

**Report on the Exercise of the Observer Status of the  
Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) at the  
Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission  
(Helsinki Commission – HELCOM)**

**2022–2023**

The BSPC Rapporteur's 2022-2023 Report on HELCOM  
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*The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC)* was established in 1991 as a forum for political dialogue between parliamentarians from the Baltic Sea Region. The BSPC aims to raise awareness and opinion on issues of current political interest and relevance for the Baltic Sea Region. It promotes and drives various initiatives and efforts to support the sustainable environmental, social and economic development of the Baltic Sea Region. It strives to enhance the visibility of the Baltic Sea Region and its issues in a broader European context. BSPC gathers parliamentarians from 10 national parliaments, 7 regional parliaments with legislative powers, one supranational parliament and 4 parliamentary organisations around the Baltic Sea. The BSPC thus constitutes a unique parliamentary bridge between the democratic EU- and non-EU countries of the Baltic Sea Region. BSPC external interfaces include parliamentary, governmental, subregional and other organisations in the Baltic Sea Region and the Northern Dimension area, among them CBSS, HELCOM, the Northern Dimension Partnership in Health and Social Well-Being (NDPHS), the Baltic Sea Labour Forum (BSLF) and the Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation (BSSSC).

The BSPC shall initiate and guide political activities in the region; support and strengthen democratic institutions in the participating states; improve dialogue between governments, parliaments and civil society; strengthen the common identity of the Baltic Sea Region by means of close cooperation between national and regional parliaments based on equality; and initiate and guide political activities in the Baltic Sea Region, endowing them with additional democratic legitimacy and parliamentary authority.

The political recommendations of the annual Parliamentary Conferences are expressed in a Conference Resolution adopted by the Conference. The adopted Resolution shall be submitted to the governments of the Baltic Sea Region, the CBSS and the EU and disseminated to other relevant national, regional and local stakeholders in the Baltic Sea Region and its neighbourhood.

# Contents

I. Introduction .....	5
II. Cooperation between the BSPC and HELCOM .....	8
1. HELCOM at the 31 <sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in Stockholm, 12 June 2022 .....	9
2. Presentation of the HELCOM Submerged Assessment at the BSPC Standing Committee Meeting in Berlin, 21 November 2022 .....	11
3. HELCOM Progress Update at the BSPC Standing Committee Meeting in Brussels, 6 March 2023.....	13
4. BSPC Efforts to Support HELCOM.....	16
III. Main Developments and Events in 2022/2023.....	19
1. HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in Lübeck, 20 October 2021 .....	19
<i>The Update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP): Background Information</i> .....	20
<i>HELCOM Ministerial Meeting 2021: Keynotes and the Ministerial Debate</i> .....	21
<i>Documents Adopted by the 2021 Ministerial Meeting</i> .....	25
2. HELCOM Strategic Pause.....	26
3. Latvian HELCOM Chairmanship 2022–2024.....	27
4. Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2022, 26–27 September 2022 .....	28
5. Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2023, 9 March 2023.....	30
6. HELCOM's Global Engagement and Commitments.....	32
IV. Prospects and Outlook .....	34
Useful Sources and Links.....	35
ANNEX I: Updated Lists of HELCOM's Working Groups and Projects.....	38
<i>Annex I.1. List of Current HELCOM Working Groups and Expert Groups</i> .....	38
<i>Annex I.2. List of Ongoing HELCOM Projects</i> .....	40
List of Abbreviations .....	41

## I. Introduction

The past years have not been easy for international institutions and organisations. First, the COVID-19 pandemic and the connected quarantine regulations and travel restrictions have severely limited the possibilities for in-person meetings and informal exchange. Then, just when the pandemic had started subsiding and day-to-day life was slowly returning to normal, a new geopolitical crisis has erupted, shaking the very foundation of the post-Cold War international order in Europe.



*Ms Beate Schlupp*

In light of the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, many European and International institutions had to re-evaluate their identity, reinforce their values and find new modes of operation. Both the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) and the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (Helsinki Commission – HELCOM) have condemned the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in the strongest terms<sup>1</sup> and had to adjust their working processes accordingly.

On 12 and 22 March 2022, the BSPC Heads of Delegations from eleven national parliaments, five regional parliaments and three parliamentary organisations from the Baltic Sea region have issued a declaration announcing the suspension of the Russian parliaments from the BSPC Annual Conference, the meetings of its working bodies, proceedings, and projects.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, at its 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on 12–14 June 2022 in Stockholm, the BSPC has adopted the new BSPC Statutes and Rules of Procedure,<sup>3</sup> outlining the fundamentals and core principles of cooperation within the BSPC and detailing the suspension procedure for members that blatantly violate the aforementioned foundations and principles of international law.

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<sup>1</sup> See: *Conference Resolution Adopted by the 31<sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, 14 June 2022*, <https://www.bspc.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Conference-Resolution-31-BSPC.pdf>; *Statement by the German Chairmanship of HELCOM on behalf of the European Union and the Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are Member States of the European Union, 4 March 2022*, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/German-Chairmanship-Statement-on-Ukraine.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Declaration 12<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022 by Heads of BSPC Delegations on the War in Ukraine and its consequences for the BSPC Work, 12 and 22 March 2022*, <https://www.bspc.net/declaration-12-march-2022/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Statutes and RoP adopted by the 31<sup>st</sup> BSPC, 14 June 2022*, <https://www.bspc.net/statutes-and-rop-adopted-by-the-31-spc-onn-13-and-14-june-2022/>.

For its part, on 4 March 2022, the German Chairmanship of HELCOM issued a statement on behalf of the European Union and the HELCOM Contracting Parties that are Member States of the European Union. They announced the suspension of all official meetings of HELCOM bodies and meetings of project groups with Russian involvement under the HELCOM umbrella with immediate effect and until further notice.<sup>4</sup> The strategic pause announced in March 2022 was later prolonged by the current Latvian Chairmanship of HELCOM, which took over presidency from Germany in July 2022.

Yet while official meetings remain suspended, HELCOM has continued its operational work. Current priorities include first and foremost the implementation of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) adopted at the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in October 2021, the connected update of HELCOM's working structure, and the realisation of the Third HELCOM Holistic Assessment (HOLAS 3) which commenced in 2022. HELCOM proceeded with its relevant project work and stepped-up cooperation with other regional sea conventions and international institutions, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the United Nations.

In July 2022, Latvia took over HELCOM Chairmanship from Germany and presented its presidency priorities, which prioritise preserving HELCOM as an effective and well-functioning organisation of regional cooperation, implementing the updated BSAP, and strengthening the role of regional cooperation in the context of international ocean governance.

Notwithstanding the announced strategic pause, HELCOM has continued its work on HOLAS 3 indicators and thematic reports based on data from 2016–2021. The results, starting with the thematic assessments, are expected to be published in 2023. In view of the aims and actions contained in the new BSAP, HELCOM has also updated and streamlined the structure of its Working Groups and Expert Groups. Furthermore, despite its initial postponement, the Baltic Stakeholder Conference on climate change in the Baltic Sea was successfully organised in September 2022 and presented the comprehensive Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet for policy- and decision-makers. The Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2023 then focussed on the different aspects of the BSAP implementation process and served as a helpful forum for generating new ideas in this central HELCOM's priority area.

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<sup>4</sup> *Statement by the German Chairmanship of HELCOM on behalf of the European Union and the Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are Member States of the European Union, 4 March 2022, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/German-Chairmanship-Statement-on-Ukraine.pdf>.*

The report at hand follows the long-standing tradition and provides an overview of the main developments in the work of the Helsinki Commission. In addition, it summarises the BSPC's efforts to support HELCOM and highlights the valuable and important cooperation and exchange between the two organisations. Despite the crises, we could deepen our contact to HELCOM. In this way, I would especially thank Mr Rüdiger Stempel, Executive Secretary at HELCOM, for the intensive exchange after the Standing Committee Meeting in Brussels in March 2023.

**Beate Schlupp**

First Vice President of the  
State Parliament of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern  
BSPC Observer at HELCOM

## II. Cooperation between the BSPC and HELCOM

Despite past and ongoing crises, the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference and the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission continued and strengthened their fruitful cooperation and exchange throughout 2022–2023. This cooperation and information sharing traditionally encompasses references to HELCOM’s work in BSPC resolutions, HELCOM’s participation in the meetings of BSPC working bodies, as well as contacts between HELCOM representatives and myself in my capacity as BSPC Observer at HELCOM.

