



GOVERNANCE IN THE BALTIC SEA BASIN

Please note that this document is intended to present a snapshot of the current governance of EU Sea basins as of November 2024. However as highlighted by the sections that follow, this can be dynamic and is subject to change.



As a common good, for decades sea basins have been areas for cooperation between States. In the first instance, cooperation was driven by environmental aspects since marine ecosystems do not know legal borders, and their environmental status is dependent on the pressures/stressors from all around the sea basin. As a result, regional sea conventions (e.g., OSPAR, HELCOM, Barcelona Convention, Bucharest Convention) were set up in each sea basin with dedicated organisations to assess human impacts and to propose actions to recover a good environmental status for the marine ecosystems, notably under the policy framework of the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

In parallel, and in line with EU integrated maritime policy (IMP), various maritime policy frameworks have been established and endorsed to support cooperation on maritime affairs in sea basins. Most of them have been engaging EU MSs and the non-EU neighbouring countries across whole sea basins (Mediterranean, Atlantic, Black Sea, Baltic, North Sea) or subsea basins (WestMED, Adriatic & Ionian Seas).

Considering the local, regional and sea basin specificities, this framework contributes to the Sustainable Blue Economy (SBE) in line with the European Commission's communication on "a new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU" ([COM\(2021\)240 final](#)). Ministerial declarations, roadmaps and dedicated governance have been designed/anticipated to catalyse cooperation.

After a detailed review of the Baltic Sea basin strategies, marine conventions and macroregions, this study provides an overview of how SBE and Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) have been considered within the Baltic Sea basin by each initiative, and by recalling their objectives and governance, how each initiative can therefore be an enabler for SBE via MSP. It highlights the cooperation between EU MS and non-EU MS. This first edition will be published on the EU MSP Platform and updated accordingly following any related update.

In summary, it states that MSP has been a long-standing topic in certain Regional Sea Conventions (e.g., HELCOM) while in others, it is just emerging (e.g., Barcelona Convention) along with other concepts such as land-sea interactions and Integrated Coastal Zone Management. In addition, it highlights that the EU Mission "Restore our ocean and waters", the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership but also projects under regional programmes and funding instruments (i.e. EMFAF) have a strong regional dimension with MSP playing an important role. Even if it is not a "governance framework" in the strict sense, it can steer cooperation amongst member states and beyond.

All the frameworks and initiatives included have declared an interest or have been implementing concepts and tools related to MSP to meet their respective objectives. All of them should enable the implementation of the future EU Oceans Pact via the cooperation framework that they constitute in each sea basin.

International Conventions Baltic Sea Basin

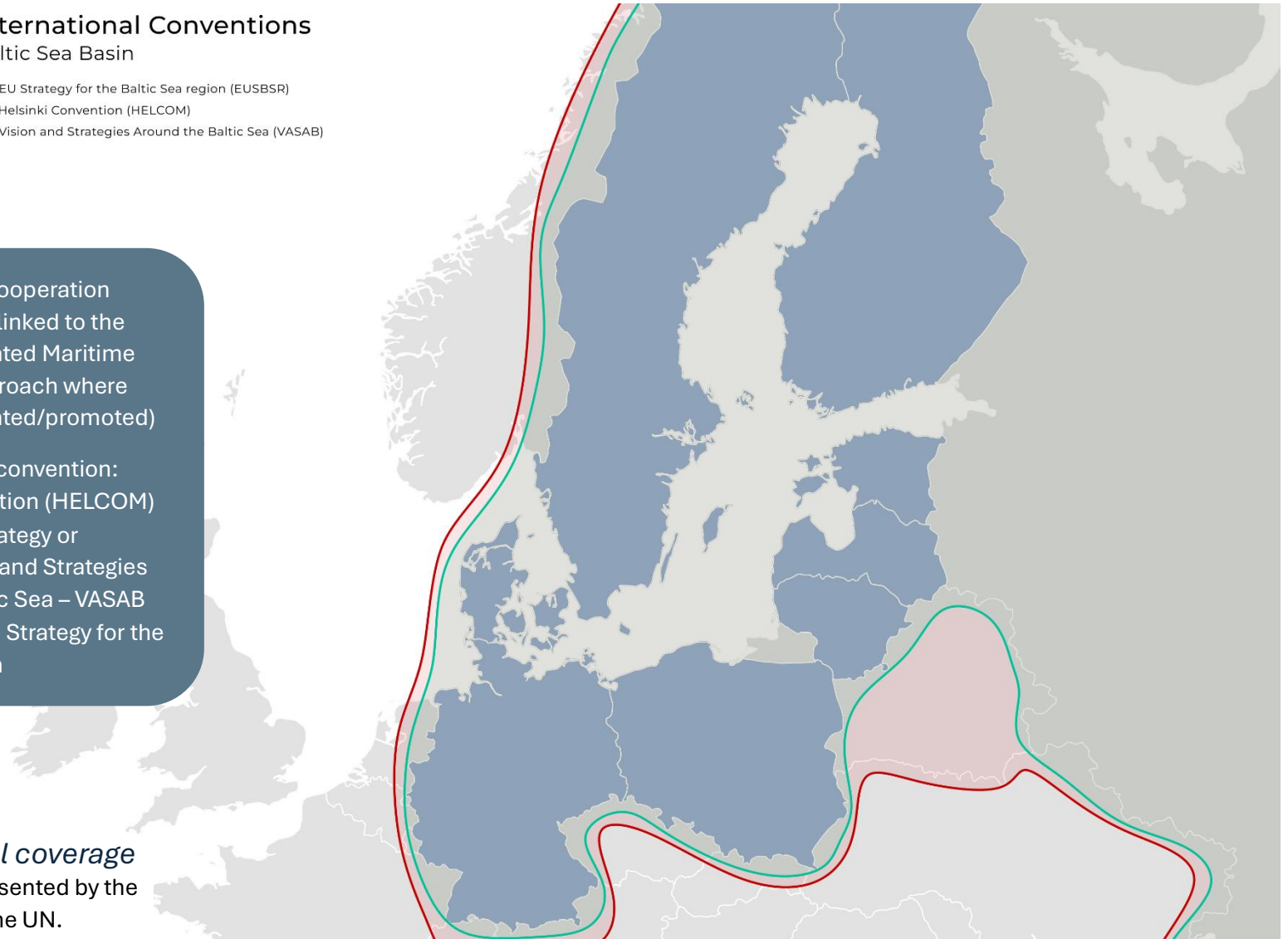
- EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR)
- Helsinki Convention (HELCOM)
- Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea (VASAB)

