history of actions to improve the situation in the Archipelago Sea. We are continuing this work and, at the moment, we are working to diminish the nutrient input from the drainage area, with different types of measures. Our focus is to make nutrient recycling a norm, and we aim at resolving the challenges caused by nutrient rich biomasses such as manure. In addition, we increase the use of biomasses in biogas and fertilizer production, by developing and testing new technologies.

In Finland, we also continue spreading gypsum to our agricultural lands. This method has proven to be a highly effective short-term solution in binding nutrients into the soil and preventing phosphorus from leaking into the waterways and further to the sea. We are also testing the use of two other substances for this purpose; organic side streams from pulp and paper industry, as well as structural lime.

As always, we will share our experiences with the HELCOM community as soon as our results become available. We wish for the other Contracting Parties to also take action, in order to restore and clean all remaining hot spots.

Cooperation with enterprises is at the heart of our activities. Together with the enterprises, we have developed a Green Deal model for voluntary water protection commitments, and we put emphasis into engaging private investment, in various water protection measures. We note with great satisfaction that also the Ministerial Declaration we are about to adopt highlights the need for closer cooperation with the private sector.

In addition to the long-lasting challenge of managing nutrients, new pressures such as marine litter have emerged into the Baltic Sea environment lately. Very recently, we have heard about exceptionally large quantities of marine plastic litter having stranded to our coastlines, and the quantity and quality of this litter has raised concern, at least in my home country. We find it important for the Contracting Parties of HELCOM to share information about all sources of litter, in order to be able to constitute a shared understanding of their origin.

While we still do not have enough data about these accumulations of litter, we already know that the so-called "dark fleet" or "shadow fleet" of the Baltic Sea pose an ever-increasing risk of oil spills close to our coastlines. In Finland, we worry about the oil shipments from Russia with weak vessels, under questionable insurance coverage. Hard winters with challenging ice conditions in the Gulf of Finland can further aggravate these safety risks.

The ability of Finland to influence the situation is limited. These vessels do not visit Finnish or other EU ports, and thus, our maritime administration is unable to conduct port-state control inspections on them. We need to make the Baltic Sea voice heard on international fora, above all in the International Maritime Organization, IMO.

On the European level, the European Maritime Safety Agency, EMSA, is an important player. We feel that EMSA's oil-spill response resources are currently not evenly distributed within Europe, taking into account the



increased risks in the northern Baltic. In Finland's view, the northern Baltic Sea requires at least one EMSA oil spill emergency response vessel, to support Baltic Sea states in preventing environmental damage.

To this effect, Finland will organize an event in conjunction with the next EMSA Administrative Board meeting in Lisbon, and we warmly welcome your colleagues in the EMSA Board to join the event in June. All Baltic Sea states need to act more coherently together in this issue, both towards EMSA as well as towards our colleagues at the European Commission.

Germany

Ms. Steffi Lemke, Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection

I am delighted to be here in Riga today so that we can advance the protection of the Baltic Sea together. There is no doubt that the world's seas and oceans are under pressure. Unfortunately, the Baltic Sea is no exception. "The state of the Baltic Sea ecosystem has not improved". This statement can be found in the HELCOM's State of the Baltic Sea report.

The triple planetary crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change harms the Baltic Sea's flora and fauna. It is heavily polluted with nutrients and harmful substances. The area and its resources are overused. The expansion of renewable energies is a source of further stress.

At the same time, it is clear to us all how much we need healthy seas. Only healthy seas can regulate the climate. Only healthy seas can provide humans with food, recreation and many other important services. Only healthy seas secure the foundations of our lives and economies.

So what can be done to make the Baltic Sea a healthy sea?

The answer to this can also be found in the report. Improvements are evident where measures have been implemented. As HELCOM, we have already adopted a series of measures. The report tasks us all with doing a better job of implementing them.

One focus should be on combating pollution. We must put an end to plastic waste entering the Baltic Sea and reduce pollution through nutrients and harmful substances. Minimising the adverse effects of fishing will be vital to biodiversity conservation. For this to happen, it is important to continue working on a network of effectively managed marine protected areas.

It is crucial that we implement the right measures at national level. I believe we all have a responsibility in this regard.

In Germany, for example, we recently made legislation on fertiliser use stricter, so as to curb the discharge of nutrients into our rivers and by extension seas. We also want to improve data so that we can make fertilisation more efficient and ultimately protect water bodies more effectively.

We are developing a national marine strategy. Its aim is to ensure that our seas remain clean, species-rich and productive – or are restored to that status..

We will invest 420 million euros from the auction revenue from licences for offshore wind farms in urgently needed marine nature conservation measures.

Our programme on recovering ammunition from the Baltic Sea has commenced.



For HELCOM, there can only be one response to the State of the Baltic Sea 2023 report: to implement the Baltic Sea Action plan we adopted in Lübeck two and half years ago. Without hesitation. Even when budgets are tight. They are in Germany too. Good ideas and initiatives are not enough to help the Baltic Sea. As national governments, we must make sure to provide sufficient funding so that measures can be put into practice.

It is important to me that we work together with those making use of the seas. Economic sectors such as fishing and tourism depend on a healthy marine environment. For such sectors, the protection and restoration of nature involves short-term costs. But business as usual would completely deprive them of their livelihoods for good. Investments in the sustainable development of the Baltic Sea region not only help nature, they also lay the groundwork for an economy that is fit for the future.

Let us invest in restoring the Baltic Sea as a foundation of life for future generations. I have outlined where our priorities lie. The environmental crises will not wait for us to work through them one after the other. This is why we should focus, as far as possible, on measures that address multiple environmental impacts at the same time. The 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan is the right roadmap for this.

Lithuania

Ms. Daiva Matusevičė, Vice-Minister

Lithuania recognizes the urgent need for action in light of the findings outlined in the latest State of the Baltic Sea report. The challenges posed by climate change and eutrophicationdemand decisive and coordinated efforts. Our goal is to ensure the effective implementation of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan and to address major problems in the Baltic Sea, both within Lithuania and across the region.

I will name now some examples of Lithuania's activities directed to solve those problems.

Firstly, Lithuania has implemented a series of comprehensive measures to reduce nitrogen originating in agriculture. Over the past two years, we have made significant efforts to digitalize processes, promising improvements in the condition of rivers, lakes and the Baltic Sea. We have been preparing technical assistance for the balanced use of fertilizers, updated fertilization methodology and created fertilizer declaration system. This enables the declaration of fertilizer usage at the field level.

Last year, Lithuania initiated a project aimed at developing a free and user-friendly fertilization tool, which empowers farmers to devise optimal fertilization plans for each field. Integration of this system into soil databases, will reduce the necessity to conduct individual soil tests. Economically beneficial for farmers, this tool contributes significantly to our overarching goal: reduction of the nutrient leaching into environment and gradually improve the condition of water bodies. This initiative exemplifies Lithuania's commitment to fostering agricultural innovation while prioritizing environmental conservation.

Secondly, the recent launch of the *Wastewater Management Information System* underscores our commitment to proactive monitoring and swift intervention to prevent environmental contamination. A primary objective of the system is to maintain an accurate register of wastewater systems, enabling quick responses to prevent untreated or inadequately treated wastewater from entering the environment. It will enhance the effectiveness of controlling individual wastewater management systems and significantly contribute to controlling potential sources of pollution and improving the overall water quality.