Baltic Sea parliamentarians continued to signal their strong support towards the goals and efforts of the Helsinki Commission – as expressed in the resolutions of the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> BSPC. With the aim of intensifying the existing close partnership between the two international organisations, HELCOM representatives were invited to report on the current priorities and activities of the Helsinki Commission at the BSPC Annual Conference and Standing Committee meetings in 2022 and 2023.

Thus, notwithstanding the challenging geopolitical situation, then HELCOM Chair Dr Lilian Busse followed the BSPC’s invitation and addressed the 31<sup>st</sup> BSPC on 12 June 2022 in Stockholm. Dr Busse reported on the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting held in October 2021 and the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP). Ahead of the 32nd BSPC Annual Conference in August 2023, an interim progress update was provided by Mr Rüdiger Stempel, Executive Secretary at HELCOM, and Ms Evija Šmite, HELCOM Chair, at the BSPC Standing Committee meeting on 6 March 2023 in Brussels. Mr Stempel and Ms Šmite informed the members of the Standing Committee about the working arrangements at HELCOM following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the ongoing implementation of the updated BSAP, and the current priorities of the Latvian Chairmanship of HELCOM.

Earlier, Ms Jannica Haldin, Deputy Executive Secretary at HELCOM, presented the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet report<sup>5</sup> at the BSPC Secretary Level meeting on 3 November 2022 in Helsinki. In addition, Mr Torsten Frey from GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research in Kiel shared some of the conclusions of the HELCOM Submerged Assessment report at the Standing Committee meeting on 21 November 2023 in Berlin.

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5 *Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet 2021*, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Baltic-Sea-Climate-Change-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf>.

The following sections provide detailed information on the information exchange between HELCOM and the BSPC as well as the BSPC's efforts to support HELCOM's work towards our common goal of improving the environmental situation in the Baltic Sea region and helping restore its good ecological status by the end of the current decade.

### *1. HELCOM at the 31<sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in Stockholm, 12 June 2022*

Following the invitation to the BSPC Annual Conference, the outgoing German Chairwoman of HELCOM, Dr. Lilian Busse addressed the 31<sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference held on 12–14 June 2022 in Stockholm, Sweden.<sup>6</sup> Dr Busse provided a brief overview of the main priorities, activities, and outcomes of the 2020–2022 German Chairmanship of the Helsinki Commission, which she described as overall challenging. The German Chairmanship had started with the global COVID-19 pandemic and was ending in a difficult geopolitical situation.

Nonetheless, as Dr Busse highlighted, HELCOM had succeeded in adopting the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan at the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in October 2021. In addition, the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting had adopted the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter, the Regional Action Plan on Underwater Noise, and the HELCOM Science Agenda. Further, Dr Busse gave an outline of the new BSAP, which represented a strategic programme of almost 200 measures and actions for achieving good environmental status of the Baltic Sea by 2030. The new BSAP largely follows the structure of the old plan and includes thematic sections on biodiversity, eutrophication, hazardous substances, and litter as well as sea-based activities. Horizontal issues encompass monitoring, marine-spatial planning, economic and social aspects, knowledge exchange and awareness-raising, hotspots, financing, and climate change were included in the updated BSAP as cross-cutting topics.

Talking about climate change as a cross-cutting issue, Dr Busse underlined that all 199 actions and measures were part of the solution. These measures were designed to raise the resilience of the Baltic Sea to the

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<sup>6</sup> *Renewed Commitment to Democratic Values in a Historical Moment marked the first part of the 31<sup>st</sup> BSPC, 13 June 2022, <https://www.bspc.net/renewed-commitment-to-democratic-values-in-a-historical-moment-marked-the-first-part-of-the-31st-bspc/>.*



effects of climate change. She then stressed that human activities continued to negatively affect biodiversity and caused its further deterioration. The situation was exacerbated by climate change. Therefore, the BSAP included a large number of measures and activities directly concerned with biodiversity, such as the implementation of the Science Agenda, closing the knowledge gap on blue carbon, developing a strategic approach on ocean acidification but also developing work under HELCOM to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Turning to sea-based activities, Dr Busse mentioned the promotion of sustainable shipping, in consideration of the greenhouse gas discussions at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

Furthermore, Dr Busse emphasised that at the end of 2021, HELCOM and Baltic Earth had published the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet<sup>7</sup> in order to provide a better understanding of the effects of climate change in the Baltic Sea region. The report represents a concise and reader-friendly summary of the latest scientific knowledge on climate change and its impacts on the marine environment in the region. It is designed to help decision-makers to carry out timely and coordinated climate action.

In conclusion, Dr Busse underlined that the updated BSAP and the Climate Change Fact Sheet provided comprehensive information and ambitious instruments to achieve the central goal of HELCOM: good environmental status of the Baltic Sea. Now, she stressed, the actions and measures aiming at restoring the healthy state of the sea had to be implemented. HELCOM's work and the implementation of actions was complicated by Russia's war against Ukraine. Dr Busse informed the BSPC that since the outbreak of the war, HELCOM had postponed all meetings and initiated a strategic pause until the end of June 2022, when the Chairmanship was to be passed over to Latvia. She noted that HELCOM was deliberating how to move forward against the backdrop of the difficult geopolitical situation.

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<sup>7</sup> *Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet 2021*, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Baltic-Sea-Climate-Change-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf>.

## *2. Presentation of the HELCOM Submerged Assessment at the BSPC Standing Committee Meeting in Berlin, 21 November 2022*

The issue of sea-dumped munitions had traditionally been high on the agenda of the BSPC. The resolutions of the 28<sup>th</sup>,<sup>8</sup> 29<sup>th</sup>,<sup>9</sup> 30<sup>th</sup>,<sup>10</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup><sup>11</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conferences directly addressed this topic, calling upon the governments of the Baltic Sea region to develop a cross-border sustainable strategy for dealing with unexploded ordnance and, among other things, to support the 2020–2022 German HELCOM presidency's intention to intensify efforts to monitor and treat this problem. With Germany having assumed Chairmanship at the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in July 2022, new impetus in line with the BSPC's calls for action has been given to regional cooperation on this topical issue. Therefore, in November 2022, the BSPC Standing Committee met with experts in order to learn more about the environmental and health threats posed by munitions and ordnance dumped in the Baltic Sea.

As one of the invited experts, Mr Torsten Frey, Deep Sea Monitoring Group, GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research, Kiel, informed the parliamentarians about the work of the HELCOM Expert Group on Environmental Risks of Submerged Objects (EG SUBEMERGED) and the distribution of munitions in the Baltic Sea.<sup>12</sup> In the beginning of his presentation, he demonstrated a map showing contamination hot spots in German waters, and specifically addressed Kolberger Heide and Lübeck bay. Since the GEOMAR research centre was located in Lübeck, researchers had direct access to their research object. Yet Mr Frey stressed that munitions could be found everywhere in the Baltic Sea. Some 300,000 tonnes of conventional munitions and 5,000 tonnes of chemical ordnance remained in German marine waters alone. These estimates were based on historical records but could not yet be fully confirmed in current-day assessments. Talking about the risks posed by mines, Mr Frey noted that nowadays, efforts were made to retrieve them from the waters. In prior times, however, they were simply disarmed and left to sink to the bottom of the sea. As an example, he noted that several naval mines had been discovered during the construction of the Nord Stream pipelines.

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8 *Conference Resolution Adopted by the 28<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) in Oslo on 27 August 2019, Item 24, p. 4, <https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bspc.net%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2019%2F08%2FConference-Resolution-28-BSPC-adopted-270819-.docx&hl=en>.*

9 *Conference Resolution Adopted by the Digital 29<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) on 24 August 2020, Item 15, p. 3, <https://www.bspc.net/29th-bspc-resolution-final-adopted/>*

10 *Conference Resolution Adopted by the 30<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) on 30 August 2021, Item 47, p. 6, <https://www.bspc.net/30-bspc-resolution-2021-adopted/>.*

11 *Conference Resolution Adopted by the 31<sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) in Stockholm on 14 June 2022, Item 26, p. 5, <https://www.bspc.net/conference-resolution-31-bspc/>.*

12 *Exploring the Dangers of Sea-Dumped Ammunitions and Steering Towards the New Year, 21 November 2022, <https://www.bspc.net/exploring-the-dangers-of-sea-dumped-ammunitions-and-steering-towards-the-new-year/>.*

Moving on to the HELCOM Submerged Assessment, Mr Frey noted that – as part of the permanent Working Group Pressure – an Expert Group called Submerged had been established within HELCOM. The Expert Group’s goal was to contribute to regionally coordinated actions on submerged munitions and explosives of concern as well as other submerged hazardous objects. Based on a three-year assessment of the situation across the Baltic Sea, the HELCOM Submerged Assessment report featured a chapter on each country bordering the Baltic Sea, describing its history concerning munitions. Much information had been gathered on the risks posed by munitions as well as protection and management. Finally, for all the bordering countries – with the exception of Latvia and Russia –, there was a list and short description of the respective national and international activities. The report was expected to be published in 2023.