Existing and endorsed cooperation mechanisms which are linked to the Blue Economy or Integrated Maritime Policy (an extensive approach where MSP could be implemented/promoted)

- Marine regional convention: Helsinki Convention (HELCOM)
- Sea basin BE strategy or initiative: Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea – VASAB
- Macroregion: EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region

Initiatives' geographical coverage

General note: the borders presented by the map are the ones agreed by the UN.











European
MSP Platform



European
Commission

The Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area - Helsinki Convention (HELCOM)

PARTIES	EU MEMBER STATES								
	European Commission	GERMANY	DENMARK	ESTONIA	FINLAND	LATVIA	LITHUANIA	POLAND	SWEDEN
									
	NON-EU MEMBER STATES								
	RUSSIA								
									

The Convention has ten Contracting Parties: European Union, 8 EU MS and 1 non-EU MS – the Russian Federation. All meetings of HELCOM bodies and meetings of project groups with Russian involvement under the HELCOM umbrella have been suspended since 4 March 2022 due to the Russian Federation’s war of aggression against Ukraine. During the Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment held in Riga on 25 April 2024, the EU and the Contracting Parties to the Convention that are Member States of the EU upheld their decision to observe a strategic pause in regular HELCOM operations, whereby all regular meetings of HELCOM bodies and meetings of project groups with involvement of the Russian Federation under the HELCOM umbrella are suspended until further notice.

The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – “Helsinki Commission” or “HELCOM” – was established at the same time as the Convention. HELCOM is made up of 67 observers contributing actively to the protection of the Baltic Sea, of which: 2 are governments (Belarus and Ukraine), 19 are intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and 46 are international NGOs. Observers can take part in the meetings of the various HELCOM bodies and are allowed to make statements. HELCOM may also invite any state that is not party to the Helsinki Convention to be represented at its meetings.

Date of endorsement: the Helsinki Convention was originally signed by all Baltic Sea coastal countries in 1974, and then updated in 1992 to take into account the geopolitical changes and emerging environmental challenges in the region. The updated Helsinki Convention of 1992 entered into force on 17 January 2000.

MAIN GOALS AND TOPICS

The Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) adopted by the HELCOM Contracting Parties in 2007 and updated in 2021, is HELCOM's strategic programme of measures and actions for achieving good environmental status of the sea, ultimately leading to a Baltic Sea in a healthy status. The main topics are biodiversity, eutrophication, hazardous substances and sea-based activities.