Thirdly, at the Klaipėda Sea Port, Lithuania is implementing the *Green Port Development Plan* in line with the European Directives. This plan prioritizes environmental preservation, sustainable and innovative practices, reflecting our dedication to reducing air and water pollution, mitigating climate impact, and enhancing biodiversity.



By 2030, we aim to achieve significant progress in implementing the mentioned measures that contribute to the overarching objectives of the Baltic Sea Action Plan.

Poland

Ms. Monika Michaliszyn, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland

I would like to start by thanking the Latvian side, which is holding the Chairmanship of HELCOM, for hosting us today in beautiful Riga and inviting us to this important HELCOM ministerial meeting of the Helsinki Convention.

Each of us, participating in today's discussion, is aware of the special conditions of the Baltic Sea. It is one of the largest brackish water areas in the world, with a surface area of 420,000 square kilometers, relatively shallow and has limited water circulation with oceans. All this makes the Baltic Sea not only a unique place for many species to live, but also an area particularly exposed to pressures of anthropogenic nature.

The results of the third HELCOM holistic assessment 2016-2021 (HOLAS 3) are certainly not optimistic. The actions we have taken so far, turned out to have only a limited impact on improving the environmental condition of the Baltic Sea. The well-known pressures such as eutrophication, pollution from hazardous substances, land use and overfishing still exist and have a major impact on the current poor state of the Baltic Sea. What is more, the impact of these pressures is being strengthened by ongoing climate change accelerating the loss of biodiversity in the Baltic Sea.

Therefore, the main findings of the HOLAS 3 constitute the outmost important basis for today's discussion on further actions need to be taken within HELCOM.

Looking at the HOLAS 3 policy recommendations, we can see, that our road to improve the environmental condition of the Baltic Sea will certainly not be straight and convenient, rather will be winding and bumping.

However, we should not forget that we already have a map explaining us how to do this. Its name is the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP), adopted at the last HELCOM ministerial meeting in Lübeck in 2021.

Now is time for each of us to implement the updated BSAP, which contains almost 200 stipulated actions, both at joint and national level by each of Contracting Parties. It depends solely on our determination and efforts, to what extent we will achieve the vision that is "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".

From the perspective of Poland, I would like to draw your attention on two aspects, also reflected in the updated BSAP

The first one is the need to find a right balance between the economic and social use of the Baltic Sea, as well as the protection of its biodiversity. It seems particularly important not only in the context of the extremely sensitive nature of the Baltic Sea, but also dynamic economic development of this region, including shipping, offshore activities, fisheries and tourism.

Sustainable use of the Baltic Sea, by applying maritime spatial plans based on ecosystem approach should enable us to reconcile various types of interests and make them complementary to each other.

The second aspect concerns pressures, like hazardous substances, that do not respect spatial limitations and have transboundary nature. To give an example submerged hazardous objects, in particular wrecks and dumped munitions should not be overlooked. They still pose a significant risk for the Baltic Sea and future measures to assess their distribution, impact on the Baltic Sea ecosystem,



as possible ways to eliminate them, require coordinated regional efforts both at the research and the financial level.

In the opinion of Poland, future involvement in these aspects within HELCOM or in cooperation with other regional organizations will bring us closer to realizing the mentioned vision of the updated BSAP.

Sweden

Mr. Daniel Westlén, State Secretary for Climate and the Environment

In 1974 we signed the Helcom Convention since we were all concerned about the environmental situation in the Baltic sea. The status of the Baltic sea was quickly deteriorating and nutrient emissions to the Baltic sea had dramatically increased since the 1950s. By 1980 the emissions of nutrients had almost quadrupled but they have now been reduced almost back to the levels of the 1950s!

Today we should be proud – but not satisfied.

We should be proud, because our regional cooperation together with our national efforts have given results. Over time, Helcom has proven to be, and still is, the galvanizing platform that inspires and facilitates progress.

Let us remind ourselves that the fundamental basis for our achievements is that we have identified and quantified the problems together, and formed a common view of what the solutions are. Today we can say: The problems are outlined in the HOLAS reports - and the list of solutions are agreed upon in the Baltic Sea Action Plan. The EU marine and maritime policy is crucial to strengthen our efforts to reach good environmental status and a blue economy.

But we should not be satisfied. HOLAS III shows that the Baltic Sea ecosystem is still in a dire situation and there is not much visible progress during the last six years. HOLAS III concludes that the measures identified in the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) are effective when they are implemented – but they have not been implemented enough. We have done too little and too late!

Let me take this opportunity to highlight two topics where we can say we are proud of progress – but not satisfied.

The first area is Minimizing impacts from shipping.

We – the Helcom countries – took the lead by implementing a strict cap on discharges of sulphur oxides into the air in 2015. We should be very proud of this, but at the same time, we know from several reports that discharges of the wash water of the scrubbers is increasing.

Let me congratulate Denmark for their decision on 11th of April to ban scrubbers in their waters. We need to jointly ban these discharges in the Baltic Sea. I ask you all to cooperate through this BSAP action and reduce these discharges!

Today, I can also announce that Sweden is preparing to ban these discharges in our territorial waters. This is a stepping-stone to a regional ban that we think is necessary!

The second area where we can be proud but not satisfied is Combatting eutrophication.

We – the Helcom countries – have done pioneering work in combatting eutrophication. The Helcom nutrient input reduction scheme provides us with a unique tool to take further action. We should be very proud of the substantial reductions made, but at the same time, we all know much more is needed, not at least in addressing diffuse losses from agriculture.



The Baltic Sea Action Plan Fund, financed by Sweden and Finland since 2010 and managed by NIB and Nefco, has supported more than 70 innovative projects in the Baltic Sea Region. Each and every invested euro has generated seven more euros in investment. Many projects have triggered new innovative and collaborative ideas for combatting eutrophication.

We need to jointly explore how to mobilize more innovative financing mechanisms to trigger collaboration, innovation and combatting eutrophication!

I am also happy to announce that Sweden is now increasing its efforts to reduce eutorphoication from river basins. This year twenty (20) new catchment coordinators will be assigned to work actively together with different stakeholders in river basins to step up action and trigger targeted and coordinated actions reducing eutrophication.

Finally, Ladies and gentlemen, our joint cooperation in establishing ecosystem based marine spatial planning in the Baltic Sea Region is impressive.

Now, there is an absolute need to strengthen ecosystem-based fisheries management and deliver on the 30% biodiversity protection target by 2030. A focus on supporting small scale fisheries for human consumption.

These joint challenges such a eutrophication, fisheries and shipping need to be jointly addressed by the parties to Helcom in a similar way to how we have cooperated on shipping. Not only in Helcom but in all contexts where the relevant sectors are addressed.

To conclude: we should be proud of progress, but not satisfied. Sweden is committed to the next phase of cooperation in Helcom.

Second question of the Ministerial Debate:

II. How can we continue and reinforce the successful implementation of HELCOM goals notwithstanding the current geopolitical situation in the Baltic Sea region?

Latvia

Ms. Inga Bērzina, Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development

Given the transboundary nature of the marine environment, regional cooperation is essential to meet the Convention's objectives and HELCOM commitments.

The main priority of Latvian Chairmanship was to ensure HELCOM as an effective and well-functioning regional cooperation organization able of action even in force majour situations.

Thanks to the support and involvement of all of you, together we have succeeded.

We are convinced that regional cooperation must continue, notwithstanding the current geopolitical situation, which may add additional concerns and to discover unknown or not entirely recognized relationships between environmental and security and safety aspects.