The report draft identified three major areas of concern: explosive hazard that was increasing as the ordnance was becoming more fragile, consequences of direct contact with munitions objects (such as white phosphorus), and the environmental effects of munitions compounds. Mr Frey stressed that despite great efforts undertaken in the past years, multiple research gaps remained, and additional research on warfare materials in the Baltic Sea war was required. Thus, there was a lack of information on where to start clearance, on how munitions compounds accumulated along the food web as well as on toxicological thresholds for munitions compounds in marine biota. In addition, there was a need for continuous monitoring of contamination hot spots. Mr Frey stated that a Baltic Sea-wide data set had not yet been put together since all the gathered information was stored in national databases.

Mr Frey concluded by once again reminding the members of the Standing Committee that munitions could be found everywhere throughout the Baltic Sea. Although contamination hotspots were known from historical records, they had not been fully investigated so far. Further mapping as well as continuous research was needed in order to fill knowledge gaps and create region-wide data. As far as technology was concerned, Mr Frey noted that detection and investigation methods were well established, but clearance and disposal technologies needed to be scaled up significantly. He further cautioned that at the current speed, it would take centuries to clear the sea of unexploded ordnance. Financial resources and political will were needed in order to solve the problem in the coming 30–40 years.

Following the presentation, BSPC Secretary General Mr Bodo Bahr asked whether the clearance process could be completed in the 20-year span demanded in the BSPC resolution. Mr Frey replied that with a focused effort on the dumped munitions in German waters, munitions could be cleared and deposited on land within ten years. However, this approach came with inherent security problems, so that offshore disposal with more efficient methods still to be fully developed should be the goal. Therefore, for clearing munitions off the German coast, he expected that disposal would take longer than twenty years. In response to BSPC President's Mr Johannes Schrap's question concerning joint international efforts, Mr Frey noted that GEOMAR had good connections to Poland and added that extensive research was also conducted in Finland. He mentioned that information was lacking on which institutions and bodies were responsible for research and disposal processes in the various countries.

### *3. HELCOM Progress Update at the BSPC Standing Committee Meeting in Brussels, 6 March 2023*

In March 2023, the BSPC Standing Committee resumed its tradition of convening in Brussels for its winter meeting, which was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. BSPC Standing Committee members met with representatives of the European Parliament, the European Commission, and its close partner organisations, CBSS and HELCOM, in order to discuss the current geopolitical situation and efforts to increase the resilience of the Baltic Sea region.<sup>13</sup>

At the meeting, Mr Rüdiger Stempel, Executive Secretary at HELCOM, and Ms Evija Šmite, HELCOM Chair, Deputy Director-General, Director of Fisheries Control Department at the Latvian State Environmental Service, presented the current priorities and activities of the Helsinki Commission.

Thus, Mr Rüdiger Stempel first provided an overview of HELCOM's achievements in 2022 and gave an outlook on what was planned for the year 2023. In the beginning of his presentation, Mr Stempel reminded the Standing Committee members of HELCOM's goal of improving the unique but fragile ecosystem of the Baltic Sea and briefly outlined the current working arrangements at HELCOM since March 2022.

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<sup>13</sup> *Deepening Collaboration with the EU, the CBSS and HELCOM, 6 March 2023, <https://www.bspc.net/deepening-collaboration-with-the-eu-the-cbss-and-helcom/>.*

In view of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, HELCOM had entered a strategic pause, in due of which all official meetings had been suspended until further notice. Mr Stempel noted that HELCOM Contracting Partners which were also EU member states (also referred to as the “HELCOM 9” or “H 9”) continued informal consultations as needed while official procedures still requiring Russian participation were handled via correspondence. In this regard, Mr Stempel underlined that the organisation was continuing its operational work.

Following the adoption of the updated BSAP in October 2021, the implementation of agreed measures and actions became the central priority of HELCOM’s current work. The predecessor BSAP adopted in 2007 had aimed at reaching good ecological status of the Baltic Sea by 2021 – a goal that could not be achieved within the envisioned timeframe. The updated BSAP now includes 199 actions, which have individual target years for their implementation. All these measures are to be implemented by 2030 at the latest. Each action had been assigned to one or several HELCOM bodies for monitoring, guiding, and contributing to their implementation. Furthermore, the BSAP included specific criteria to measure their fulfilment. Progress could be tracked with an online tool called HELCOM Explorer.<sup>14</sup> Aside from the Baltic Sea Action Plan, Mr Stempel mentioned several other projects and processes, including the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter as well as the recently published Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet, providing information about the effects of climate change in the Baltic Sea region. Further activities included the HELCOM Red List II Project and the HELCOM Submerged Assessment of warfare materials in the Baltic Sea. Moreover, HELCOM was continuing its cooperation with partner organisations – global, continental, and regional. Thus, Mr Stempel noted that HELCOM was contributing and planning to contribute to the UN Oceans Conference and the UN Water Conference.

Another flagship activity within HELCOM highlighted by Mr Stempel was the Holistic Assessment (HOLAS), which provides a comprehensive overview of the ecosystem health of the Baltic Sea. According to Mr Stempel, the assessment was called holistic because it covered the entire area of HELCOM’s activities: biodiversity, eutrophication, hazardous substances, economic and social analyses, and spatial pressures and impacts. The initial Holistic Assessment (HOLAS 1) was conducted in 2010 and was based on data from the years 2003–2007. The Third Holistic Assessment (HOLAS 3) report will cover the period of 2016–2021 and is due in autumn 2023.

Looking forward, Mr Stempel noted that the next HELCOM Ministerial Meeting would be held in 2024 – the same year that HELCOM would be celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

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<sup>14</sup> HELCOM Explorer, <http://maps.helcom.fi/website/HELCOMexplorer/>.

Subsequently, the current HELCOM Chairwoman Ms Evija Šmite presented the priorities of the Latvian HELCOM Chairmanship 2022–2024.<sup>15</sup> These included three main objectives: maintaining HELCOM as an effective and well-functioning organisation of regional cooperation, implementation of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan. These objectives were focusing on the protection of marine biodiversity and advancing ecosystem-based sustainable marine management, and strengthening the role of regional cooperation in the context of international ocean governance to support the achievement of the global sustainable development goals. In terms of the latter objective, Ms Šmite noted that it was important to coordinate and harmonise the work in the context of the BSAP with other political instruments and ongoing international initiatives of the European Union, such as the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (EU MSFD).

Elaborating on HELCOM's mode of operation in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, Ms Šmite clarified that HELCOM had announced a strategic pause shortly after the outbreak of the war. The suspension was initially announced in a statement by the German presidency of HELCOM,<sup>16</sup> which declared that the H9 Contracting Parties unanimously agreed that they could not currently engage in business as usual with the Russian Federation in the context of HELCOM. The suspension has been prolonged until further notice under the current Latvian Chairmanship of HELCOM. However, the Latvian Chairmanship, according to Ms Šmite, was organising such major events as the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in Riga in the spring of 2024 and a celebration of HELCOM's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In the following exchange between HELCOM representatives and the BSPC, the Standing Committee members inquired about the further reduction of nutrient input into the Baltic Sea as well as the possibilities to improve the implementation of the updated BSAP – also with a view to Russia, which remained a Contracting Party to the Helsinki Convention. In response to the former, Ms Evija Šmite noted that the updated BSAP contained a number of concrete actions and thresholds, including those aimed at reducing eutrophication. Mr Rüdiger Stempel stressed that while the previous action plan had not been implemented fully, there was improvement in the situation. In addition, HELCOM had undertaken a unique sufficiency of measures analysis (SOM), which allowed identifying weaknesses and considering them in the updated BSAP.

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<sup>15</sup> *Priorities of the Latvian Chairmanship of HELCOM, 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024*, <https://helcom.fi/about-us/chairmanship/latvian-chairmanship-2022-24/>.

<sup>16</sup> *Statement by the German Chairmanship of HELCOM on behalf of the European Union and the Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are Member States of the European Union, 4 March 2022*, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/German-Chairmanship-Statement-on-Ukraine.pdf>.

With the high level of commitment by the involved parties, he expected substantial progress in this area. In regard to Russia, Mr Strempel mentioned that improving the ecological status of the Baltic Sea was in that country's own interests. He therefore assumed that Russia was taking action contributing to the implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan. However, more precise information was not available.

