

The environmental deterioration of the Baltic Sea from the Finnish Perspective /Esko Seppänen in GUE/NGL symposium in Jurmala, Latvia 30.5.2011

The health authorities of Finland gave last week new eating maxima concerning fish caught from the Baltic Sea. The recommendations varied from species to species and from place to place, but generally speaking it is a risk for one's health to eat for instance the Baltic herring more often than twice a month. There is in the water plenty of dioxin, PCB- and TNT-compounds and other poisons, and to eat fish from the Baltic Sea may be a dangerous supper.

It is difficult to accept that our common sea, especially its Gulf of Finland, is the most polluted sea in the world. Most likely it is.

The pollution cannot be harmful only from the point of view of the centuries-old Hansa League countries, which today are, each of them, EU members. Russia must also be included in all planning and implementation measures for protection of the Baltic Sea, and it must be taken into account in strengthening and vitalizing the EU concept "Northern dimension". In Brussels, the Mediterranean dimension is a more privileged policy than the northern one, but we need to get them on the equal footing. Let us make, together, the Northern dimension the best environmentally sustainable program for the EU.

Russia exports 66 million tons of raw oil abroad from Primorsk, almost from the utmost end of the Gulf of Finland. Especially in the winter time, the transportation of oil is a risky business, and it has become a big concern to the countries around the sea. The first accident of the big tanker is only a question of time? Finland wants to be ready by the year 2015, in collaboration with our neighboring countries, to respond in the Gulf of Finland within three days of the accident to a major oil spill (of 30,000 tons). This time is needed in open water conditions. In ice conditions, the target is to achieve the same result within 10 days of the accident.

Although our readiness to combat oil and chemical accidents is good, it is not yet sufficient. It is expensive to make it better. Improvement of response-preparedness is estimated to require a total investment of some 200 million euros by the Finnish state and of some 100 million euros by the rescue authorities. For saving the brackish-water biodiversity we need to prepare ourselves to combat oil and chemical spills and improve readiness to respond to marine pollution even though there are no species unique to the Baltic Sea and there are very few species specifically adapted to brackish water.

It is a young sea in evolutionary terms. There has not been enough time for species differentiation to take place. The Baltic Sea is continuously visited by new species, some of which are successful while others fail. The brackish water sets limits on species adaptation: it is too salty for freshwater species, and not salty enough for saltwater species.

It was taken as a joke in Finland, when the Brussels eurocracy created a new profession for the Baltic Sea: a whale observer. His duty was to go along with the fishermen and to observe if they fished whales. This is to show how far away Brussels is from our life. There are not many individuals of the 80 million people living in the area who have ever seen a whale in our waters.

Considering the Nord Stream gas pipeline, I do not see such an environmental threat as was introduced in the European Parliament by the Baltic and Polish MEPs. In the own initiative report of the Parliament they wanted to write down that “the European Union must treat this project with the utmost caution and concern, since it poses a direct threat to the environment of the Baltic Sea basin as a whole.” In the report they called on the Council and Commission to use all available legal means to prevent the construction of the gas pipeline on the scale proposed by the investors. The Polish rapporteur proposed the pipeline to be routed overland through Poland.

If I had been a Polish MEP, I would have proposed the same. It is a Polish habit to play with the Polish card as a goal to defend and extend Polish interests. But if I had been a decision maker in Russia or Germany, I would not have taken the risk to build the pipeline overland thus giving Poland a weapon: in some critical political situation it could close the gas taps and block running of gas from Russia to the west. We do not need a duplicate of Ukraina. Poland would have laved such a central position at the expense of the Russian and German pipeline owners, who finance the project from the financial markets. At the same time Poland requests the EU to

finance an alternative gas pipeline Nabucco coming to Poland from the south.

I do not see the Nord Stream pipeline as much as an environmental project as the opponents are saying. By environment they attempt to hide their political ambitions and make it a cover for their attempt to exclude Russia from the European energy politics.

I know, of course, the fact that **during and after the First and Second World Wars, chemical and conventional munitions were deployed and disposed of in the Baltic Sea.**

Be

tween 100,000 and 150,000 mines were deployed in the sea, primarily in the Gulf of Finland. Only a crazy investor will not take this risk seriously.

The consumed energy must be produced, preferably by renewables. Latvia is in this respect Number One in the EU. According to the renewables directive its target is to produce 40 % of the consumed energy by renewables by 2020, and that may not be a problem to Latvia. For Finland it is a problem, and to reach its 38 % target we have to start burning forests for energy. At the same time it is doubtful if the much lower renewables quotas of the bigger states (Great Britain, France, Italy) will be reached.

The climate friendly nuclear energy is an alternative, but it may be an enormous risk, if an

accident happens in a nuclear reactor in at the banks of the Baltic See, in Sosnovy Bor in Russia, in Loviisa or Olkiluoto in Finland or in Oscarshamn or Barsebäck in Sweden. The wind aura is in this latitude of the world normally from west to east, and the biggest threats are experienced by those who live east from the damaged nuclear installation. There will not be (?) tsunamis in this part of Europe during our lifetime and during the life span of the existing nuclear reactors, but the human being is always a risk factor and may be as dangerous as a tsunami.

Without any accident, in normal conditions, The Baltic Sea is suffering from oxygen depletion. Only occasionally, depending on the weather, does salty water flow into the Baltic Sea through the Danish Straits in the form of salt pulses. We do not know, yet, if the huge bridge between Copenhagen and the southern part of Sweden is barrier for the salt pulses to come. The last pulse, vital for the health of our sea, was in 2003, and it was preceded by the pulses in 1993 and 1973. If the salted water from the Atlantic does not run to the Baltic Sea, the oxygen runs out from the bottom of the sea, the phosphorus level increases rapidly. The result is eutrophication.

Eutrophication is a syndrome of [ecosystem](#) responses to human activities that fertilize water bodies with [nitrogen](#) (N) and [phosphorus](#) (P), often leading to changes in animal and [plant](#) populations and [degradation of water](#) and habitat quality. The Gulf of Finland is the most eutrophied area, with occasionally large oxygen free areas on

the seafloor. The deepest zones of the Baltic, around Gotland Island and the water area between Sweden and Latvia, are worst affected by a lack of oxygen in the seafloor.

Several rivers bring fresh water into the Baltic Sea. River water contains often a lot of nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus. The Number One phosphorus and nitrogen polluter of the Baltic Sea runoff area is the Polish agriculture. Poland produces 55 % of the phosphorus pollution compared, for instance, to Finland 10 %, to Russia 7 % and Latvia 3 %. Of the nitrogen pollution Poland produces 36 % compared to Sweden 16 %, Finland 12 % and Latvia 5 %. The Polish farmers do not seem to set aside waterway protection zones between their fields and waterways, and this is very kindly said. (I am so kind that earlier, when I spoke about fishing, I did not even remind of the Polish fishing fleet that breaks the sustainable EU catch quotas by overfishing.)

In the summer time, eutrophication is the source of blooming algae. Microscopic phytoplankton is present all the time, even in winter. If the amount of algae is small, it is impossible to see them with the naked eye. Some algae can even – in addition to the growing form – grow cells which can stay alive in the seafloor for months or even years. When there are sufficient nutrients and light, as well as little zooplankton which eats phytoplankton, the algae can

reproduce quickly. Warm and calm weather is also needed for poisonous algal bloom mats to form on the surface.

We need the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region to set concrete goals in developing the region. We need to co-operate and share good (BAT) experiences with our neighbors. But it is the responsibility of every member state to save our common sea and keep it alive, and we must not – and we cannot – transfer the responsibility to the EU.