However, we cannot indefinitely act in the form of informal consultations.

The recent holistic assessment of the Baltic sea state of environment confirms that we are still facing a lot of implementation challenges. In our view, the so called "strategic pause" cannot last indefinitely. At the same time the reasons for the "strategic pause" are still there.



Therefore, we should reconsider all possible options for re-establishing the fully operational and legally sound mechanisms for future HELCOM operations.

Another aspect I would like to touch on is threats to critical infrastructure, vulnerability of electricity and communication cables, growing trend in offshore wind power development plans along with the well-known problem of underwater dumping sites. This links the environment protection with security aspects of the region.

Security problems if not addressed in a holistic way can become environmental problems over time.

Therefore cooperation in the framework of HELCOM and with competent regional organizations should be continued.

Sweden

Mr. Daniel Westlén, State Secretary for Climate and the Environment

The core of Helcom lies in the fact that decisions are taken by consensus and that actions are developed through cooperation and support for each other.

However, the present situation with the Russian Federation's unprovoked, unjustified and illegal war of aggression against Ukraine is a setback to our important efforts to improve the status of the Baltic Sea.

The Helcom focus is the state of the marine environment and this work is more pressing than ever given the results of the Holas III report.

The situation therefore calls for the remainder of the Helcom parties to do our outmost to continue the Helcom agenda and to minimise the impacts of the Russian aggression on our work.

So far Helcom has entered in to the so-called strategic pause which has proven a functional approach.

The situation is however unlikely to be resolved in the near future. The Helcom parties should therefore examine if there are alternative approaches that could resolve legal and organisational issues while not excluding a continued future Baltic cooperation.

Poland

Ms. Monika Michaliszyn, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland

I would like to turn to the past, which may give us an answer how we should deal with the current geopolitical situation.

The original Helsinki Convention, which the 50th anniversary of its signing we are going to celebrate today, was concluded between all Baltic Sea countries. Countries, just to recall, representing two opposing political blocs, however were seeking in a regional cooperation a proper solution to address the increasing environmental challenges from industrialization and other human activities and that were having a severe impact on the marine environment at that time.

Helsinki Convention, updated in 1992, took successfully account the geopolitical changes and emerging environmental challenges in the Baltic Sea region.



I remind you the past of HELCOM, because I would like to show you, how flexible and durable was our regional cooperation within HELCOM, even despite periodic increase in regional tensions and geopolitical changes, what we have experienced so far.

All of us are aware of the importance of cooperation with HELCOM to protect and restore the good environmental status of the Baltic Sea as well as negative consequences of its potential freezing or breaking.

The former good and close cooperation between all HELCOM Contracting Parties was brutally and suddenly broken off by the Russian Federation with its unprovoked, unjustified and illegal aggression against Ukraine, an observer state to the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM).

However, the actions taken by the rest of the Contracting Parities and the European Commission within the introduced "strategic pause", showed clearly that even such violation of the international law, would not weaken the will to continue working to implement the previously adopted obligations.

Bearing in mind this determination, Poland fully supports actions taken by HELCOM towards Russia so far and endorses the draft Ministerial Statement to be adopted today.

The current geopolitical situation does not seem likely to change in the near future, therefore Poland supports the proposal to come back to the issue of working out the permanent solution towards Russia after today's meeting.

Regardless of the solution adopted in the future, HELCOM's past should be a source of strength and determination for us.

Furthermore, I would like to point out a completely different aspects that play and will continue to play a huge role in implementation of HELCOM goals.

It is, firstly, the fact that 8 Contracting Parties are also Member States of the European Union and they are being committed to implementing EU legislation regarding the protection of the marine environment, which largely overlaps with the scope of activity and the goals of HELCOM.

The implementing such initiative as for example the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the EU Water Framework Directive, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region or the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, just to name few of them, undoubtedly contributes to improving the environmental condition of the Baltic Sea.

Secondly, I would like to draw you attention on HELCOM involvement in regional and global initiatives.

A good example of regional cooperation would be cooperation with the OSPAR Commission in some topics such as non-indigenous species, Ballast Water Management Convention (BWMC) and biofouling or seabirds.

It is also worth mentioning HELCOM's current involvement in global initiatives and in a consequence its contribution to shape global processes in line with HELCOM goals, just to mention the HELCOM's previous involvement within the International Maritime Organization to reduce sulphur oxides (SOx) and nitrogen oxides (NOx) emissions from shipping in the Baltic Sea.

Poland believes, that the wide catalog of actions stipulated in updated BSAP addressing many pressures of global nature, innovative nature of many foreseen activities (including marine litter and underwater noise), promotion of in-depth knowledge and scientific explanation guarantee that our regional actions in the Baltic Sea will find support from other regional or global organizations and contribute to synergy of the activities at the different levels.



Lithuania

Ms. Daiva Matusevičė, Vice-Minister

During our previous meeting in 2021, it is likely that none of us anticipated the unfortunate reality of one HELCOM country launching aggression against another nation. The current geopolitical developments present challenges that were difficult to foresee when the Helsinki Convention was signed 50 years ago.

Pollution and ecological degradation know no borders, and the sustainability of the Baltic Sea ecosystem is vital for all countries bordering it. Unfortunately, in the current geopolitical situation, interactions with Russia and Belarus - even at a technical level – have become challenging. Notably, the river Nemunas and its tributary Neris, major contributors to the Baltic Sea in our region, are common bodies of water shared with neighbouring Belarus and Russia. Regrettably, obtaining reliable data from them about the pollution of these rivers has become almost impossible.

Lithuania has the honour of assuming the HELCOM Presidency from our Latvian colleagues on 1st July this same year. We are committed to making informed decisions that will enhance HELCOM's influence in the region and contribute to improving the environmental status of the Baltic Sea, regardless of geopolitical challenges.

Germany

Ms. Steffi Lemke, Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection

April was all about oceans for me. I was at the Our Ocean Conference in Athens, then in Ottawa for the Fourth Session of negotiations for a global plastics agreement, and today I am here in Riga. At every international meeting nowadays, the major geopolitical issues, international crises and tensions are, of course, always hanging in the air. This does not make international cooperation any easier. But at all of these meetings, one thing became clear: cooperation still works. There is a great willingness to tackle global challenges together. This is particularly true for the protection of a global resource like the oceans. It was a huge success that we were able to sign the BBNJ Agreement last year. This should give us reason to be confident as a marine community.

There is no doubt that the geopolitical situation is a burden for HELCOM. The launch of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine called for a swift response from HELCOM too. The strategic pause was one such swift and pragmatic response. The HELCOM bodies have paused official meetings. The HELCOM contracting parties, which are made up of the EU and several EU Member States, are continuing their work through the informal format of H9.

In doing so, the democratic Baltic riparian states and the European Union are sending an unmistakeable message. Our joint commitment to improving the state of the Baltic Sea marine ecosystem is unwavering.

It is also true that after two years, the first significant difficulties are arising for HELCOM. Financing is becoming increasingly challenging. It is difficult for the contracting parties to ensure the payment of the usual annual contributions without a legal basis. This also has personal consequences for the team of the HELCOM Secretariat, who are concerned about losing their jobs. I am very aware of this.

This is why I would like to thank the staff for being so committed to HELCOM despite uncertain conditions. I consider it an obligation of the contracting parties to continue to ensure adequate funding for HELCOM. Germany will continue to make its contribution, and I would like to call on all our partners to do the same.