#### *4. BSPC Efforts to Support HELCOM*

Ahead of the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in October 2021, the resolution of the 30<sup>th</sup> BSPC called upon the national governments in the Baltic Sea region and the European Union to adopt an ambitious update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan. This was to ensure “that its objectives are implemented in all countries of the Baltic Sea Region more quickly and consistently than before.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the resolution called for emission reductions and reaching climate resilience in line with the updated BSAP as well as supporting the activation of the HELCOM Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter.<sup>18</sup> In a resolution section dedicated to concrete proposals on solving the issue of sea-dumped munitions in the Baltic Sea, the resolution of the 30<sup>th</sup> BSPC proposed to bring together national findings and information in an expert group – if possible, at HELCOM – and prepare concrete actions for the removal of unexploded ordnance in the Baltic Sea.<sup>19</sup> The resolution further suggested to look into the possibility of including this task as a long-term priority in the updated BSAP.<sup>20</sup>

The resolution of the 31<sup>st</sup> BSPC subsequently expressed its support to the updated BSAP and its supporting documents.<sup>21</sup> The resolution called for a more quick and consistent implementation of the agreed objectives and underlined the importance of regular monitoring. Moreover, the resolution recommended deriving and implementing further measures from the policy-relevant suggestions of the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet.<sup>22</sup> On the issue of sea-dumped munitions, which has been one of the priorities

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<sup>17</sup> *Conference Resolution Adopted by the 30<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) on 30 August 2021, Item 35, p. 4, <https://www.bspc.net/30-bspc-resolution-2021-adopted/>.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid, Items 37, 45(b).*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid, Item 47(b).*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid, Item 47(f).*

<sup>21</sup> *Conference Resolution Adopted by the 31<sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) in Stockholm on 14 June 2022, Item 19, p. 4, <https://www.bspc.net/conference-resolution-31-bspc/>.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid, Item 20, p. 5.*

of the German Chairmanship of HELCOM, the resolution called for continued cooperation with HELCOM and the CBSS. The ultimate goal sees establishing the Baltic Sea region as a global role model region for the environmentally sound, rapid, and affordable salvage, decontamination and removal of explosive ordnance dumped in the sea.<sup>23</sup>

In my speech at the 31<sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in Stockholm, I have expressed my gratitude to Dr Lilian Busse for accepting the invitation to the Annual Conference and providing an update on HELCOM's work in the current turbulent and troubling times.

I have underlined the utmost importance of continuing our joint efforts towards the common goal of a safer and more sustainable Baltic Sea. In view of the difficult geopolitical developments, I have mentioned the adoption of the revised Statute and Rules of Procedure of the BSPC, which explicitly outlined the fundamentals, principles, mission, and objectives of our parliamentary cooperation. Accordingly, our main aim and focus is contributing to security, prosperity, and sound and sustainable status of the environment in our Baltic Sea region. I have further reminded that joint efforts to support sustainable ecological development in the region have traditionally stood high on the agenda of our regional inter-parliamentary forum. In this regard, I have thanked the outgoing German HELCOM Chairmanship for its engaged work over the past two years – a difficult time dominated by unprecedented crises and disruptions. Despite the pandemic-related restrictions on operational activities, HELCOM has managed to finalise the ambitious and comprehensive update of the BSAP.

As I have pointed out in my speech, the adoption of the updated BSAP together with a comprehensive package of associated action documents at the highest decision-making level in HELCOM should send a strong signal for stepping up efforts in the area of marine environment protection at the regional and at the global level. Yet I have also stressed that the true success of the BSAP would depend on national implementation of the agreed measures and actions. Therefore, we as parliamentarians are responsible for considering the adopted measures and targets in our decision-making and for pushing our governments towards their timely implementation.

Finally, I have taken the opportunity to wish the upcoming Latvian HELCOM Chairmanship much success in the upcoming two years.

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<sup>23</sup> Conference Resolution Adopted by the 31<sup>st</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) in Stockholm on 14 June 2022, Item 26, p. 5, <https://www.bspc.net/conference-resolution-31-bspc/>.



In the forerun to the 32nd Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference scheduled for 27–29 August in Berlin, I have continued updating the BSPC Standing Committee on the developments at HELCOM – in addition to the valuable updates by HELCOM representatives delivered at BSPC Standing Committee meetings throughout 2022–2023. In February 2022, I have delivered an update on the 2021 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting as a supplement to my BSPC Observer Report 2021.<sup>24</sup> This update is included in Section III.1 of the report at hand. Furthermore, I have informed the BSPC Standing Committee about the modalities of HELCOM’s work following the announced strategic pause at the BSPC Standing Committee meeting on 21 November 2022. The formal and informal exchange between the BSPC and HELCOM at the Standing Committee meeting in March 2023 in Brussels has presented a valuable opportunity to further develop our cooperation, which I am sure would be strengthened in the future.

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<sup>24</sup> *Report on the Exercise of the Observer Status of the BSPC at the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission 2021*, [https://www.bspc.net/bspc\\_observerstatushelcom2021/](https://www.bspc.net/bspc_observerstatushelcom2021/).

## III. Main Developments and Events in 2022/2023

### *1. HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in Lübeck, 20 October 2021*

The summary at hand complements the first part of the 2021 Report on the Exercise of the Observer Status of the BSPC at the Helsinki Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea (HELCOM)<sup>25</sup> and provides an overview of the 2021 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting, which was held on 20 October 2021 in Lübeck, Germany. In my capacity as BSPC observer at HELCOM, I would like to to congratulate HELCOM and the German Chairmanship on the successful organisation of the meeting and on the adoption of the ambitious and comprehensive update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP). As a regional parliamentary organisation, the BSPC highly appreciates the successes of HELCOM's work towards our common goal – a healthy and thriving Baltic Sea.

In their Ministerial Statement, the Contracting Parties represented by the ministers of the environment of the Baltic Sea coastal states and the EU Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries have underlined HELCOM's role in the protection of oceans and seas in the Baltic Sea region as well as its valuable contribution to global ocean governance. The road towards the updated BSAP was long and not always smooth. In the end, the Contracting Parties have consensually agreed on an extensive list of long-term targets and concrete measures to achieve a good environmental status of the Baltic Sea by 2030. This could be seen as a clear political success – yet the true success of the action plan would depend on national implementation of the agreed measures and actions.

The BSPC will therefore continue to closely follow and support HELCOM's dedicated work and looks forward to continuing our cooperation in the future. For this reason, I have once again reached out to Dr Lilian Busse as then HELCOM Chair in order to inform the Helsinki Commission about the relevant recommendations. These recommendations were contained in the resolution of the 30<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference and renewed the BSPC's invitation for HELCOM representatives to report on the current and future activities in matters of our mutual interest and concern at the future meetings of BSPC bodies.

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<sup>25</sup> Report on the Exercise of the Observer Status of the BSPC at the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission 2021, [https://www.bspc.net/bspc\\_observerstatushelcom2021/](https://www.bspc.net/bspc_observerstatushelcom2021/).

### *The Update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP): Background Information*

The Helsinki Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea (HELCOM) held its 14<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting in Lübeck, Germany on 20 October 2021. HELCOM Ministerial Meetings represent the highest decision-making level at HELCOM and are to be held every three years. At the meeting, the HELCOM Contracting Parties, which include Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden and the EU, adopted the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) – a strategic program of measures and objectives until 2030. The adoption of the updated action plan marked the completion of the comprehensive revision process launched in 2018 and signalled political agreement on an ambitious roadmap for the protection of the Baltic Sea.

The Baltic Sea Action Plan, which was initially adopted in 2007, set the goal of achieving good ecological status in the Baltic Sea by 2021. Even though considerable progress has been made during this time – for example in reducing inputs of nutrient and hazardous substances – the main goal of the BSAP could not be achieved. The reasons are numerous and range from insufficient implementation of existing measures to the emergence of new, previously unaccounted for challenges. Due to this, the 2018 Conference of Environment Ministers of the HELCOM Contracting Parties ordered a comprehensive revision of the BSAP by the end of 2021. As the Contracting Party then holding HELCOM Chairmanship, Germany has played a key role in accompanying and shaping the revision process since mid-2020 and hosted the 2021 Ministerial Meeting.

The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, which acquired observer status at the Helsinki Commission in 2002, has closely followed the implementation of the 2007 BSAP and later addressed the update process in several resolutions. Thus in 2017, the resolution of the 26<sup>th</sup> BSPC called for the strengthened implementation of the BSAP and for its renewal, if applicable, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals with a time perspective until 2030.<sup>26</sup> Further, the resolution of the 27<sup>th</sup> BSPC supported the HELCOM Ministerial Declaration of 6 March 2018 and shared its critical view on the state of the Baltic Sea, while also calling for a vigorous implementation of the decisions contained in the 2018 Ministerial Declaration.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Conference Resolution Adopted by the 26<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), Item 2, <https://www.bspc.net/final-version-4adopted/>.