GOVERNANCE (MINISTERIAL – STEERING COMMITTEE)

The HELCOM meets annually. The HELCOM adopts recommendations related to the protection of the marine environment and sustainable maritime activities, decides on the budget and makes other key decisions. The working structure of HELCOM consists of the meetings of the Helsinki Commission, the Heads of Delegation, and the eight main HELCOM Working Groups. HELCOM's work and meetings are coordinated by the HELCOM Secretariat.

A working group on marine spatial planning (MSP) is established jointly with VASAB, thus called the **Joint HELCOM-VASAB Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group** (HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG). The HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG was established to ensure cooperation among the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) countries for coherent regional MSP processes in the Baltic Sea. The decision to set up this group was made in 2010, and the mandate of the group is extended to 2030. The work carried out in the HELCOM Working Groups usually needs to be further approved by the HELCOM decision making bodies such as the Heads of Delegation or during the Meeting of the Helsinki Commission.

The BSR MSP Data Expert Sub-Group was established in 2015 aiming to provide methodological support to the joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG in relation to MSP data and to facilitate the data exchange throughout the Baltic Sea. The sub-group also serves as a liaison for MSP data related processes in the EU, thus supporting the implementation of respective regulation in the BSR.

INTERACTIONS AND SYNERGIES WITH OTHER FRAMEWORKS IN THE SEA BASIN OR BEYOND

HELCOM has a very close cooperation with VASAB as there is a joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG which has established the [Regional Baltic MSP Roadmap 2021-2030](#), (the previous Roadmap was for the period 2013—2020). The roadmap sets the framework for MSP cooperation and defines the necessary steps to achieve the goal to draw up and apply maritime spatial plans throughout the BSR which are coherent across borders and apply the ecosystem-based approach to contribute to reaching jointly agreed environmental and climate goals.

There are strong interactions with EU Strategy for Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and the Policy Area “Spatial Planning” (PA SP). HELCOM is co-leading the PA SP on MSP issues. The joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG also acts as the Steering Group for the PA SP concerning MSP issues.

STATEMENT ON MSP PROMOTION, IMPLEMENTATION, COOPERATION UNDER THE INITIATIVE BETWEEN EU MS (MSPD) AND ICZM

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan contains four horizontal actions of relevance to MSP:



- Utilise maritime spatial planning (MSP) applying an ecosystem-based approach to support BSAP objectives and targets and contributing to sustainable sea-based activities.
- Use maritime spatial planning (MSP) as a tool to signal areas of high nature value as identified by responsible environmental authorities.
- Implement MSP with the aim of steering sea-based activities away from areas where they can cause serious damage or disturbance.
- Integrate quantitative and qualitative economic values of the environment into the management of human activities and maritime spatial planning











HELCOM has adopted the Recommendation 24/10 on the implementation of integrated coastal management and maritime spatial planning in the Baltic Sea area (adopted 25 June 2003 and amended 7 March 2019). It recommends a list of activities to be performed by the Contracting parties when developing maritime spatial plans and integrated coastal management measures as well as highlighting the linkages between different planning activities including water resources management and land use planning in the catchment area of the Baltic Sea.

REFERENCES

- <https://helcom.fi/about-us/>
- <https://helcom.fi/helcom-at-work/groups/helcom-vasab-maritime-spatial-planning-working-group/>



Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea- VASAB

PARTIES	EU MEMBER STATES							
	European Union	GERMANY	ESTONIA	FINLAND	LATVIA	LITHUANIA	POLAND	SWEDENE
								
NON-EU MEMBER STATES								
	RUSSIA	BELARUS						
								

VASAB is guided by the Conference of Ministers responsible for spatial planning and development, steered by the Committee on Spatial Planning and Development of the Baltic Sea Region (CSPD/BSR). Denmark was party of VASAB until December 2020. The participation of Belarus and Russia has been suspended since 4 March 2022. The [Council of Baltic Sea States](#) (CBSS) participates as an observer. It is possible for other Baltic Sea Region countries to become members of VASAB Cooperation.

Date of endorsement: VASAB was founded in August 1992 at the Conference at Ministerial level in Karlskrona, where it was decided to work out a document entitled “Vision and Strategies for the Baltic Sea Region 2010”.

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE

OSPAR covers five regions: Region I (Arctic waters), Region II (greater North Sea), Region III (Celtic Seas), Region IV (Bay of Biscay and Iberian Coast) and Region V (Wider Atlantic). For the North-East Atlantic Sea basin, Regions III, IV & V are considered.