The strategic pause cannot and must not be permanent for HELCOM. We are currently considering how we can structure our cooperation in such a way that it is firmly anchored in international law. To do so, we need a resilient and sustainable solution.

I would like to expressly thank the Latvian HELCOM Chair and the Executive Secretary for their collaborative, solutions-oriented and objective handling of this issue.

With regard to technical work, we should concentrate on implementing the updated 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan and the HELCOM Science Agenda. Through the Science Agenda, we want inspire the scientific community to research HELCOM-related topics. There is great enthusiasm for our topics in the scientific community and an interest in shaping solutions together. We should make use of this. For example, research can support us where gaps in knowledge prevent us achieving good environmental status in the Baltic Sea as required under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Forging alliances, exploring feasible options for concrete progress. I am convinced that this is the best response to the geopolitical situation. I look forward to joining you in HELCOM's work over the next decade.

Finland

Ms. Sara Viljanen, Senior Ministerial Adviser, on behalf of Mr. Kai Mykkänen, Minister of Climate and the Environment

While the current geopolitical situation remains extremely challenging for everyone, HELCOM has successfully continued its crucial work to protect our home sea. Implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan remains in schedule, and the recently published report on the State of the Baltic Sea was, once again, of outstanding quality. Together, we can take pride in having achieved all of this, despite difficult circumstances.

During the last two years, as a consequence to Russian Federation's unprovoked, unjustified and illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, we have adapted our ways of working, in order to keep HELCOM operational. Constructive and solution-oriented spirit, together with a strong sense of unity, have underlined the work of the HELCOM community throughout these past months, and this has simply amazed us. In particular, our gratitude goes to the members of the secretariat. We realize that these exceptional circumstances have required exceptional strength from you, and in our opinion, you have pulled through excellently.

Looking into the future, we must continue focusing on our shared goals, and on how to best achieve them, regardless of the format we operate in. We must not let the challenges of the geopolitical situation turn into challenges in the marine environment, and in this regard, I have all the faith in the nine Contracting Parties in this room today.

At the same time, we must prepare ourselves for new potential threats caused by the current geopolitical situation. During my previous intervention, I already mentioned the threat caused by the so-called "dark fleet" or "shadow fleet" of the Baltic Sea. I would like to emphasize two issues: Firstly, we need to make the Baltic Sea voice heard in the International Maritime Organization, IMO. Secondly, EMSA's oil-spill response resources require enhancement in the Baltic Sea, due to the increased risks in the northern Baltic. The northern Baltic Sea requires at least one EMSA oil spill emergency response vessel, to support Baltic Sea states in preventing environmental damage. As I already mentioned, we should all join forces in advancing these matters.



In addition, we must pay close attention to the recently reported discoveries of large amounts of plastic litter in the Baltic Sea, as they may be connected to the same phenomenon. Furthermore, the possibility of deliberate interference in the marine environment should be kept in mind, when looking into the future.

While HELCOM continues working with its agreed work plans, we must also respond to these new types of challenges, with the capacity we have. Sharing as much information with each other as possible helps us in painting the more comprehensive picture, and we all know that the HELCOM community has excellent established practices when it comes to both gathering data and sharing it. Let's use the strengths we have.

The last two years have shown that flexibility is the secret to a resilient organization. Finland has no doubt as to the resilience of the HELCOM community also in the future, if we continue working in the same unified manner as we have done so far. At the same time, we must continue carefully evaluating the pros and cons of our chosen lines of action as time goes by, and be ready to re-evaluate our decisions when needed. Finland remains open towards this re-evaluation.

We must hold on to the high level of professionalism that has always defined our work, and remain calm and patient, while at the same time alert. HELCOM has a lot to do still, and it is our duty to make sure we continue striving towards our shared goals, despite changing circumstances.

European Union

Mr. Patrick Child, Deputy Director General for Environment

First of all, I would like to send my heartfelt appreciations and thanks to the HELCOM Secretariat and team for their flexibility and dedication in the face of this very complex geopolitical situation.

Resolving the geopolitical situation is obviously beyond our control, but I think that HELCOM's stance is pragmatic: we are on a 'strategic pause', but the work continues at a good pace. A testimony of this is the impressive number of expert meetings that take place year-round. And this is the right thing to do: more than ever cooperation is needed around the Baltic Sea. The state of the sea is telling – without further coordinated actions the efforts made by some Parties could be jeopardised by the lack of efforts of the others.

The Russian Federation's absence potentially undermines progress and also brings about concrete consequences, for instance on the financing of HELCOM activities. The EU and the other contracting parties took their responsibilities to mitigate these shortcomings, notably through direct support to specific HELCOM projects and grants.

The Helsinki Convention used to be a point of contact between the East and the West blocks, even during the worst times of the Cold war era. Unfortunately, today all contacts with Russia are at a standstill. Let's hope that HELCOM can play a specific and pioneering role in renewing contacts with Russia if and when the unjustified and illegal aggression war against Ukraine stops.

Estonia

Mr. Kaupo Läänerand, Deputy Secretary General on Maritime Affairs and Water Resources

- Collaboration and cooperation: EU member states have continued to engage in very good and efficient work in implementing the Baltic Sea Action Plan, despite the official suspension of cooperation within



HELCOM. While we must acknowledge that the past two years have been exceptionally challenging, we have nevertheless maintained our strong environmental cooperation.

- Support to Ukraine at this time and in the future is very important. HELCOM countries are invited to engage in supporting both Ukrainian maritime economy and environment.
- Shadow fleet is a new threat, that must be addressed together with other Baltic Sea countries.
- Continuing collaboration is of utmost importance to Estonia. It is essential to emphasize that the
 participation of all partners in expert and working groups is crucial. Only through collective discussions
 can we reach agreed-upon actions that take into account the specificities and needs of all countries.
- Moreover, through joint cooperation, we can implement agreed-upon actions and thereby ensure their maximum effectiveness.
- It is also crucial to continue developing and implementing a common format, procedure, and capability for collecting data across the Baltic Sea region.
- We also recognize significant potential in our region for enhancing digital capabilities.
- Regional cooperation in the development and testing of digital and green technological solutions will be increasingly important in the future.
- By integrating digital opportunities with common monitoring practices, we can establish a precise and efficient environmental monitoring network.
- This could be the next step among our neighbouring countries and across the entire Baltic Sea region, sharing knowledge and resources to strengthen digital cross-border marine environmental and safety monitoring efforts.
- Knowledge sharing could involve organizing training programs, workshops, and conferences to disseminate best practices and foster innovation in the use of digital and technological solutions.
- A shared regional goal could be to conduct pilot projects in specific areas, evaluating the effectiveness and user-friendliness of developed practices.
- For example, Estonia is currently developing a network of smart platforms and associated digital systems, which could be collectively tested throughout the Baltic Sea in the future.
- Since environmental problems do not recognize national borders, it is extremely important to continue cooperation both within the Baltic Sea region in the HELCOM forum and to support HELCOM's cooperation with other regional commissions (such as OSPAR), the European Union (MSFD), and other international organizations (ICES, UN).
- According to recent assessments, we have confirmed that due to the poor state of the marine environment, we are actually missing out on economic benefits.
- Therefore, we must acknowledge, among other things, that we are also working towards a cleaner sea, which in turn will strengthen and improve our economy in the Baltic Sea region –in coastaland marine economy (marine blue economy).
- Finally, it is important to highlight that we must ensure funding for the support of agreed-upon activities, both through national financing and through various European Union funds.
- While we have effective measures in the Baltic Sea Action Plan, they are only effective when collectively implemented, and often the key to implementation lies in ensuring adequate funding.