<sup>27</sup> Conference Resolution Adopted by the 27<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), Items 7 and 10, <https://www.bspc.net/res-27-bspc-final/>.

In 2020, the BSPC called upon the Baltic Sea governments, the CBSS, and the EU to support the HELCOM Chairmanship in pursuing the objectives of explicitly considering aspects of sustainability, relevance for the climate and biodiversity as well as suitability in the update of the BSAP.<sup>28</sup> Finally, ahead of the 2021 Ministerial Meeting, the 30<sup>th</sup> BSPC held on 30 August 2021 urged to send a powerful and determined signal by adopting an ambitious update of the BSAP. We called for a faster and more consistent implementation of the targets formulated in the Baltic Sea Action Plan to achieve a good ecological status of the Baltic Sea by the end of 2030.<sup>29</sup>

### *HELCOM Ministerial Meeting 2021: Keynotes and the Ministerial Debate*

The 2021 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting was addressed by the State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety Mr Jochen Flasbarth, the Minister of Energy, Agriculture, the Environment, Nature and Digitalisation of the Federal State of Schleswig-Holstein Mr Jan-Philipp Albrecht, and the State Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment of the Federal State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Dr Jürgen Buchwald. In their welcoming addresses, they emphasised the importance of joint international efforts in the area of environmental protection, as no country or state could master the current environmental challenges alone. It was also stressed that German federal coastal states were at the forefront of implementing environmental measures, for example in the area of marine protected areas (MPAs) and should therefore be involved in international negotiations on the goals and priorities of marine protection policy, thus underlining the positive experience of Germany holding HELCOM Chairmanship 2020–2022 as a Bund-Länder team.

In his welcome address, Mr Albrecht also thanked the BSPC for providing an important political impetus for international efforts in addressing the problem of sea-dumped munitions, which was one of the priorities of Schleswig-Holstein's HELCOM Vice-Presidency. On this issue, the resolution of the 30<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference called to strengthen multinational efforts to recover and neutralise explosive ordnance in the Baltic Sea and to strive for an international donor fund – possibly, managed by HELCOM.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Conference Resolution Adopted by the 29<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), Item 14, <https://www.bspc.net/29th-bspc-resolution-final-adopted/>.

29 Conference Resolution Adopted by the 30<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), Item 35, <https://www.bspc.net/30-bspc-resolution-2021-adopted/>.

30 Conference Resolution Adopted by the 30<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), Item 47 (a, b, c, f), <https://www.bspc.net/30-bspc-resolution-2021-adopted/>.

The updated HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan includes one action aimed at developing best environmental practices (BEP) for evaluating the risks posed by dumped munitions by 2025 and implementing best available technologies (BAT) for their environmentally safe disposal by 2028.<sup>31</sup>

To kick off the Ministerial Conference, Dr Mojib Latif, professor at GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel, gave a presentation on the current and future impacts of climate change on the oceans and highlighted the need for regional as well as global actions to protect the marine environment and biodiversity.

Subsequently, HELCOM Executive Secretary Mr Rüdiger Stempel presented the draft of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan, which is to become a central regional instrument for the protection of the Baltic Sea ecosystems. He noted that the updated plan included 199 measures to protect biodiversity, combat eutrophication and marine pollution, and regulate maritime activities such as fishing, underwater noise and seabed disturbance. In addition, cross-cutting issues such as monitoring, maritime spatial planning, socio-economic analysis and, last but not least, climate change were included as so-called “horizontal topics,” which would support the implementation of all elements of the BSAP. Mr Stempel reminded that the update process followed an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach and was based on the results of sound scientific research. In addition, the updated action plan was aligned with global commitments such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), as well as the EU’s Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD).

Together with the updated BSAP, HELCOM has developed a number of key instruments to be adopted in order to support the successful implementation of the planned measures, e.g. the Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy, the Regional Maritime Spatial Development Roadmap 2021–2030, the HELCOM Science Agenda, and the HELCOM Guidelines for sea-based measures to manage internal nutrient reserves. In conclusion, Mr Stempel emphasised that the adoption of the updated BSAP would not only mark an environmental success, but also an important political one and serve as a token of the successful regional and cross-sectoral cooperation, which made the update possible. Future work should concentrate on the implementation of agreed measures and honouring the commitments for a healthy Baltic Sea.

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<sup>31</sup> *Baltic Sea Action Plan 2021 Update, Action S34*, <https://helcom.fi/media/publications/Baltic-Sea-Action-Plan-2021-update.pdf>.

The presentation of the updated BSAP draft was followed by the Ministerial Debate, which concentrated on three main questions concerning:

- a) the most urgent actions contained in the action plan,
- b) HELCOM's and the BSAP's contribution to global processes, as well as
- c) the expectations for each Contracting party and HELCOM as a whole.

In regards to the most burning environmental issues to be addressed, the environment ministers agreed that eutrophication, loss of biodiversity, and marine pollution represented the greatest environmental threats in the Baltic Sea region. In addition, Germany, Denmark, Finland, and Latvia pointed towards the exacerbating effects of climate change on eutrophication and biodiversity loss. Poland specifically mentioned the risks posed by submerged hazardous objects, in particular wrecks and dumped munitions, while Sweden underlined the importance of addressing the issue of hazardous substances such as pharmaceuticals. In terms of dealing with excessive nutrient inputs as the main source of eutrophication, the ministers repeatedly highlighted the importance of agreeing on the HELCOM nutrient reduction scheme as well as adopting the HELCOM Nutrient Recycling Strategy. In relation to biodiversity protection, the ministers welcomed the HELCOM BSAP's ambition to expand the network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to cover at least 30% of its marine area of which one third should be strictly protected. As regards to combatting marine pollution, the Contracting Parties highlighted the importance of the HELCOM Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter as a central and crucial instrument for achieving the ecological and management objectives contained in the BSAP.

On the question of HELCOM's and the BSAP's possible contribution to global processes, the ministers agreed that the joint regional as well as national actions contained in the BSAP would contribute to the achievement of the United Nations' SDGs. Moreover, the extension of the network of marine protected areas as well as HELCOM's assessment and evaluation processes could significantly help in the implementation of the global targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The ministers also praised HELCOM's science-based approach and underlined the importance of international scientific cooperation. In this sense, the HELCOM Science Agenda prepared for adoption together with the updated BSAP could not only foster scientific innovation and informed decision-making on environmental issues in the Baltic Sea area but also contribute to the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science. In this vein, Russia suggested that HELCOM could become a platform for the dissemination of knowledge about the consequences of climate change. In addition, the EU Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius pointed towards such first of their kind innovative regional approaches as the HELCOM nutrient recycling strategy and the regional action plan on underwater noise, which could

set a positive example for other regions worldwide. Finland also emphasised the exemplary character of HELCOM's science-based system of nutrient load ceilings as well as the Country-Allocated Load Reduction Targets, which could allow HELCOM and the Baltic Sea region to lead on the work that relates to land-based pollution. Germany and Latvia noted that the HELCOM regional marine litter action plan could also set an aspiring example to contribute to worldwide improvement of marine ecosystems.

With regard to the expectations for the Contracting Parties and HELCOM as a whole, all ministers highlighted the need for effective and timely implementation of the agreed measures. In view of the fact that the majority of national actions under the 2007 BSAP remained partially implemented or unimplemented, Estonia emphasised the need to understand the failures and gaps. In this regard, Finland stressed that the Third HELCOM Holistic Assessment (HOLAS) would be central to assessing the state of the Baltic Sea environment and coordinating the efforts needed to achieve good ecological status of the Baltic Sea. The European Union also stressed the crucial importance of regular monitoring and review as a way of keeping a track record of the progress made and evaluating the effectiveness of the adopted. Poland and Russia highlighted the value of joint efforts and international cooperation within the framework of HELCOM in those areas where individual implementation of the environmental goals appeared challenging.

### *Documents Adopted by the 2021 Ministerial Meeting*

In addition to the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan,<sup>32</sup> the Contracting Parties adopted the following associated action documents, which directly relate to implementing the actions agreed upon and achieving the overall vision and objectives of the BSAP:

- HELCOM Recommendation 42-43/2 on Amendments to Part II Annex III “Criteria and Measures Concerning the Prevention of Pollution from Land-Based Sources” of the 1992 Helsinki Convention,<sup>33</sup>
- HELCOM Recommendation 42-43/3 on Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP ML),<sup>34</sup>
- Regional Maritime Spatial Planning Roadmap 2021–2030,<sup>35</sup>
- Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy,<sup>36</sup>
- Guidelines for Sea-Based Measures to Manage Internal Nutrient Reserves in the Baltic Sea Region.<sup>37</sup>

The meeting also adopted the HELCOM Science Agenda,<sup>38</sup> and took note of the Climate Change in the Baltic Sea 2021 Fact Sheet<sup>39</sup> as supporting documents. These documents provide science-based information and analysis and are aimed at supporting the implementation of actions contained in and the goals set by the revised BSAP.

