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Session II – The Northern European experience: current status and the way ahead

HELCOM and inter-regional cooperation

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The Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) is the Governing body of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention), which was signed in 1992 and entered into force in January 2000. The original Helsinki Convention was signed already in 1974.

The aim of the Convention is to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution.

The Helsinki Commission consists of the representatives of the nine Baltic Sea Coastal States and the European Community and is the major body of the international environmental co-operation in the Baltic region. After the EU enlargement in May 2004, 8 of 9 Baltic Sea Coastal States became members of the European Union.

How HELCOM works

Today's environmental and maritime legislation is a complex matter consisting of numerous processes and vast amount of legislation. To effectively work in this complex environment, actions should be taken at the most relevant level. HELCOM is working in different ways when tackling specific Baltic issues:

- Joint initiatives of the Baltic Sea States within international organizations (IMO, EU)
- Harmonized, and where needed and possible, the strictest implementation of international environmental regulations
- Baltic regional actions:
 - legislation (Convention, Recommendations, Ministerial Declarations)
 - joint initiatives and projects.

Last but not least, one very important role of HELCOM is to be the information centre for decision makers and the general public.

Main threats in the Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed sea and it collects the runoff from 14 countries situated in its catchment area being four times as big as the sea itself. Due to low temperature, low water exchange rate and low salinity of the water the Baltic Sea ecosystems are highly sensitive and susceptible to anthropogenic pollution.

Eutrophication, pollution by hazardous substances, decline of biodiversity and habitats and impact of shipping are major environmental problems of the Baltic.

The Baltic Sea is one of the most intensely trafficked areas in the world. Both the number and the size of the ships, especially oil tankers, have been growing during last years, and this trend is expected to continue.

This heavy traffic is being carried out within narrow straits and shallow water, covered with ice for a long period, which makes the Baltic a difficult area to navigate and leads to traffic junctions and an increased risk of shipping incidents.

The share of the pollution from maritime activities in total loads reaching the sea is growing bigger and bigger, partly due to the strict control of the land-based sources.

HELCOM cooperation has been ongoing for more than 30 years and a great deal of measures have been taken to improve the safety of navigation and minimize the environmental impact of shipping in the Baltic Sea. Some examples of those measures are provided below.

The Baltic Strategy and its enforcement

According to the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, 1973, modified by the Protocol of 1978 (MARPOL 73/78) the Baltic Sea has been internationally designated as a special area where far-reaching prohibitions and restrictions have to be followed as regards any discharges into the sea of oil or oily mixtures, noxious liquid substances and garbage.

Additionally, the Helsinki Convention requires strict rules to be applied for discharge of sewage from ships as well as incineration of wastes on board ships.

Adequate reception facilities in ports, mandatory delivery of ship-generated wastes and the “no-special-fee” system for waste delivery are the main components of the Strategy for Port Reception Facilities for Ship-generated Wastes and Associated Issues, also known as the Baltic Strategy, initiated by HELCOM in the late 1990s. The implementation of the Strategy has been successful which can be proved e.g. by comparing the number of detected illegal oil spills in the Baltic ten years ago and now. In 1996, 416 oil spills were observed while in 2006 as less as 236¹.

Apart from regular aerial surveillance conducted by HELCOM countries and supported by satellite imageries also other means are available to enforce anti-discharge regulations within the region. A new tool called Seatrack Web/AIS has been developed by HELCOM recently, which is an oil drift forecasting system integrated with information from Automatic Identification System, increasing the possibility to identify the source ship of illegal oil spills and in a significant way improving the evidence to court.

The Copenhagen Declaration

The rising density of ship traffic in the Baltic is putting more and more pressure on the marine environment. As a result, one of the major risks the Baltic nations are facing is the risk of considerable accidental pollution of oil or other hazardous substances due to possible grounding or collision of a ship.

Every year around 150 shipping accidents take place in the Baltic. According to the 2000-2006 data, 7 % of the reported accidents ended up with some kind of pollution².

One of the milestones in improving the safety of navigation in the Baltic Sea was the adoption of the Declaration on the Safety of Navigation and Emergency Capacity in the Baltic Sea Area (HELCOM Copenhagen Declaration), 2001. The Declaration contains a number of important measures, which to a great extent have already been implemented by the Contracting Parties. These include:

- increased use of pilots for ships posing a risk to the environment;
- provision of up-to-date information on water depths through co-operation with the Baltic Hydrographic Commission implementing a Joint Re-surveys Plan;

¹ HELCOM reports on illegal discharges observed during aerial surveillance in the Baltic Sea can be found at http://www.helcom.fi/shipping/waste/en_GB/surveillance/

² Compilations of shipping accidents in the Baltic Sea can be found at http://www.helcom.fi/shipping/accidents/en_GB/accidents/

- covering the major and secondary shipping routes with Electronic Nautical Charts;
- promotion of the use of Electronic Chart Display and Information Systems, whereby a ship is able to display in real time its own position;
- introduction of new routing measures, which, e.g., have led to a much clearer traffic pattern for deep-draught ships;
- phasing out the use of single-hull oil tankers;
- establishing of the Automatic Identification System, which improved the communication between ships and shore stations;
- establishing of the Baltic Sea as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area, except for the Russian waters, which requires ships to take special care when navigating through areas of ecological, economic, cultural or scientific significance, and for which Associated Protective Measures have already been approved by IMO.