Denmark

Ms. Ida Hannibal, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Environment

- We recognize that the current geopolitical situation in the Baltic Sea region, is very challenging for HELCOM and new ways of working has been explored.
- Therefore, we would like to applause the Secretariat and HELCOM for how the situation has been handled. Meetings, discussions and outputs have continued throughout the period.
- We furthermore encourage the Baltic Sea Countries to continue to join hands and lift the important work on implementing HELCOM goals despite the difficult circumstances.
- Like mentioned by several Contracting Parties already, Denmark is also deeply concerned about the so-called shadow fleet and environmental risks as oil spills constitute a very significant danger to our marine environment and especially to the Baltic Sea, which is very vulnerable to oil spills.



Annex 7 Statement by Ms. Helena Tuuri on behalf of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)

Distinguished ministers, your excellencies, dear HELCOM partners and colleagues,

Representing the Finnish Presidency of the CBSS, I have the pleasure and honour to congratulate HELCOM, and those serving it, on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Convention. Fifty years of service is an impressive milestone. It is also a testament to the excellent work conducted by HELCOM, its corresponding Working Groups, and secretariat.

The long-standing record should not come as a surprise, however. If we go back to the original convention, a defining characteristic is its forward-looking vision. The Convention speaks of the need to protect and enhance the values of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea Region for the benefit of its peoples. With respect to working methods, it calls for expediency and co-operation. These and related guidelines remain as relevant today as they were in 1974. As Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine continues, the challenging geopolitical situation in our region affects our work and focus. However, it does not change the need to protect and save the Baltic Sea and the marine environment.

HELCOM built a respectable track record early on, and its experience would later provide guidance for other Baltic regional organisations – including the CBSS. In hindsight, it is probably safe to say that the practical orientation of HELCOM inspired a whole host of other organisations in the region to emulate a targeted and functional approach.

The CBSS has a long-standing collaboration with HELCOM. The complementarity of mandates — aiming to contribute to a safer, more secure, more sustainable and more prosperous Baltic Sea Region — makes the partnership a natural one. We in the CBSS recognise that a sound Baltic Sea environment is a prerequisite for other regional goals. The two organisations have combined their respective strengths on several initiatives in recent time. These range from addressing submerged munitions to promoting green shipping corridors.

With the current celebrations in mind, I congratulate the on-going Latvian chairmanship and wish the forthcoming Lithuanian chairmanship a successful tenure. Looking ahead, the CBSS wishes HELCOM a continued successful journey as it navigates the next years and decades.



Annex 8 Statement by Ms. Nea Westerlund on behalf of the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO)

Dear Ministers, honoured representatives of HELCOM contracting parties, and colleagues devoted to the Baltic Sea's well-being. On this impressive occasion of your 50th anniversary, we extend our heartfelt congratulations from the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO) for reaching this remarkable milestone.

NEFCO's journey in tackling Baltic Sea challenges began with a simple yet urgent mission: combating eutrophica-tion, the biggest threat to our Baltic Sea. Since NEFCO's establishment in 1990, we've expanded our efforts, con-tributing to environmental goals not only in the Nordics but also in Ukraine and globally. Since our establishment, NEFCO has financed approximately 40 different projects to improve wastewater treatment, contributing to the re-duction of phosphorus and nitrogen discharges in the Baltic Sea.

Today, one of NEFCO's central Baltic Sea related efforts is the Baltic Sea Action Plan Fund. The fund was initiated in 2010, as a combined effort from the governments of Finland and Sweden, together with NEFCO and the Nordic Investment Bank. Initially named in alignment with HELCOM BSAP, it has been pivotal in funding projects closely aligned with the BSAP's objectives. The fund serves as an efficient mechanism for its donors to take concrete ac-tions to achieve and accelerate the BSAP goals for 2030, a commitment shared by all HELCOM countries.

The BSAP Fund's aim is to help concrete projects, regardless of national borders. During the past decade, the BSAP Fund has financed 74 projects in 8 different countries with a total investment of nearly 15 million euros. The fund has made significant contributions towards fostering a healthy and resilient Baltic Sea ecosystem. To name a few examples, the BSAP Fund has financed 11 projects related to reducing land-based nutrient input from agricul-tural fields and forests, 10 projects within wastewater treatment and 4 projects addressing the challenge related to shipping discharges and waste. About 80% of the funded projects address biodiversity conservation or pollution prevention.

Today, as we convene, NEFCO highlights the urgent requirement for varied financing mechanisms to accelerate our collective vision outlined in the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan. The continuity of the BSAP Fund relies on the combined dedication of both present and future donors. Today, we emphasize the importance of collective action, urging every Baltic Sea nation to participate in our shared responsibility of preserving a healthier Baltic Sea. We implore everyone present to acknowledge the significant impact of even modest financial contributions in catalysing substantial environmental improvements, as evidenced by the Fund's proven track record.

In closing, as we reflect on the journey of HELCOM and the pivotal role played by the Baltic Sea Action Plan, it is essential to acknowledge the progress made and the challenges that lie ahead. Over the past 50 years, HELCOM has been at the forefront of efforts to protect and restore the Baltic Sea ecosystem, bringing together governments, organizations, and individuals committed to its well-being. We look forward to continuing our fruitful collaboration knowing that our collective efforts today will shape the health of the Baltic Sea for generations to come.



Annex 9 Statement by Ms. Carole Durussel on behalf of the OSPAR Commission

Dear HELCOM Chair, distinguished Ministers, EU Commissioner, fellow Observer organisations, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to make a statement at the 2024 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting on behalf of the OSPAR Commission.

First of all, I would like to convey apologies from Ane-Marie Løvendahl Eskildsen, Chair of the OSPAR Commission, and Dominic Pattinson, the OSPAR Executive Secretary, who are unable to be here today because of other commitments. They both send their good wishes for a successful meeting.

The work of OSPAR and HELCOM is intrinsically linked.

We share a common border and five Contracting Parties. The transboundary nature of the marine environment leaves us facing similar challenges, through species migration, ocean currents, and the spread of pollution and invasive species. Our joint Contracting Parties help provide a strong framework for cooperation that contributes to the delivery of our shared objectives.

We have a common responsibility towards marine environmental protection and stewardship and share a common understanding of the need for collective action. Through the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan and the OSPAR North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy, which both aim to achieve a healthy marine environment by 2030, we pursue the same environmental objectives and many of our actions are synergistic and complementary in nature.

Our recent holistic assessments, HELCOM's HOLAS 3 and OSPAR's 2023 Quality Status Report, both highlighted similar pressures and challenges. By working together, we can better address common issues, such as plastic pollution, underwater noise, eutrophication, bycatch, the spread of invasive species and the loss of biodiversity.

And, of course, we have a long and successful history of cooperation that exists between our two organisations and that has led to the establishment of joint processes as well as the development of collective action to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic and Baltic Sea.

As our recent assessments highlighted, the triple planetary crisis that we are facing requires urgent action. Since the last HELCOM and OSPAR Ministerial Meetings in 2021, two international commitments have been adopted: The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the BBNJ Agreement. Furthermore, formal negotiations for a treaty to end plastic pollution under the United Nations started in November 2022.