Finally, the Ministerial Meeting adopted a joint statement<sup>40</sup> highlighting the importance of HELCOM’s regional environmental work for the international protection of seas and oceans. Over the past five decades, HELCOM has played a leading role in reducing marine pollution of all kinds as well as in biodiversity protection. The adoption of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan was seen as an important contribution to marine protection at the global level.

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<sup>32</sup> *Baltic Sea Action Plan 2021 Update*, <https://helcom.fi/media/publications/Baltic-Sea-Action-Plan-2021-update.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/HELCOM-Recommendation-42-43-2.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/HELCOM-Recommendation-42-43-3.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://helcom.fi/media/publications/Regional-Maritime-Spatial-Planning-Roadmap-2021-2030.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> <https://helcom.fi/media/publications/Baltic-Sea-Regional-Nutrient-Recycling-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> <https://helcom.fi/media/publications/Guidelines-for-Sea-Based-Measures-to-Manage-Internal-Nutrient-Reserves-in-the-Baltic-Sea-Region.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> <https://helcom.fi/media/publications/HELCOM-Science-Agenda.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> <https://helcom.fi/media/publications/Baltic-Sea-Climate-Change-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ministerial Statement of the 2021 Ministerial Meeting of the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission*, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/HELCOM-Ministerial-Statement-2021.pdf>.



## 2. HELCOM Strategic Pause

The unprovoked and unjustifiable aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022 has disrupted the work of multiple regional cooperation institutions and fora. As an intergovernmental organisation and a regional sea convention comprised of Baltic Sea coastal states, HELCOM counts among those institutions affected by the war of aggression waged by one of its Contracting Parties against a sovereign state in Europe. In reaction to the war, the 43rd Meeting of the Helsinki Commission scheduled for March 2022 was postponed and all meetings of HELCOM bodies and project groups with Russian involvement were suspended.

On 4 March 2022 – shortly after the beginning of the war – then German HELCOM Chairmanship issued a Statement on behalf of the Contracting Parties that are Member States of the European Union.<sup>41</sup> The Statement condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and announced the suspension of all HELCOM meetings with Russian involvement. This included all HELCOM bodies, including the Heads of Delegations, Working Groups, Expert Groups, and other bodies. In June 2022, the suspension was prolonged until further notice.<sup>42</sup>

In effect, this meant that the official work of HELCOM has been put on pause. Consequently, the HELCOM Stakeholder Conference on Climate Change had to be postponed by more than half a year and could not officially be announced as a HELCOM event – even though its key purpose was to present the main findings of the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet jointly prepared by Baltic Earth and HELCOM.

However, HELCOM's practical environmental work and ongoing activities continue in the form of informal consultations. These are organised and hosted by the respective Contracting Parties. The invitations are sent out to HELCOM members representing the EU and EU member states (H9), as well as HELCOM observers. Formal decisions are handled by a correspondence procedure – with Russia's involvement – after the informal session.

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<sup>41</sup> *Statement by the German Chairmanship of HELCOM on behalf of the European Union and the Contracting Parties to HELCOM that are Member States of the European Union, 4 March 2022, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/German-Chairmanship-Statement-on-Ukraine.pdf>.*

<sup>42</sup> *HELCOM meetings remain suspended until further notice, 21 June 2022, <https://helcom.fi/helcom-meetings-remain-suspended-until-further-notice/>.*

### *3. Latvian HELCOM Chairmanship 2022–2024*

On 30 June 2022, Germany ended its two-year Chairmanship of HELCOM. As of 1 July 2022, Latvia would hold the rotating HELCOM presidency until 30 June 2023. Ms Evija Šmite, Deputy Director General and the Director of Fisheries Control Department, State Environmental Service of Latvia, was appointed as the new Chair of HELCOM. Ms Ilona Mendzina, Deputy Director of the Nature Protection Department, and the Head of Species and Habitats Protection Division of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, has been selected as the Vice-Chair.

The Latvian Chairmanship has set out the following priorities:<sup>43</sup>

- (1) HELCOM as an effective and well-functioning organisation of regional cooperation, which is capable of action, including in unforeseen and force majeure situations.
- (2) Implementation of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP 2021) with a special focus on:
  - i) protection of marine biodiversity by contributing to the establishment by 2030 of a resilient, regionally coherent and effectively managed ecologically representative and well-connected system of marine protected areas (MPA) to cover at least 30% of the marine area of the Baltic Sea, as well as to updating the HELCOM MPA management guidelines and starting their application;
  - ii) advancing ecosystem based sustainable marine management by integration of environmental objectives with socio-economic goals – by supporting regional efforts to promote sustainable use of the sea, based on the best available scientific information, improved quality and management of marine data, taking into account climate change aspects and balancing environmental and socio-economic objectives, inter alia, through further development of regional Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) process in accordance with HELCOM MSP Roadmap 2021-2030.
- (3) Strengthening the role of regional cooperation in the context of international ocean governance.

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<sup>43</sup> *Priorities of the Latvian Chairmanship of HELCOM 1 July 2022 – 30 June 2024*, <https://helcom.fi/about-us/chairmanship/latvian-chairmanship-2022-24/>.

#### *4. Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2022, 26–27 September 2022*

The 2022 edition of the Stakeholder Conference was initially planned for 9–10 March 2022. Due to the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine and the following announcement of HELCOM's strategic pause, the event was postponed until 26–27 September 2022.<sup>44</sup> The Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2022 was dedicated to climate change in the Baltic Sea and hosted by Germany as the country holding Chairmanship of HELCOM. Among other things, the conference aimed to showcase the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet report<sup>45</sup> jointly prepared by HELCOM and Baltic Earth and present it as a knowledge and information tool for policy- and decision-making. Furthermore, the results from the joint HELCOM and UBA/BfN Blue Carbon Workshop 2021 held on 17–18 November 2021<sup>46</sup> were discussed during the sessions with a view to identifying possible management options regarding mitigation of and adaptation to the effects of climate change. In addition, the conference was to facilitate a discussion on the steps and opportunities for implementing the climate change-related actions contained in the updated BSAP.

The conference was opened by Mr Sebastian Unger, First Marine Commissioner, Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection of Germany, who underlined that humanity depended on healthy oceans and stressed the need to tackle the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution in the Baltic Sea. Further, Mr Unger noted that Germany had launched a new national action plan for nature-based solutions for climate change mitigation and biodiversity protection, including a programme for marine blue carbon. He also presented the results of the German Chairmanship of HELCOM, especially emphasising the adoption of the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan.

Following Mr Unger, Mr Marcus Reckermann, Head of the International Baltic Earth Secretariat, gave an overview of past and present cooperation projects between Baltic Earth and HELCOM, of which the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet was the most recent example. He saw this joint work as a role model for science-based political decision-making.

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<sup>44</sup> *Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2022 – Climate Change in the Baltic Sea, 26–27 September 2022*, <https://helcom.fi/helcom-at-work/events/helcom-stakeholders-conferences/bsc2022/>.

<sup>45</sup> *Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet 2021*, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Baltic-Sea-Climate-Change-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> *HELCOM holds workshop on blue carbon in the Baltic Sea, 1 December 2021*, <https://helcom.fi/helcom-holds-workshop-on-blue-carbon-in-the-baltic-sea/>.

Opening the conference, Mr Rüdiger Stempel, Executive Secretary of HELCOM, stressed that the problem of climate change was taken very seriously in the Baltic Sea region and pointed to the activities of the joint HELCOM/Baltic Earth Expert Network on Climate Change as well as the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet report. He further highlighted the extensive net of scientific and research institutions dealing with environmental issues in the Baltic Sea region. He stressed that HELCOM was privileged to be able to work in close cooperation with the research community and benefit from the extensive scientific expertise on the impacts of climate change in the region.