MAIN GOALS AND TOPICS

The new [VASAB Vision for the Territorial Development of the Baltic Sea Region in 2040](#) (adopted in 2023) highlights the following topics:

- a diversified and fresh Baltic Sea region
- vibrant pearls of all sizes

- well-connected strings between people and places
- resilient patches of ecosystems and unique areas at sea and land
- cooperative sea and land planning systems

GOVERNANCE

The Committee on Spatial Planning and Development of the Baltic Sea Region (CSPD/BSR) is composed of the senior representatives of the respective ministries as well as the regional authorities in Germany adjacent to the Baltic Sea (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein Lands). The main tasks are to offer a forum for the macro-regional, trans-boundary and cross-sectoral dialogue and the exchange of know-how on spatial planning and development between BSR countries; to create a common spatial policy perspective. VASAB CSPD/BSR meetings are held at least twice a year, according to the decision of VASAB CSPD/BSR and ongoing chairmanship. CSPD/BSR has given mandate on the MSP matters to the Joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP Working Group, including those of the MSP within the EUSBSR.

INTERACTIONS AND SYNERGIES WITH OTHER FRAMEWORKS IN THE SEA BASIN OR BEYOND

VASAB cooperation operates under the umbrella of the [Council of the Baltic Sea States \(CBSS\)](#) and contributes to and collaborates with other networks and frameworks (e.g. EUSBSR, HELCOM), particularly regarding the territorial dimension.

VASAB is closely cooperating with HELCOM through the joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP Working group.

VASAB is co-leading the EUSBSR Policy Area “Spatial Planning”.

STATEMENT ON MSP PROMOTION, IMPLEMENTATION, COOPERATION UNDER THE INITIATIVE BETWEEN EU MS (MSPD) AND ICZM

VASAB Vision for 2040: Advanced and transnationally coordinated land-use and maritime planning systems across sectors, borders, and levels of administration in the Baltic Sea Region make the Region a pioneer in sea and land planning, improving resilience and security. Various spatial planning systems, climate resilience policies and tools, and data platforms exist at land and sea. Besides spatial/terrestrial (land-use planning) and MSP, there is also the integrated coastal zone management and other relevant tools. By 2040, they should all be communicating smoothly with each other to ensure proper management, territorial monitoring, climate resilience and planning. This also involves, for example, digital solutions and interoperability to exchange on analytical information, objectives and measures and have a better understanding of potential conflicts and synergies among various uses and interests, increasing overall resilience and security of the Region.

VASAB also adopted the [Common Recommendations for Spatial Planning of the Coastal Zone in the Baltic Sea Region](#) in 1996.

REFERENCES

- <https://vasab.org/home/about/>
- <https://vasab.org/theme-posts/maritimespatial-planning/> <https://vasab.org/home/about/vasabvision/>
- <https://vasab.org/eusbsr/>

EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region – EUSBSR

EU MEMBER STATES	
PARTIES	European Union
	GERMANY
	ESTONIA
	FINLAND
	LATVIA
	LITHUANIA
	POLAND
	SWEDENE
	DENMARK

The cooperation is exclusively between eight EU MS situated around the Baltic Sea and the European Commission.

Date of endorsement: the EUSBSR was adopted in 2009 and was the first macro-regional strategy. It was [approved by the European Council](#) following [Communication from the European Commission and an action plan in 2009](#).

MAIN GOALS AND TOPICS

The EUSBSR is an agreement between the EU Member States bordering the Baltic Sea and the European Commission. It fosters cooperation and finds common solutions to joint challenges at a regional level. The EUSBSR has three objectives (i) Save the Sea, (ii) Connect the Region and (iii) Increase Prosperity.

To achieve these goals, the Strategy's Action Plan identifies the most important actions for implementation. The actions are thematically divided into Policy Areas (PAs) which are all linked and contribute to achieving these goals from different angles and in diverse ways.

Spatial Planning (SP) is one of the PAs focusing on encouraging the use of maritime and land-based spatial planning in all Member States around the Baltic Sea. It ensures a transnational approach in spatial planning in the BSR and creates a forum and cooperation platform for regional, trans-boundary and cross-sectoral dialogue towards more coherent planning. Before the revision of EUSBSR in 2021, Spatial Planning was called Horizontal Action.

Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) is one of the thematic areas under PAs of SP. A dedicated action “*Ensuring coherent maritime spatial plans throughout the Baltic Sea*” was established with a revised action plan in 2021.

GOVERNANCE

The EUSBSR is governed by a number of different actors: the National Coordinators Group, Policy Area Coordinators (PACs) and Policy Area (PA) Steering Groups, the European Commission and a High-Level Group. The Baltic Sea Strategy Point has been established with the [2021 Action Plan](#) update to support the coordination and governance of the EUSBSR. Each year one member state takes over the Presidency in the EUSBSR for twelve months. Currently Poland holds the presidency, since July 2024 until June 2025.