These international commitments re-enforce the importance of regional organisations like OSPAR and HELCOM in helping to tackle the issues facing the marine environment. As well-established Regional Seas Conventions, OSPAR and HELCOM can also play an important role by sharing our expertise to help build the capacity of others to deliver coherent and pragmatic solutions for the protection of the marine environment.

On behalf of the OSPAR Commission, I would like to thank HELCOM for its valued and continued engagement, cooperation, and collaboration, and we look forward to continuing working together towards a healthy and thriving ocean.



Annex 10 Statement by Mr. Jarek Zielinski on behalf of the Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC)

Dear Chair of the Helsinki Commission, Dear Ministers, high-level Representatives, distinguished Delegates, Dear HELCOM Secretariat,

I would like to thank HELCOM for giving me the opportunity to take the floor on behalf of the Baltic Sea Advisory Council members at this high-level Ministerial Meeting, marking the start of HELCOM's 50th anniversary celebrations.

HELCOM was, among other goals, established to ensure that all the coastal states pursue many commitments made for a healthier Baltic Sea. BSAC recognises the role of HELCOM in environmental protection of the Baltic. Our organisations have much to share since the awareness of the massive challenges, in particular climate crisis and biodiversity loss, has been rising.

I am therefore very pleased to recall that the Baltic Sea Advisory Council has been working with HELCOM since 2015 when my organisation was granted observer status. Our organisations have exchanged views on many topics of common interest. Among others, stakeholders' engagement, fishing gears, eel stocks, seals and other predators, and also climate change.

The BSAC members contributed actively to the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) proposing a series of measures for inclusion. Collaborating with your organisation, by taking part in the implementation of the BSAP, is one of the objectives of our work programme. The same applies to our participation in the HELCOM Group on ecosystem-based sustainable fisheries.

As recently as in March 2024, the BSAC members contributed to the implementation of one of the actions of the BSAP, by providing input on data and research needs regarding regulated and non-regulated fish stocks and non-fish species such as harbour porpoise and seals, as well as birds. All the interactions have both a direct (predation, prey availability) and indirect (food competition, diseases) impact on the fish stocks.

The BSAC members look forward to the Ministerial Meeting deciding on the next steps of the implementation of the BSAP, towards reaching a healthy Baltic Sea environment, and ensuring continued cooperation in the region, taking also into account specific current political challenges. In this context, the BSAC would like to point out the importance of balancing environmental, social and economic aspects when implementing those actions. With reference to fisheries, the BSAC would like to underline the importance of taking into account sustainable fisheries in the BSAP's actions. The BSAC also highlights that the requirements in the new Control Regulation may allow to fill some of the identified data gaps. In particular, the new reporting requirements for some fisheries (including recreational and small-scale) might allow for better records on key fish species.

The BSAC members look forward to our continued cooperation and stand ready to work closely with HELCOM for the benefit of the Baltic. Congratulations with the 50 years!



Annex 11 Statement by Ms. Bettina Taylor on behalf of Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB)

Dear Ministers, High-level representatives, distinguished guests,

As WWF colleagues before, we stand here in front of you to speak on behalf of the Baltic Sea. Protecting this Sea, restoring what humans have already destroyed, is not a luxury that would be nice to have. It is not optional. It is essential for the survival of the region – now more so than ever. Healthy oceans can be our strongest allies in the climate crisis – a functioning marine ecosystem will help store carbon and regulate the climate.

Again, likewise WWF, we speak to you in your representative function, but also as fellow human beings.

What is missing, why has there not been enough progress, and why do you allow for even more pressures to affect our sensitive Sea? Why expand cities and reclaim land from the Baltic Sea, why expand harbours, why build pipelines through spawning grounds, why plan CCS?

Are you really going to keep prioritizing industrial growth over common sense? Haven't we learned in the last 50 years that there needs to be a balance between use and protection?

We have a joint Baltic Sea Action Plan, we have several other plans under the EU and other conventions. We have knowledge, we have tools and legal frameworks. Sometimes we even have the funds to act. And we've just heard about the costs of inaction. Now you need to stick to these plans. Only a sustained effort and long-term political commitment will yield sustainable improvement for our Sea.

The next 50 years need innovation, and we don't mean just technical innovation, but new strategies, new political thinking, bring policies together, think big, act small, local and big - but act. Think beyond borders and the legislative period, call on your neighbours and plan together, free resources, learn from mistakes in the past, use the precautionary principle when uncertain.

"Proud past, promising future" – you chose those words for these celebrations today. YOU are HELCOM, YOU are the ones choosing where to go from here. Let's do something you, we all, can be really proud of.

Three years after the update of the BSAP, we are concerned to see delays in the implementation of the plan. Thus, even though every single action in the BSAP is of greatest value, we have identified around 25 measures that should be prioritized – for a start. These include suggestions for a green recovery of Ukraine.

For the Baltic Sea to be saved from further deterioration you will need to be bold.

You will need to be bold and say no to destructive industries such as seabed mining and geoengineering.

You will need to be bold and make protected areas that are not ashamed of their name.

We repeat ourselves from the beginning: marine protection and restoration is not a luxury, it is a necessity and you need to start treating it as such.

We stand here with you for a healthy Baltic Sea.



Annex 12 Statement by Ms. Johanna Fox on behalf of World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF)

Your Excellencies, Ministers, High-level representatives, HELCOM observers and invited guests,

Today we are here to celebrate 50 years of continuous regional cooperation under HELCOM, leading to a reduction of DDT, PCBs and dioxins in Baltic Sea wildlife, recovery of iconic and important species such as the white-tailed eagle and grey seal, and a reduction of nutrient hot spots and oil spills. Even through difficult times, cooperation persists, which is commendable.

Yet, after 50 years and several successes, the Baltic Sea is far from a good state. Today, you are here as ministers and state representatives, deciding on the future of the Baltic Sea. Thus, I'd like to ask you, as ministers but also as individuals with a personal stake in and a responsibility for the health of our sea - what do you want your legacy to be?

Do you want to leave a healthy and restored sea, with vibrant ecosystems that attract tourists to our region to see the Baltic harbour porpoise and fish in our salmon-rich rivers? A sea with clear waters, sustained by sustainable farming, that provides food security and where coastal fishing is profitable? A Baltic Sea in good environmental status worth EUR 5.6 billion annually to society, with additional billions to be saved every year from natural carbon and nutrient sequestration?

Or do you want public outcry due to expanding iltsvind, dead seafloor, in Denmark? Do you want the culturally important Swedish surströmming, fermented herring, to be lost due to ever decreasing fish stocks? Tourists to stop coming to the beaches of Rügen, Palanga, Pärnu and Jurmala because of algal blooms, with EUR 9 billion of recreational value lost every year throughout the Baltic Sea region?

It is difficult to fully estimate the true cost of losing vital ecosystem services provided by a healthy Baltic Sea, but the latter scenario paints a rather grim picture that, I hope and trust, none of you would like to leave as your legacy. Yet, the results of the State of the Baltic Sea report are a stark reminder that this is the future we risk seeing, unless we – you – take action now.

Dear ministers, saving the Baltic Sea makes cultural, social, environmental, and economic sense. It will require transformative change across all sectors that influence or interact with the Baltic Sea. Ask yourselves, do your decisions truly reflect your ambition to protect and restore our Sea? Thankfully, actions have impact and your role as politicians is to convincingly provide solutions for a healthy Baltic Sea, something people around the region care about.