Adequate response capability to accidental pollution

The risk for a ship accident will never be totally eliminated, so there is a need to ensure sufficient emergency and response resources in the Contracting States.

Much has been done to build up adequate emergency capacity and response capability. Around 30 emergency tugs with the bollard pull of 50 or more tons and around 40 sea-going response vessels are located around the Baltic. They have necessary equipment, capacity, trained crew and in principle are able to reach any place in the Baltic within six hours after an incident.

Additional response capacity has been provided by EMSA to “top-up” the existing resources in case of a big accident.

Exercising is a key to efficient response operations at sea. Several kinds of exercises are conducted under the HELCOM flag. The most famous one is the BALEX DELTA, which tests the alarm procedures and response capability of the Contracting Parties in case of a major accident and an international response operation. BALEX DELTA exercises take place each year and are hosted by the Contracting Parties according to an agreed schedule.

HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan

The latest assessments show that there is still a need for further actions. HELCOM is at present intensifying its efforts by developing the strategic and innovative HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan which will guide us how to achieve the vision of a healthy Baltic Sea as agreed by the countries.

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan is built on an ecosystem approach and aims at actions to ensure a healthy Baltic Sea:

- unaffected by eutrophication,
- with favorable biodiversity,
- with life undisturbed by hazardous substances, and
- with maritime activities carried out in an environmentally friendly way.

The ecosystem approach will lead to both a marine environment in a good ecological status and a marine environment supporting a wide range of sustainable human, economic and social activities. The ecosystem approach is based on best available scientific knowledge about the ecosystems and its dynamics, which leads to identification of actions to be put in place to improve the health of the marine ecosystem.

The actions to improve the health of the Baltic marine ecosystem are now being finalized under each of the above mentioned priority areas. In the maritime field they include among others:

- further strengthening of the control and enforcement of existing anti-discharge regulations by utilizing to a bigger extent satellite surveillance;

- further advancing of the safety of navigation in ice conditions,
- step-wise strengthening of sub-regional cooperation to build up adequate emergency capacity and response capability,
- development of a mutual plan for places of refuge,
- early and harmonized implementation of the Ballast Water Management Convention with the final aim of its ratification by an agreed deadline,
- contribution to the review process of Annex VI to MARPOL 73/78 by evaluation of the impact of NOx emission from shipping in the Baltic Sea based on the HELCOM Automatic Identification System and by evaluating the experience gained in implementing the SOx Emission Control Area in the Baltic.

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan will be adopted by the ministers of environment on 15 November 2007 in Krakow, in Poland.

Specific recommendations for the OSCE

The ecosystem approach needs implementation at the regional level, which however constitutes a major challenge to many regional communities. The experience gained in one regional level should therefore be shared with other regions.

HELCOM, based on its vast experience and through its Baltic Sea Action Plan, is putting the concept of the ecosystem approach into practice and the experience and activities undertaken can be replicated to other marine regions.

Together with the Black Sea Commission Secretariat, and upon invitation by Sweden, a proposal for a joint HELCOM/BSC two-year project to address environmental pressures resulting from high density of shipping, including increased oil transportation, as well as from oil exploration has been developed.

The overall aim of the project is to enhance partnership, to exchange information and transfer of experience for mutual benefit and to speed up the process of development of guidelines for rehabilitation and protection of the Black Sea, based on the examples from the Baltic Sea. The project awaits the decision by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) on its financing. The Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea region, due to many similarities, are natural candidates for such inter-regional cooperation.

The justifications as to the proposed cooperation can be summarized as follows:

- the geographical similarities between the seas call for similar methodologies and tools for the protection of the marine environment;
- the particular organizational set-up within both HELCOM and the BSC to focus on and address pollution sources from shipping and ports;
- a GEF conducted project in the Black Sea region in a benchmarking exercise found a good match between HELCOM and the BSC;
- one country is a party of both conventions (the Russian Federation) and can contribute and link with its unique experience;
- HELCOM is the oldest and most mature regional convention addressing the protection of the marine environment and has a substantial stock of experience, which would allow the BSC to take onboard this experience and use it to speed up their work in the region;
- and the possibility of replicating the achievements obtained through this cooperation, by sharing of lessons learned, challenges and results with the international community through the UNEP Regional Seas programme.

HELCOM finds it important to support such inter-regional cooperation projects. Sharing of experience between the regional networks strengthens identification of issues of common interest and of cross regional character and thus best practices and models from one region can be replicated to other regions, fostering even development of Europe.