The National Coordinators Group is the core decision-making body within the governance structure, acting as its executive board. The 14 Policy Areas (PA) are managed operationally by one or more Policy Area Coordinators (PACs) coming from a member state’s official authority of the national or regional government, an organisation or an intergovernmental or non-governmental body, which can ensure the operationalisation of the Policy Area.

For MSP, PA “Spatial Planning” is coordinated by **VASAB** and **HELCOM**. The joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG acts as the Steering Group for the PA “Spatial Planning” concerning MSP issues. The Steering Group can convene in two different formats based on the questions on the agenda: one for maritime spatial planning (HELCOM-VASAB) and the other for land-based (VASAB).

The Steering Group meets twice a year. PA “Spatial Planning” is co-funded by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme through the project “*Policy Area “Spatial Planning” Support*”.

INTERACTIONS AND SYNERGIES WITH OTHER FRAMEWORKS IN THE SEA BASIN OR BEYOND

[The Regional Baltic MSP Roadmap 2021-2030](#), along with [VASAB Vision 2040](#) and [HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan](#) sets the framework for MSP cooperation and defines the necessary steps to achieve the goal to draw up and apply maritime spatial plans throughout the BSR which are coherent across borders and apply the ecosystem-based approach to contribute to reaching jointly agreed environmental and climate goals.

This PA “Spatial Planning” is contributing to Sustainable Development Goals: 9, 10, 11, 13 and 14.

STATEMENT ON MSP PROMOTION, IMPLEMENTATION, COOPERATION UNDER THE INITIATIVE BETWEEN EU MS (MSPD) AND ICZM

In 2030, the Region will be a better-integrated and more coherent macro-region, with reduced socioeconomic development divides between its individual parts and global challenges that have been turned into assets. To achieve this, PA SP is encouraging the use of maritime and land-based spatial planning as well as integrated/territorial approach to development policies in all Member States.

REFERENCES

- <https://eusbsr.eu/about/>
- https://eusbsr.eu/wp-content/uploads/pa_spatial_planning_28-04-2023.pdf

BEST PRACTICES OR RELATED ACTIONS IN THE SEA BASIN

[Planners' Forums](#) act as a practical dissemination and collaboration platform supporting ongoing national and regional MSP processes and the implementation of the MSP policy. The Planners Forum as a cooperation mechanism was created by the Pan Baltic Scope project, followed up by Capacity4MSP project and is now continued by EUSBSR PA SP.

[Baltic MSP forums](#) serve as a platform for discussions among those involved and affected by Maritime Spatial Planning on how to further develop and enhance MSP in the Baltic Sea Region.

HELCOM and VASAB have adopted several **important documents** that support a regional approach to MSP:

- [Baltic Sea Broad-Scale Maritime Spatial Planning \(MSP\) Principles \(2010\)](#)
- [Guideline for the implementation of ecosystem-based approach in Maritime Spatial Planning \(MSP\) in the Baltic Sea area \(2016\)](#)
- [Guidelines on Transboundary Consultations, Public Participation and Co-Operation \(2016\)](#)
- [Guidelines on transboundary MSP output data structure in the Baltic Sea \(2018\)](#)
- [Voluntary guidance for assessment of cross-border coherence in Maritime Spatial Planning \(2021\)](#)

The Baltic Sea region countries have implemented **transboundary Baltic projects** that have significantly contributed to the advancement of MSP in the BSR: [PanBaltic Scope](#); [NBSR eMSP](#); [Baltic Sea2land](#), [Capacity4MSP](#), [Land-Sea-Act](#), [BalticRIM](#), [Baltic LINES](#), [PartiSEApate](#), [BaltSeaPlan](#).

Conclusions at sea basin level

Widely recognised Baltic Sea Region (BSR) collaboration on maritime spatial planning (MSP) within the joint HELCOM-VASAB maritime spatial planning working group has turned the BSR into a global forerunner in regional cooperation and governance on MSP applying ecosystem-based approach. The Policy Area Spatial Planning of the EUSBSR is represented by two well-established macro-regional networks (HELCOM and VASAB) involving both EU and non-EU countries to ensure the exchange of know-how on spatial planning and development among the BSR countries but also the development of common management solutions and actions to protect the marine environment.

All these initiatives call for cooperation and consider MSP a key driver for the Baltic dialogue on a sustainable blue economy. It is in line with the lighthouse MissionOcean for the North Sea and the Baltic (cf. [BlueMissionBANOS](#)) which aims at reaching carbon-neutrality and circular blue economy stated in its [Arena 2 regional roadmap 2030](#).

