

OPENING

Vision 2030: Safeguarding our Environment, Seas and Oceans for Future Generations



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European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries

Your excellency Speaker of Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, Dear Ministers, Members of Parliaments, dear Participants to the 29th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, I would like to welcome the setting of the conference and the very high level of participation which should enable discussions of quality and fruitful debates.

This setting is a unique parliamentary bridge between all the EU and non-EU countries of the Baltic Sea Region and an important guide for political actions. It can thus play an important role to achieve a clean, healthy and productive Baltic Sea, which is a core objective of the EU's work for this regional sea.

The state of the Baltic Sea, like that of all other European Seas, is one the Commission pays particular attention to. Much is said about its condition, little is said about what is being done.

As outlined in the Commission's recent report adopted just last June – the picture portraying state of our seas is rather mixed. There are some positive stories, such as the white-tailed eagles here in the Baltic Sea. But we have others stories that are gloomier. The State of the Environment Report 2020 of the European Environmental Agency (EEA), and the 2018 HELCOM report on the state of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS report) shows that there are still too many nutrient run-offs choking the Baltic Sea. Unsustainable fishing practices that bycatch for example harbour porpoise and dumping contaminants and other pollutants such as marine litter makes the situation worse.

Ladies and gentlemen, our biodiversity remains at risk, pollution is ever present.

We do however have marine strategies in place – thanks to EU legislation that protects and conserves the marine environment – that has led to important progress towards reducing marine pollution, in particular since the entry into force of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive in 2008.

This directive was indeed the first EU's holistic tool to analyse the health of our seas and oceans and to take action where it is most needed. It is a unique tool in the world and is often mentioned as a best practice. The report published a few weeks ago on its implementation provides an honest assessment of both its achievements and its challenges.

It has improved regional coordination within and across the regional seas. It helped deliver key international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Thanks to the directive, an effective monitoring of ecosystems' condition and pressures on them is now in place.

As a policy tool, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive has made significant inroads. But we recognise that actual implementation across the EU is lacking. The 2020 deadline to achieve good environmental status in all our seas will not be achieved everywhere.

In that regard the work we do with our Member States through HELCOM is also an important contribution to the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and importantly towards good environmental status of the Baltic Sea as whole. We share the same objective.

This is an excellent example of ocean governance at regional level. The coordinated regional work is particularly relevant now in light of our overarching European Green Deal that guides all our policy-making in the EU.

Work is done for example at regional level to reduce nutrient inputs in the Baltic Sea, for example through launching a joint nutrient reduction scheme. Together with the countries bordering the North Sea, HELCOM also contributed to better overall air and water quality by creating some of the first Sulfur Oxides and Nitrogen Oxides Emission Control Areas in European waters.

Over the last decade, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) has also supported these efforts by mobilising and coordinating public funding under EU Cohesion Policy as well as European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). The work launched under the EUSBSR offers a

good basis for further development of initiatives aimed at preservation of the marine environment and climate change.

In addition, The Sustainable Blue Growth Agenda for the Baltic Sea Region, adopted by the European Commission in 2014 highlighted the extraordinary potential for developing sustainable blue economy in the Baltic Sea Region. Thematic areas such as green shipping, blue bio-economy, coastal and maritime tourism, and environmental and monitoring technology offer tremendous opportunities for new value creation which can benefit from coordinated action and joint investment to get new promising development off the ground.

I see that the latest HELCOM Ministerial Declaration of March 2018, adopted under EU Chairmanship, is being implemented with the on-going update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan. Consideration of new issues not yet or partially tackled, such as marine litter, underwater noise, nutrient recycling, and regional ocean governance is of particular importance. I do hope to see these issues reflected in the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan.

As you can see, we all need to act together, and here I call on all coastal EU member States to cooperate and coordinate their strategies more closely. And I think more needs to be done. The Marine Strategy Framework Directive report that I mentioned earlier, shows that there is indeed need for will, ambition and dedication to reach Good Environmental Status. And we need to do this across the board – in reducing pollution and litter, in addressing unsustainable fishing and other extractive industries. We need to treat the seas with respect.

That is why I will organise a conference this September 28th to tackle these issues together and gather support and commitments to reduce the pressures affecting the state of the Baltic Sea, in particular eutrophication, fisheries and pollution (with a focus on litter). It will gather EU Ministers from Fisheries, Agriculture and Environment, with a parallel stakeholder conference aiming at trigger substantial discussions on the issues at stake and on the solutions to implement, based on existing policies and best practices. I hope to adopt an ambitious declaration aiming at presenting the ways forward and commitments to accelerate efforts to achieve a clean and healthy Baltic Sea.

This means first of all that European policies such as Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) should be used to reduce key pressures on the Baltic Sea. This is my number one priority and it fits very well with the EU objectives set out in the European Green Deal, Biodiversity strategy, zero pollution ambition, Farm to Fork, Chemicals Strategy, that are relevant for the wellbeing of our seas and oceans.

In particular, the new Biodiversity Strategy sets out an ambitious agenda for the protection of our seas and oceans. And it is a necessary ambition. We need to tackle the current biodiversity crisis in the marine environment. We need to strengthen our efforts to protect and restore marine ecosystems, based on an ecosystem-based approach.

The Commission is about to adopt its proposal for fishing opportunities in the Baltic Sea for 2021. This proposal is as always based on the latest best available scientific advice and our legislation in force. The proposal will reflect the overall approach I described earlier with a prudent approach for struggling stocks and additional accompanying measures to support the rapid recovery of the stocks.

We have a shared responsibility to protect the Baltic; through our agricultural practices, through our fishing methods and through the way we take care of its environment. And as these issues do not know any borders, it is important that EU and non-EU countries of the Baltic Sea Region work together; for example through the regional organisations that protect the marine environment, or those that manage fisheries issues.

A coordinated and comprehensive response is what the Baltic needs. I will personally see that this is done.