

## **Russia and international environmental politics: Lessons to learn from the Baltic Sea cooperation**

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In recent years, the performance of Russia in the cooperation for the environmental protection of the Baltic Sea has been relatively active, if compared with many other cooperation processes within the environmental sector. Russia is a signatory to the Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea area, originally agreed upon in 1974 and participates in the activities of HELCOM, the governing regime of the convention. The significance of HELCOM for Russia was especially demonstrated in 2008-2010 when Russia hosted the HELCOM presidency, and in 2013 when Russia organized a Baltic Sea Summit for state leaders in St Petersburg. Russia also signed the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) together with other HELCOM countries in 2007; the plan now guides the environmental protection of the Baltic Sea.

As part of the BSAP commitment, Russia introduced its National Programme for the Rehabilitation and Recovery of the Baltic Sea Ecosystem, as well as a specially targeted federal programme to provide appropriate federal funding for implementation, in 2010. Total funding allocated for the Programme is 145 billion roubles. The priority of the programmes is to improve wastewater treatment so that 100 per cent of wastewater will be treated in 2020; also measures targeted at decreasing agricultural runoff and wastewater from ships are set in the programmes.

Some of the success of the Baltic Sea environmental cooperation regarding the activity of Russia can be explained by the character of the cooperation as well as the convention itself. The first element of the success is the character of the convention. Under the convention, no binding obligations but recommendations are being issued. In fact, it has been articulated by the contracting parties of the convention that the uninterrupted dialogue between the parties has been regarded as more important than more stringent environmental policies and regulation. Thus, the provisions of the regime have not been particularly heavy for Russia.

Second, throughout the years the cooperation for the better Baltic Sea environment brought about many benefits to Russia beyond the environmental. In the 1970s and 1980s, foreign-policy benefits were at the forefront: environmental cooperation was used to create an “image of cooperativeness” and to advance overall foreign policy interests. During the 1990s, in turn, economic benefits, such as foreign investment and financial support in the urban water infrastructure, were of special interest for Russia. Recently, economic issues related to energy exports have emerged as the main driver for Russia’s behaviour in the Baltic Sea environmental protection cooperation. Even the main documents guiding the marine policy of the Russian Federation, including the Maritime Doctrine, mention the usage of environmental

cooperation as a tool for promoting energy export, economic cooperation and general confidence in the Baltic Sea.

Finally, a recurrent theme throughout the history of the Baltic Sea environmental cooperation has been the role of Russia as a Great Power and the following geopolitical interests. Geopolitical interests that were particularly noteworthy at the beginning of the cooperation in the 1970s re-emerged after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. This was reflected in greater emphasis on the importance of the HELCOM and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) vis-à-vis the growing influence of the EU on environmental policies in the Baltic Sea region, and Russia has stepped up its activity in these institutions. Thus, obviously, geopolitics is one element of the success of the Baltic Sea environmental cooperation, too.

Can we draw some lessons to learn from this cooperation? No doubt, the participation of Russia in the Baltic Sea environmental protection serves as a success story of Russia's engagement in international environmental cooperation. Accordingly, understanding the position of Russia in the Baltic Sea environmental cooperation can contribute to establishing environmental goals that are more realistic in terms of their outcomes and more understandable to all participants. As it stands, it seems that negotiation partners should try to couple other interests of Russia, be they related to foreign policy, geopolitics, or economic issues, with environmental issues so as to advance joint environmental policies. As demonstrated by its environmental concern in the energy sector, Russia can take on serious environmental responsibilities, if there is economic and/or political motivation to do so. Similar trade-offs can possibly be employed in other sectors as well. Otherwise, influencing Russian environmental policy conduct and trying to appeal with environmental arguments seems extremely difficult for foreign actors.