The following session was dedicated to the presentation of the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet report by Mr Markus Meier, Chair of the Baltic Earth Science Steering Group, Leibniz Institute for Baltic Sea Research Warnemünde, and of the joint HELCOM and UBA/BfN Blue Carbon Workshop held in 2021 by Ms Manuela Krakau, Scientific Officer, German Environment Agency (UBA). Further, Mr Erik Kjellström, climate researcher at the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI), gave a presentation on climate projections in the Baltic Sea region. Mr Kjellström underlined that climate projections predicted continued warming, even if CO<sub>2</sub> emissions could be reduced in the future. However, these models were important for simulating impacts at different locations and identifying possible differences in the outcomes. Overall, they foresaw increased precipitation in winter, extreme weather events, less snow, and decreasing ice coverage.

The presentations were followed by a panel discussion on the added value of regional level work to climate change mitigation. It was emphasised that the Baltic Sea was a unique and highly busy sea, exposed to multiple pressures. A regional viewpoint could allow addressing climate change across the whole spectrum. Even though climate change impacts could not be predicted fully, the extensive information already available allowed making science-based decisions in the area of climate change adaptation and mitigation. Raising public awareness, highlighting the benefits of environmental action and following up on the decisions made was also seen as an important element of climate policies. HELCOM's motto was "think globally and act regionally." In addition, by simultaneously addressing pollution and biodiversity issues, HELCOM aimed at a holistic picture as well as creating new solutions for emerging issues.

The second day of the conference featured a workshop for representatives of the governments of the Baltic Sea states, academia, NGOs, and civil society organisations. The workshop was organised in three sessions dealing with science, policy, and management. The inputs, ideas and proposals gathered from stakeholders in these sessions would serve as a basis for further deliberations within HELCOM and HELCOM groups following the intention of distributing climate change actions and considerations across all HELCOM bodies.

### *5. Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2023, 9 March 2023*

The Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2023 was hosted by Latvia, currently holding Chairmanship of HELCOM, and was held online on 9 March 2023.<sup>47</sup> The aim was to collect ideas from stakeholders around the Baltic Sea region and beyond for accelerating the implementation of the BSAP and finding solutions for both long-standing and emerging challenges as well as to share best practices. The programme was divided into four blocks dealing with a broad array of issues ranging from awareness raising, municipal level implementation, private sector cooperation, to financing. More than 200 registered participants were encouraged to brainstorm outside-the-box solutions for old and new challenges.

The conference was opened by HELCOM Chair, Ms Evija Šmite, who noted in the beginning that the implementation of the updated BSAP was one of the priorities of the current Latvian Chairmanship of HELCOM. She stressed that the conference was seen as a call for action and emphasised the crucial role to be played by various stakeholders in making the ambitious strategic objectives of the BSAP a reality.

In view of strengthening youth participation and involvement, the Baltic Sea Youth Advocacy Working Group under the umbrella of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was invited to formulate questions regarding the measures and steps undertaken by HELCOM to ensure the achievement of a good ecological status of the Baltic Sea. The questions from youth representatives were answered by Ms Marie Louise Krawack, Former Chair of the HELCOM Working Group on the State of the Environment and Nature Conservation (WG State & Conservation WG), and Mr Lars Sonesten, Former Chair of the HELCOM Working Group on the Reduction of Pressures from the Baltic Sea Catchment Area (Pressure WG). These questions concerned the ways and opportunities to ensure the implementation of BSAP actions, evaluating their effectiveness, as well as possible international actions to support Ukraine. In terms of the implementation of the previous BSAP – the goals of which could not be fully accomplished, – it was stressed that while not all actions were implemented, HELCOM had achieved important progress in relation to biodiversity, through e.g., the renewed Recommendation on marine protected areas and on conservation of Baltic Sea species. Concerning the evaluation of the effectiveness of the BSAP, the conference referred to the regular holistic assessments conducted through HELCOM and currently undertaken for the years of 2016–2021 (HOLAS 3). In regard to the implementation of the updated BSAP, it was emphasised that each action had been assigned to at least one HELCOM working body in order to track progress and to insure that the objectives are fulfilled.

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<sup>47</sup> *Thinking outside the box at the Baltic Stakeholder Conference 2023, 13 March 2023, <https://helcom.fi/thinking-outside-the-box-at-the-baltic-stakeholder-conference-2023/>.*

The first thematic block of the conference was dedicated to awareness raising and accelerating actions for the Baltic Sea. Sharing knowledge and promoting engagement on the ground was seen as one of the most important elements in reaching the objectives of the BSAP and consequently achieving a good ecological status of the Baltic Sea. In the discussion, participants noted that awareness of the environmental challenges and problems was already rather high in the Baltic Sea region. However, identifying specific areas for action, motivating people to alter their behaviour and lowering barriers for action were seen as the main remaining challenges. In addition, the importance of raising awareness among governmental actors, the role of social media, and the type of message to be transported were also discussed during this session.

The second panel was dedicated to municipal level implementation. Three presenters shared best environmental practices and their experiences in promoting local level initiatives. The discussion showed that municipalities could benefit from exchanging experience and learning from their counterparts across the Baltic Sea region.

Private sector cooperation was the focus of the third block. Representatives of the business, non-governmental, and research sectors shared their thoughts and ideas about how private companies could contribute to the implementation of the BSAP. Once again, the panellists emphasised the need for cooperation, communication, joint actions, and information sharing.

The fourth session dealt with questions of funding and financing. Implementation measures require substantial resources, which cannot be covered public funds alone. This block featured a panel discussion on what role business could play in protecting and restoring the environment of the Baltic Sea. The panellists underlined the efficiency of impact funding – either results-based or subsidised by private investors, foundations, or government bodies. Joint Baltic Sea funds were seen as a possible instrument for financing environmental actions. Solutions created and implemented in the region could also have potential to generate added value, e.g. through raising employment. It was underlined that funding would, in the long run, contribute not only to solving old problems, but to creating solutions for a better future.

Wrapping up the conference, Mr Rüdiger Stempel, Executive Secretary of HELCOM, emphasised that the Baltic Sea region was facing an enormous challenge, since only 75% of joint actions of the 2007 BSAP could be implemented by the target year. With 2030 as the new target year, Mr Stempel noted that the task ahead was challenging but expressed his optimism regarding future progress. Among the main challenges, he listed lack of funding and the overall political and geopolitical situation. Many actions would have to be implemented at the municipal level. That means that the Contracting Parties would have to engage all relevant actors and organisations and work closely with HELCOM through its respective

Working and Expert groups. The experience gathered in the process of implementing the first BSAP had revealed multiple blind spots, which were now addressed within the new BSAP. Therefore, Mr Stempel noted that he was hopeful that the updated BSAP would succeed in achieving the set goals.

In his final address, Mr Stempel once again underlined the crucial role played by stakeholders, both in the BSAP update and the implementation process. One example of such fruitful cooperation was the Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet report prepared in cooperation between HELCOM and Baltic Earth.<sup>48</sup> Monitoring and keeping a critical eye on the developments were crucial as well – but shareholders were also encouraging, sharing innovative ideas, and thinking outside the box. Mr Stempel emphasised that cooperation on all levels was needed if the BSAP were to succeed. Finally, he stressed that there was no time to waste and thanked the participants for their ideas and discussions during the conference.

## *6. HELCOM's Global Engagement and Commitments*

In line with its aim of committing and contributing to global environmental processes, HELCOM participated in a side event organised by Baltic Sea countries and partner organisation at the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, Portugal on 30 June 2022.<sup>49</sup> The main goal of the event was to display marine protection at the macro-regional and sea-basin levels as an instrumental contribution of the regional sea conventions in implementing Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) – Life under water.

The event was addressed by Ms Steffi Lemke, German Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection, Ms Terhi Lehtonen, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of the Environment of Finland, as well as Mr Antti Tooming, Deputy Secretary General, from the Ministry of the Environment of Estonia.

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<sup>48</sup> *Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet 2021*, <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Baltic-Sea-Climate-Change-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> *Key outcomes of the UN Ocean Conference 2022 side event: Delivering Global Commitments in the Baltic Sea Region, 7 September 2022*, <https://helcom.fi/key-outcomes-of-the-un-ocean-conference-2022-side-event-delivering-global-commitments-in-the-baltic-sea-region/>.

During the presentations, the Baltic Sea Action Plan was presented as a best-practice example of effective regional marine governance. In more detail, the side event addressed the potential of Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECMs), as referred to in the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), as a means of advancing the ocean agenda and enhancing marine conservation. The Baltic Sea region has already surpassed the 10% target of MPA coverage and was becoming a frontrunner in using OECMs. However, many questions regarding definitions and terminology remained. The discussion emphasised that OECMs could not and should not replace MPAs but should be seen as complementary instruments. Stakeholder involvement, cultural sensitivity, and the need for mutual learning and experience sharing were underlined during the event.