As WWF, we ask you to:

- Implement the Baltic Sea Action Plan in full it provides many solutions, but only completed actions have impact.
- Continue and strengthen regional cooperation, particularly when planning nature-friendly expansion
 of offshore renewable energy and implementing the 30x30 protection target in the region.
- Jointly mobilize the necessary funds for Baltic Sea action both public and private.
- Ensure restoration of Baltic Sea ecosystems becomes a priority financially and legally.
- Reassess and reform subsidies that degrade the Baltic Sea environment, aligning them with the Baltic Sea Action Plan goals.

It comes down to your priorities - do you want to be remembered as ministers taking decisive action or as those leaving the challenges for future generations to address? So, I ask you once again - what do you want your legacy to be?



Annex 13 Statement by Mr. Boris Erg on behalf of International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

Excellencies,

Parties to the Helsinki Convention,

Observers and guests,

It is a great pleasure and honour to be with you at the 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment, also celebrating 50 years of the signing of the Helsinki Convention. Half a century of the Commission's remarkable and relentless work to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea area and succeeding in keeping up strong cooperation between the states sharing this invaluable environmental, cultural, and economic asset.

IUCN is the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it. For the past 75 years, IUCN has been providing credible knowledge and advice to societies and communities around the world to help safeguard biodiversity and ensure that any use of natural resources is sustainable and equitable. The HELCOM Red List of Baltic Sea species and the Guidelines for designating marine and coastal Baltic Sea marine protected areas are two vivid examples of IUCN's global standards and knowledge feeding into HELCOM's work on the preservation of the Baltic Sea ecosystem.

Let us for a minute remind ourselves of the dire state of global biodiversity, coupled with climate change, consumption, and pollution pressures, and remember that nature and resilient ecosystems are crucial for our wellbeing, health, and sustainable growth. The founding principles of regional cooperation embedded in the Helsinki Convention undoubtedly have a crucial role within this context.

Global and regional policy frameworks, most notably the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the Agreement on the Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, and the EU Green Deal and Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 are clear. We need to double down our efforts if we are to preserve rapidly declining biodiversity and the ability of ecosystems to provide essential services to our society. We must maintain all positive action and strengthen our efforts further. HELCOM has proven that it can provide the necessary leadership and guidance to achieve our common environmental targets.

Planned and coordinated measures on nature recovery, embedded in initiatives such as the EU Nature Restoration Law, are essential for the gradual restoration of the Baltic Sea. This approach reinforces the Baltic Sea Action Plan aiming at a healthy and resilient Baltic Sea ecosystem and the development of an action plan for habitat and biotope restoration by 2025 with a prioritized list of actions and regional targets.

IUCN is looking forward to collaborating with HELCOM on the implementation of this and other commitments and the vision created 50 years ago. Let us deliver what is needed today and provide solutions to prevent tomorrow's challenges.

Thank you!



Annex 14 Statement by Ms. Alda Nikodemusa on behalf of the Baltic Sea Region Spatial Planning Initiative - Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea (VASAB)

Ministers, High-level Representatives, Delegates,

It is a great honour to be here at the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting and address you on behalf of VASAB which is more than 30 years lasting cooperation of ministers responsible for spatial planning and development of the Baltic Sea Region countries.

The main VASAB mission is to prepare policy options for the territorial development of the Region, to provide forum for exchange of knowledge as well as promote and participate in cooperation projects to achieve well-integrated, coherent, and sustainable region.

Today, I would like to highlight the close cooperation of VASAB and HELCOM that effectively lasts already 14 years, and which is targeted towards reaching our common goal - careful management of the Baltic Sea as well as implementation of the specific strategies and policies of both organisations.

Last year VASAB Ministers had their Conference in Wismar, Germany. Ministers welcomed the well-established cooperation of VASAB and HELCOM and endorsed the Baltic 'Regional Maritime Spatial Planning Roadmap 2021-2030' as a guiding document for the continuation of these joint efforts. The role of VASAB as the Policy area 'Spatial Planning' lead coordinator within the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was also acknowledged and regards maritime spatial planning - we do that work jointly with HELCOM.

The new strategic-visionary framework for a vibrant, well-connected and resilient spatial development of the Baltic Sea Region - 'VASAB Vision for the Territorial Development of the Baltic Sea Region in 2040' was endorsed by the VASAB Ministerial Conference. The proposed possible future actions of the co-created Vision also foresee engagement of various stakeholders to implement it. And HELCOM is a very significant player to reach several Vision goals, for example, resilient ecosystems and cooperative sea and land planning systems.

To conclude, VASAB expresses a willingness to continue close cooperation with HELCOM to promote reaching our common goal - sustainable development of the region and healthy and resilient Baltic Sea.

Thank you.



Annex 15 Ministerial Declaration

We, the Ministers of Climate, of the Environment, of Infrastructure and of Maritime Affairs of the Baltic Sea coastal states that are also Member States of the European Union and the Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries of the European Commission, assembled in Riga, Latvia, on 25 April 2024, on the occasion of the 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment:

- **NOTING** with appreciation the 50th anniversary of the signing of the 1974 Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, the work conducted over the course of five decades under the auspices of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and the pioneering role that HELCOM has fulfilled at the regional level;
- RECALLING the aims and provisions of the 1992 Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, in force since 17 January 2000;
- **RECALLING** also the HELCOM vision of "a healthy Baltic Sea environment, with diverse biological components functioning in balance, resulting in good environmental status and supporting a wide range of sustainable human economic and social activities";
- **NOTING** the progress achieved in implementing the Baltic Sea Action Plan adopted in 2007;
- RECALLING and REAFFIRMING the goals of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (2021 BSAP)
 adopted by the 2021 Ministerial Meeting, held in Lübeck, Germany and REITERATING the
 conclusion of that Meeting that the current state of the Baltic Sea marine environment remains
 unsatisfactory as a result of pressures from both land- and sea-based human activities and that
 recovery is not yet sufficient to achieve the goals of the 2021 BSAP;
- RECALLING also the Declaration and Commitments adopted by the Ministers of the Environment, Maritime Economy, Agriculture and Fisheries of EU Baltic Sea Member States and of the Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries at the "Our Baltic" Ministerial Meetings in 2020 and in 2023, with a view to achieving a clean and healthy Baltic Sea;
- ACKNOWLEDGING that the work of HELCOM has yielded significant environmental
 improvements and contributed to preventing further deterioration of the environment of the
 Baltic Sea, including preventing pollution and other harmful impacts from shipping and other
 maritime activities, while ensuring safe navigation in the Baltic Sea;
- HIGHLIGHTING the finalization of the Third Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS 3), covering the period from 2016 to 2021, and ACKNOWLEDGING its importance in taking stock of the current level of implementation of the 2021 BSAP and establishing benchmarks for the future implementation of the Plan;
- NOTING with deep concern, however, that the Baltic Sea continues to be heavily affected by multiple anthropogenic pressures, as reflected in the outcome of HOLAS 3;
- NOTING the potential economic benefits of countering the various threats to the Baltic Sea
 ecosystem, as reflected by HOLAS 3, according to which achieving good environmental status in
 the Baltic Sea Region by 2040 is projected to provide an annual economic benefit of 5.6 billion
 euros to the region's population, and ACKNOWLEDGING the potential cost of inaction as
 evidenced by the estimated loss of 9 billion euros annually in recreational benefits alone due to
 environmental degradation;
- **NOTING** that the Baltic Sea is under increasing impact from the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, in particular due to (a) the use of marine and terrestrial space and resource extraction (b) the fact that eutrophication continues to have a particularly severe impact on the Baltic Sea; (c) the fact that levels of hazardous substances as well as submerged munitions and wrecks, the introduction of non-indigenous species into the Baltic Sea and marine litter remain issues of major concern; (d) the fact that seabed disturbance due to human activity remains high and other pressures such as underwater noise negatively affect marine life;



