

Informal consultation session of the Helsinki Commission (IC HELCOM 1-2023)
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Statement by Rüdiger Strempel, Executive Secretary of HELCOM

The past year has been one of many challenges, but, nonetheless, also a year of progress in implementing our ambitious HELCOM agenda. The geopolitical crisis that erupted on 24 February 2022, severely impacted our organization, which was forced to review and rethink its established procedures and routines. However, while the resultant “strategic pause”, first declared on 4 March 2022 by the then German Chairmanship of HELCOM and continuously upheld since then, led to a postponement of all official meetings of HELCOM bodies as well as a number of other modifications to HELCOM operations, it has not brought HELCOM to a halt. This is an achievement in itself. And it has enabled HELCOM to stay on track – and within agreed timelines – as we work towards safeguarding and improving the environmental status of our sea.

The year 2022 saw the start of implementation of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP), adopted in October 2021 after many years of preparatory work. With many Actions under the plan needing to be implemented much sooner than the overall target year for implementation, 2030, there is no time to lose in bringing the plan to life and HELCOM has thus far successfully met all required deadlines. Meanwhile, we also continue to work towards achieving the more long-term aims of the BSAP.

However, not all HELCOM activities are exclusively about implementing the BSAP. Work on another flagship product of our organization, the Third Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS 3), has advanced according to plan and the final product will be available in the course of 2023. Consisting of five thematic reports as well as a summary report, HOLAS 3 highlights a broad range of aspects under the overarching themes of the state of the ecosystem, environmental pressures and human well-being and contributes to development and sharing of knowledge both within and across topics. The focus of the assessment is to show results of relevance at the regional scale, and large-scale patterns across and between geographic areas in the Baltic Sea. Each assessment provides a clearer picture of where we are, how things are connected, and what needs to be done.

The holistic assessment enables us to track progress towards the implementation of the goals and objectives of the 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan. Moreover, for those HELCOM Contracting Parties that are also EU Member States, it also serves as a regional contribution to the reporting under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD). The results of the assessment underpin HELCOM policy and will provide a foundation for future policy decisions and initiatives concerning the ecosystems-based management of the Baltic Sea nationally, regionally, and globally.

Despite the challenging circumstances we encountered over the past year, numerous other projects financed by Contracting Parties or the European Union were also completed in 2022, while new ones were initiated. To name a few examples:

Baltic Sea biodiversity remains threatened and HELCOM continues to work to address those threats. Thus, the HELCOM RED LIST II project, started in August 2022, will evaluate the threat status for Baltic Sea species as well as biotopes by 2024, using the criteria and approach developed by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Together with other HELCOM assessments, such as the State of the Baltic Sea report and the Pollution Load Compilation (PLC), the HELCOM Red Lists represent an essential part of the HELCOM evaluation system.

The Baltic Sea Action Plan includes several actions targeting species-specific conservation. Last year HELCOM concluded the indicator evaluations for phyto- and zooplankton, coastal fish, waterbirds and marine mammals, as well as indicators evaluating pressures on species and habitats.

In 2022 HELCOM also worked to secure resources to support the development of the Restoration Action Plan, which is one of the actions for restoring biodiversity under the Baltic Sea Action Plan.

The establishment of well-managed marine protected areas (MPAs) is one of the primary mechanisms for safeguarding biodiversity, ecosystem functions and natural resources, as well as securing resilience in the face of a changing climate. In 2022, HELCOM continued its work to improve MPA management efforts by developing a cohesive and comprehensive plan for addressing the MPA-related BSAP actions and securing the resources needed to ensure that the spatial conservation actions can be achieved. In this context, HELCOM continued its work on Other Effective Area-based Measures (OECMs) by organizing a cross-sectoral workshop in February 2022, supported by IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). We have now developed a regional common understanding of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) criteria for OECMs and a draft potential OECM identification tree, which will be on the agenda of this meeting.

Despite decades of intense work, eutrophication remains the major environmental threat to the Baltic Sea, and the HELCOM nutrient input reduction scheme is a regional approach to sharing the burden of nutrient reductions. Nutrient Input Ceilings (NIC) define maximum inputs via water and air to achieve good status for each country. In 2022, an additional interim NIC assessment was conducted with the new NICs based on the progress reported for 2017. Additionally, the first actual NIC assessment was finalized for approval by the HELCOM Heads of Delegation.

In recent years, HELCOM has also focused on promoting more efficient manure management and nutrient recycling. In 2022, in cooperation with key stakeholders, preparations were initiated to apply for a regional project supporting the implementation of the Nutrient Recycling Strategy.

It is also worthy of notice that the revised Part II of Annex III of the Helsinki Convention ("Criteria and measures concerning the prevention of pollution from land-based sources") has now entered into force.

In 2022, HELCOM also continued its work to improve the management of hazardous substances, another major threat to the Baltic Sea's ecosystem. The new HAPhazard project is intended to work towards a regional strategic approach to strengthening the management cycle for hazardous substances and an action plan for hazardous substances and also to develop biological monitoring of contaminants. The latter work is done in close cooperation with the BEACON project.

Focusing on a very specific but increasingly pressing threat, an expert roundtable on dumped munitions in the Baltic Sea was co-organized by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the German Federal Foreign Office, the German Federal State of Schleswig-Holstein, and the European Union and the Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are Member States of the European Union in December 2022. Its outcomes are currently being deliberated by the relevant CBSS and HELCOM bodies, with a view to advancing regional work to address the issue of submerged munitions.

Recognized as a horizontal topic in the BSAP, climate change is taken into account across the range of HELCOM activities. It was also at the core of the 2022 Baltic Stakeholder Conference hosted by

Germany in September 2022. The conference focused on both broad dissemination as well as targeted discussion of how HELCOM could continue its work to support mitigating climate change effects in the Baltic Sea region.

Climate change is one example of the many interlinkages between the Baltic Sea region and global developments. Therefore, and in keeping with our established policy of contributing to the global environmental and ocean agendas, as underscored by recent Ministerial Meetings, HELCOM also took part in various international events reaching beyond the Baltic Sea area. These include the II International Forum on Marine Litter and Circular Economy (MARLICE 2022) in Seville, Spain, the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, Portugal and the 3rd Meeting of the Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI) Global Dialogue with Regional Seas Organizations (RSOs) and Regional Fishery Bodies (RFBs) in Busan, South Korea.

One of the HELCOM-related activities in connection with the UN Ocean Conference held in Lisbon, Portugal was a much-noted side event titled “Delivering global commitments in the Baltic Sea Region – Marine Protected Areas and the success of Regional Seas Conventions”. The 75-minute side event presented HELCOM’s 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) as a best practice example for an ecosystem-based approach to marine management from science to action.

Last but not the least, 2022 marked the end of the successful German Chairmanship of HELCOM, and the commencement of Latvia’s Chairmanship, scheduled to run through June 2024. We were delighted to welcome Ms. Evija Šmite, Deputy Director General and the Director of Fisheries Control Department, State Environmental Service of Latvia, to act as the new Chair of HELCOM and Ms Ilona Mendziņa, Deputy Director of the Nature Protection Department, Ministry of the Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Latvia, as Vice-Chair. Latvia took over the Chairmanship in very challenging times and has already successfully worked to advance the HELCOM agenda.

In closing, I am gratified to note that despite the new and unprecedented geopolitical challenges we were faced with, 2022 and the beginning of 2023 have been a busy and successful time for HELCOM and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, our colleagues in the various other HELCOM bodies and the broader HELCOM community as well as the staff of the HELCOM Secretariat for this sustained effort to keep HELCOM on track to achieve our common goal of good environmental status for the Baltic Sea.