In addition, HELCOM submitted a number of modified voluntary commitments to the UN Ocean Conference Registry of Commitments. These included:

- Supporting efforts towards a binding global instrument on plastic litter;
- Sharing experiences with other Regional Seas Organisations;
- Contributing to the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030);
- Improving the spatial coverage, management and coherence of the Baltic Sea marine protected area network;
- Coming to a common understanding of the Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) criteria and identification of OECMs in the Baltic Sea region.

Further, HELCOM took part in a side event titled “Source-to-Sea Collaboration: A Game Changer for the Whole Water Cycle” at the UN 2023 Water Conference on 22–24 March 2023 in New York.<sup>50</sup> The UN Water Conference adopted the Water Action Agenda, towards which HELCOM pledged three commitments, including:

- The Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy;<sup>51</sup>
- Pollution Load Compilations;<sup>52</sup>
- Developing a regional strategic approach and an action plan for HELCOM work on hazardous substances in the Baltic Sea region.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> HELCOM joins the UN 2023 Water Conference and pledges commitments for the Water Action Agenda, 21 March 2023, <https://helcom.fi/helcom-joins-the-un-2023-water-conference-and-pledges-commitments-for-the-water-action-agenda/>.

<sup>51</sup> Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/baltic-sea-regional-nutrient-recycling-strategy>.

<sup>52</sup> Pollution Load Compilations – regional transboundary watershed cooperation, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/pollution-load-compilations-regional-transboundary-watershed-cooperation>.

<sup>53</sup> Regional strategic approach and an action plan for HELCOM work on hazardous substances in the Baltic Sea region, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/regional-strategic-approach-and-action-plan-helcom-work-hazardous-substances-baltic>.



## IV. Prospects and Outlook

Despite the HELCOM strategic pause announced following Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, HELCOM continues its operational work towards the protection of the Baltic Sea environment. Ongoing activities are focussed on the implementation of the updated BSAP, the finalisation of the Third Holistic Assessment (HOLAS 3) of the ecosystem health of the Baltic Sea, as well as the current projects dedicated to specific issues.

The results of HOLAS 3, including a summary report and further thematic reports, are expected to be published in the course of 2023. In addition, the HELCOM Thematic Assessment on Hazardous Submerged Objects (Submerged Assessment) is planned for the year 2023.

Looking beyond the current year, in 2024, HELCOM will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention). The current Latvian Chairmanship of HELCOM is further planning to organise the next HELCOM Ministerial Meeting tentatively in Riga in 2024.

In the current challenging times, the BSPC would continue to follow the dedicated work of the Helsinki Commission, especially in the area of the implementation of the updated BSAP. The BSPC would also closely consider the outcomes of the thematic assessments of the state of the environment of the Baltic Sea and is looking forward to future updates and inputs from HELCOM.

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# ANNEX I: Updated Lists of HELCOM's Working Groups and Projects

## *Annex I.1. List of Current HELCOM Working Groups and Expert Groups*

1. WG Sea-Based Pressures – Working Group on Reduction of Pressures from Sea-Based Sources
  - 1.1. EG DreDS – Expert Group on Dredging/ depositing Operations at Sea
  - 1.2. EG Marine Litter
  - 1.3. EG Submerged – Expert Group on Environmental Risks of Submerged Objects
  - 1.4. EG Noise – Expert Group on Underwater Noise
  - 1.5. JEG NIS – OSPAR/HELCOM Joint Expert Group on Non-Indigenous Species
  
2. WG Gear – HELCOM Working Group on the Implementation of the Ecosystem Approach
  - 2.1. EG ESA – Expert Group on Economic and Social Analyses
  - 2.2. EN Clime – Joint HELCOM/Baltic Earth Expert Network on Climate Change
  
3. WG Maritime – Maritime Working Group
  - 3.1. EG AIS – Expert Group for Mutual Exchange and Deliveries of AIS & Data
  - 3.2. EG Safe NAV – Expert Group on Safety of Navigation
  - 3.3. Green Team – Sub-group on Green Technology and Alternative Fuels for Shipping
  - 3.4. JTG Ballast & Biofouling – The Joint HELCOM/OSPAR Task Group on Ballast Water Management Convention (BWMC) and Biofouling

4. WG Source to Sea – HELCOM Working Group on Source to Sea Management of Nutrients and Hazardous Substances and Sustainable Agricultural Practices
  - 4.1. EG Eutro – Expert Group on Eutrophication
  - 4.2. EG Haz – Expert Group on Hazardous Substances
  - 4.3. EG MoRS – Expert Group on Monitoring of Radioactive Substances in the Baltic Sea
  - 4.4. EG RedCore – Expert Group on Reduction Scheme Core Follow-Up
  
5. WG Response – HELCOM Response Working Group
  - 5.1. EG Shore – Expert Group on Response on the Shore
  - 5.2. EG Surveillance – Expert Group on Aerial Surveillance
  - 5.3. EG Wildlife – Expert Group on Wildlife Response
  
6. WG BioDiv – HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration
  - 6.1. EG MPA – Expert Group on Marine Protected Areas
  - 6.2. MPA MaNet – HELCOM Network for Marine Protected Area Management
  - 6.3. EG Birdmove – Expert Group on Bird Migration
  - 6.4. EG Benthic – Expert Group on Benthic Habitats and Biotopes
  - 6.5. EG MaMa – Expert Group on Marine Mammals
  - 6.6. EG Stur – Expert Group on Sturgeon Remediation
  - 6.7. JWG Bird – HELCOM-OSPAR-ICES Joint Working Group on Seabirds
  
7. WG Fish – HELCOM Working Group on Ecosystem-Based Sustainable Fisheries
  - 7.1. CG Aquaculture – Correspondence Group concerning a draft document on Best Available Technology/Best Environmental Practices (BAT/BEP) descriptions for sustainable aquaculture in the Baltic Sea region
  - 7.2. EG FISH-M – Task Force on Migratory Fish Species
  
8. HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG – Joint HELCOM-VASAB Working Group on Maritime Spatial Planning
  - 8.1. MSP Data Expert Sub-Group – Baltic Sea Region Maritime Spatial Planning Data Expert Sub-Group

*Annex I.2. List of Ongoing HELCOM Projects*

1. Horizon Europe project AquaINFRA – Infrastructure for Marine and Inland Water Research (2023–2026)
2. Baltic Data Flows (2020–2023)
3. BEACON – Application of Biological Effects Methods in Monitoring and Assessment of Contaminants in the Baltic Sea (2022–2023)
4. BLUES – HELCOM Biodiversity, Litter, Underwater Noise and Effective Regional Measures for the Baltic Sea (2021–2023)
5. EMERGE – Evaluation, Control and Mitigation of the Environmental Impacts of Shipping Emissions (2020–2024)
6. EMPEREST – Eliminating Micro-Pollutants from Effluents for Reuse Strategies (2023–2025)
7. eMSP NBSR – Emerging Ecosystem-Based Maritime Spatial Planning Topics in the North and Baltic Seas Region (2021–2024)
8. FISH-PRO III – Project for Baltic-wide assessment of coastal fish communities in support of an ecosystem-based management (2018–2023)
9. HAPHazard
10. HELCOM RED LIST II – HELCOM Project for Reviewing and Updating the Threat Status of Species and Habitats/Biotopes in the Baltic Sea (2022–2024)
11. MSP4BIO – Improved Science-Based Maritime Spatial Planning to Safeguard and Restore Biodiversity in a Coherent European MPA Network (2022–2025)
12. PASPS – Policy Area ‘Spatial Planning’ Support
13. PEG – Quality Assurance of Phytoplankton Monitoring in the Baltic Sea (2020-2024)
14. PERMAGOV – Improving the PERFORMANCE of MARine GOVERNance (2023–2026)
15. PLC-8 – Compilations of Pollution Load Data, or Pollution Load Compilations (2020–2024)
16. PreEMPT – Pre-empting Pollution by Screening for Possible Risks (2021–2023)
17. ReMAP – Reviewing and Evaluating the Monitoring and Assessment of Maritime Spatial Planning

## List of Abbreviations

BSAP	Baltic Sea Action Plan
BSPC	Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference
CBSS	Council of the Baltic Sea States
ESA	Economic and Social Aspects
EU	European Union
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
GES	Good Environmental/Ecological Status
HELCOM	Helsinki Commission
HOD	Heads of Delegations
HOLAS	Holistic Assessment of the Ecosystem Health of the Baltic Sea
MPA	Marine Protected Areas
MSFD	Marine Strategy Framework Directive
MSP	Maritime Spatial Planning
OSPAR	Oslo Paris Commission
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SOM	Sufficiency of Measures
UBA	German Environment Agency
UN	United Nations
VASAB	Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea



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