- REITERATING that the achievement of good environmental status for the Baltic Sea will require
 enhanced efforts and transformational change across all relevant sectors of the economy,
 including agriculture and forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, tourism, logistics, shipping and
 manufacturing, as well as the public sector, and necessitates among other things greater
 efficiency in the use of resources and a transition to a clean and sustainable circular economy;
- ACKNOWLEDGING the important role of science and research in supporting informed decisionmaking, as well as for progressing transformative change towards securing good environmental status of the Baltic Sea;
- RECOGNIZING the linkages between good environmental status for the Baltic Sea and the
 prosperity for the people around the Baltic Sea, as well as the economic activities that depend on
 the ecosystem services;
 - MINDFUL of the links between the state of the world's oceans and seas and climate change and the resultant need for measures aimed at improving the former to also contribute to mitigating the latter:
 - **NOTING** the importance of the ecosystem approach, the precautionary principle and adaptive management in working to meet the objectives of the 2021 BSAP;
 - **NOTING** the role of the Baltic Sea Region as a global front-runner in regionally coherent maritime spatial planning and **STRESSING** the need for coherent, adaptive and sustainable spatial planning of human activities at sea across the region in order to minimize the pressures arising from human activities and to avoid conflicts between various uses of the Baltic Sea, and therefore the need to continue the successful cooperation with VASAB in coordinating regional maritime spatial planning;
 - **RECOGNIZING** the linkages between environmental protection and safety and security in the Baltic Sea Region, notably against the background of a changing geopolitical landscape;
 - **ACKNOWLEDGING** the important role of intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations in preserving and protecting the Baltic Sea and the continued need for strong regional and cross-sectoral cooperation in working towards achieving good environmental status of the Baltic Sea;
 - REITERATING the need to coordinate and harmonize the work of HELCOM overall, and the implementation of the 2021 BSAP in particular, with relevant initiatives at the global, European, regional and national levels, including in particular the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the IMO Strategy on Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Ships, the work of relevant United Nations Conventions, the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the EU Water Framework Directive, the EU Maritime Security Strategy, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, the Birds and Habitats Directives, the European Green Deal, the Zero Pollution Action Plan, the EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems and resilient fisheries and the Baltic and North Sea Basin Lighthouse under the Mission Ocean, Seas and Water and all other relevant EU legislation and programmes and policies;
 - WITHOUT PREJUDICE TO, and seeking synergies with, the legislation of the European Union, international agreements and national legislation;

hereby declare that we:

- **1.REAFFIRM** our strong commitment to continued cooperation within the framework of HELCOM;
- 2.**UNDERSCORE** our intention to continue to develop HELCOM as an effective and well-functioning regional cooperation organization capable of action even in unforeseen and force majeure situations;



- 3.**RECOMMIT** to implementing the 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan and achieving the goals laid down in that plan by the dates specified in the Plan, with a view to finalizing implementation of the BSAP as a whole by 2030 at the latest and to achieving good environmental status for our sea;
- 4. **RECOMMIT** to fully implementing, by 2027 at the latest, all nutrient input reduction measures necessary to achieve the net input ceilings (NICs);
- 5.AGREE that the ecological and management objectives in the various segments of the 2021 BSAP, which are based on best available knowledge at the time of its elaboration, should be periodically reviewed and revised using a harmonized approach and the most up-to-date information, in line with the principles of adaptive management;
- 6.**REITERATE** the commitment by HELCOM to implementing a source-to-sea approach with the aim of preventing pollution from entering the Baltic Sea from the catchment area;
- 7.AGREE to establish and adopt shared goals, objectives and quantitative targets for spatial protection, and, by 2028, incorporate these into an overarching framework for protection in the Baltic Sea, the aim of which is to secure improved effectiveness of protection and pressure reduction, supporting the implementation of the relevant BSAP Actions, as well as the implementation of related international commitments such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework;
- 8.**REAFFIRM** our commitment to stringent conservation measures in the Baltic Sea and the achievement, by 2030, of a coherent, well connected and effectively managed network of HELCOM marine protected areas, which will cover at least 30 percent of the sea area, of which at least 10 percent will be strictly protected;
- 9.**UNDERLINE** the role of HELCOM in leading regional efforts to this effect and as an important and recognized contributor in the context of international ocean governance;
- 10. **AGREE** that the effectiveness of action taken in the framework of HELCOM shall continue to be evaluated by using appropriate monitoring and indicators to measure the progress towards the targets, allowing for the adjustments needed to ensure that the objectives are achieved;
- 11. **REITERATE** the continued need for Holistic Assessments of the Baltic Sea, not least as a means of tracking progress in implementing the 2021 BSAP, and **REAFFIRM** the mandate of HELCOM to proceed with the 4th Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS 4), starting this process in 2024 and further developing the scope and content of the assessment, with a view to finalization of the assessment by 2029 and strengthening the exercise *inter alia* by increasing the number of operational indicators and improving the tools used for its implementation;
- 12. ADOPT the updated HELCOM Science Agenda;
- 13. **AGREE** to continued cooperation between HELCOM and other Regional Seas Conventions, as well as River Basin Management Commissions;
- 14. **REAFFIRM** our intention to continue to involve other relevant regional and national organizations, financing institutions, scientific and research institutions, civil society and the private sector in working towards realizing the objectives of our organization, noting the need to achieve maximum efficiency in advancing the HELCOM agenda by better integrating the private sector into the implementation of the BSAP.



Annex 16 Statement on the geopolitical situation

adopted by the EU and the Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are also Member States of the EU (H9) on the occasion of the 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment

The European Union and the Contracting Parties to the Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention) that are Member States of the European Union (H9) reiterate their unequivocal condemnation of the Russian Federation's unprovoked, unjustified and illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, an observer state to the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM). The H9 demand that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.

In light of this continuous and ongoing flagrant violation by the Russian Federation of the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, as also underscored by the multiple related Resolutions adopted by the United Nations General Assembly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022, the H9 reaffirm their unanimous position that they cannot currently engage in business as usual with the Russian Federation in the context of HELCOM.

In line with the statement by the Chairmanship of HELCOM of 2 March 2022 the H9 therefore uphold their decision to observe a strategic pause in regular HELCOM operations, whereby all regular meetings of HELCOM bodies and meetings of project groups with involvement of the Russian Federation under the HELCOM umbrella are suspended until further notice. The H9 wish to emphasize that this strategic pause does not constitute a cessation of HELCOM activities.

The H9 will continue to review their position with regard to the meetings of HELCOM bodies against the background of future developments concerning the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine.

The H9 reiterate their continued commitment to the implementation of the Helsinki Convention and the policies and measures agreed in the context of that Convention, for the benefit of the entire Baltic Sea Region.

The Kingdom of Denmark, the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Finland, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Republic of Latvia, the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Poland, the Kingdom of Sweden and the European Union reaffirm their support to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, as well as its inherent right of self-defence against the war of aggression by the Russian Federation.

Riga, 25 April 2024