BSPC 27th conference

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Mr/Mrs president, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour for me to address the 27th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in Mariehamn.

I am going to give a brief presentation of a report about environmental Co-operation in the Baltic Sea region, that I have written during the last two years. The report was published by the Nordic Council the 6th of March, the same day as the HELCOM ministerial meeting took place in Brussels.

Environmental co-operation in the Baltic Sea region developed positively during 40 years. In 1974 the seven coastal countries adopted the Helsinki Convention, HELCOM was created. HELCOM is still today an organisation of utmost importance.

When the Iron curtain fell, Nordic Countries initiated environmental cooperation with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and soon after that also with Russia.

But the long era of positive development ended abruptly in 2014 with the political conflict that emerged when Russia invaded Crimea. In response to the annexation of Crimea EU imposed restrictive measures against Russia.

Consequently, EU financial institutions and Northern dimension environmental partnership have been unable to conclude new agreements to facilitate or finance new environmental projects in Russia.

This turn to a new political reality gave me the impulse to write this report. I had three objectives in mind.

To describe how environmental co-operation in the Baltic Sea region has developed and what goals have been achieved so far.

To elaborate of the risks and consequences of the current policy in the Baltic Sea region and to

Outline measures that should be taken to ensure a positive and continuous development in the future.

My report is based on interviews with 23 specialists representing a variety of organisations in the Baltic Sea region.

One of my thesis is that environmental problems with a cross-border impact must be solved together.

Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership has had an important role in bringing together both EU- and non- EU states in projects that have been carried out in the North-western part of Russia during the last two decades.

The successful measures to restore the sewage systems in St. Petersburg would not have succeeded without the diligent efforts of officials working in government in ministries and environmental agencies and the financial support from Nordic and European financing institutions.

From 1997 to 2017 about €1bn euro, of which approximately one-third comprise international loans and grants and two-thirds domestic Russian resources, have been designated to environmental projects in St. Petersburg. Today over 98 % of the waste water in St. Petersburg is treated.

The results are visible in the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland, where the ecological state of the sea has improved as the discharge of pollution from St. Petersburg has significantly decreased.

But the political tension in the region has continued since 2014, and it has had serious negative consequences for environmental cooperation as no new projects have been funded or planned by the European banks or the Nordic Investment Bank.

Only project agreements that were signed before the crisis in 2014 have or will be implemented and completed.

Many challenges will therefore remain unresolved, including 184 sites in the Leningrad region without properly working wastewater treatment plants and sewage systems and rapidly growing agricultural industries of cattle, pig and poultry, that are serious, unresolved environmental threats.

The greatest danger in the Baltic Sea is associated with Krasnyj Bor, a landfill for hazardous waste situated close to St. Petersburg.

A major leakage of toxic compounds from Krasnyj Bor would have a profound impact on the freshwater supply in this city of over five million inhabitants.

Southwest of St. Petersburg is Sosnovy Bor, one of Russia's nuclear towns with four old nuclear power plants of the Chernobyl-type still operating, and four new nuclear power plants under construction.

At the HELCOM ministerial meeting in March the ministers had to accept that the actions taken by the Baltic Sea states have not been sufficient and HELCOM’s goal to restore Baltic Sea’s good ecological status by 2021, will not therefore be achieved.

We have this summer experienced huge amount of toxic blue-green algae and sea water temperatures up to 27 degrees. Climate change is a fact and we must be prepared for more exceptional weather conditions in the future.

My conclusion is that there is no time to waste; Environmental cooperation must continue despite politically challenging times.

The objective of the sanctions against Russia is to weaken economic interaction with Russia and demonstrate the non-approval of the annexation of Crimea.

It seems like common sense to make an exception for actions that reduces the environmental risk for millions of people living the Baltic Sea region; to allow European and Nordic financial institutions to contribute to projects carried out within the area.

Otherwise, interactions between environmental authorities will weaken and the exchange of information and communication in the Baltic Sea region will be hampered.

This will in the long run result in an increased number of critical situations, risking the security of people and the environment in the whole Baltic Sea region.

We should also urge the governments to design and implement a common strategy to fight against climate change and strongly continue to support the implementation of HELCOM’s Baltic Sea Action Plan.

Moreover, we should strive for efforts to make the Baltic Sea region a pilot area for circular economy and continuously keep sustainability issues on the political agenda.

Continuation of the environmental cooperation and protection regardless of the political situation in the Baltic Sea region is a legitimate demand. The positive development is now at stake, and we, the people living in the Baltic Sea region, cannot allow a deterioration of the cooperation. We must continue a peaceful dialogue, we owe that to our children and future generations.

Thank you for your attention.