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**A STUDY OF THE RICH HISTORY OF THE BALTIC SEA COUNTRIES**

**Abstract:** The article in memory of Professor Tadeusz Poklewski-Kozieł gives an outline of the history of the Baltic Sea and the surrounding states with the sea as a unifying and sometimes separating element. It is a panoramic view, focusing especially on older history. The presentation begins with an overview of the Baltic Sea as a brackish sea and its individual character in comparison with other seas. This is followed by sections on prehistoric times and Viking Age, the *Hanse*, the Teutonic Knights and the Livonian War in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Not only Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, and Germans were involved, but also Danes and Swedes. Of great importance for the coming development was the Swedish dream of a *Dominium maris Baltici*, which was indeed realized in the 17<sup>th</sup> c., but then turned out to be unrealistic. After the loss of Finland to Russia in 1809, Sweden was reduced to its present size, while Russia and Prussia ascended to new major powers in the Baltic region. In the late 18th c. the great power Poland-Lithuania (*Rzeczpospolita*) was dismembered into three parts. Art and culture however flourished, despite oppression. In addition to the presentation of political events, views of trade and markets, architecture, cartography, shipbuilding, navies, dynastic questions etc. are also sporadically presented. The article concludes with some personal remarks with reference to the ecology of the Baltic Sea and the Baltic Sea region. The hope is expressed that the many problems with pollution may be brought in the public eye according to the spirit of the *Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission*, also known as the *Helsinki Commission (HELCOM)*.

**Keywords:** the Baltic Sea, the Baltic countries, history, ecology, the Hanseatic League, the Teutonic Order, the Livonian War

With this article in memory of Professor Tadeusz Poklewski-Kozieł (1932-2015) I will give an outline of the history of the countries around the Baltic Sea. In order not to lose track in the jungle of historical events, a common denominator has to be found, which to some extent can serve as the heart of the action. The search proves simple because the Baltic Sea itself is such a suitable catalyst. The following comments therefore deal with its history in many facets, including views of the surrounding regions and states. Of course, the study can only provide a panoramic overview.

**The Baltic Sea**

The gradual colonization of the Baltic Sea Region by flora, fauna and *Homo sapiens* after the last Ice Age occurred from the south and east. As recent DNA research has proven, in addition to the European hunters and gatherers and the farmers from the Middle East there was also a third component from the Euroasian north, who immigrated about 5000 years ago and left its genetic material in today's Europeans. In the Baltic states in the narrow sense the gene portion of these northern Eurasians is particularly high at around 20 %.

At that time large parts of today's Baltic coasts were under water because the land elevation after the release of the pressure of the ice had only just begun. Therefore, we find settlements and other traces of human activity during the prehistoric period not directly on the coast, but inland, many meters above the present sea level. This land elevation was particularly pronounced on the Swedish side of the Gulf of Bothnia. The consequences were problems for waterways and ports that sometimes had to be abandoned due to silting. Nowadays the global sea level is rising again, due to climate change.

The Baltic Sea is a brackish sea with fresh water supply from several major rivers, one of which is Neva, coming from Lake Ladoga in Russia and supplying no less than one fifth. In Estonia we have the Narva, in Latvia the Daugava (Düna/Dvina), in Lithuania the Nemunas (Memel/Njemen), originating from Belarus, in Poland the Vistula (Wisła/Weichsel) and the Odra (Oder), in Sweden the rivers Torne and Lule, in northern Finland Kemijoki (Kemi). The salinity varies from about 3 per thousand in the north to 8 per thousand around the Danish islands. It is thus relatively low, compared with the 35 per thousand of the oceans. Since the destructive naval shipworm *Teredo navalis*, who uses its

shell with two valves for drilling into wood, can only live in salt water, there are still many well-preserved wooden shipwrecks in the Baltic Sea. A good example is the gorgeous Swedish ship *Wasa*, which sank off Stockholm in 1628, was raised in 1961 and after restoration has been exhibited since 1990. Unfortunately the roughly 20 cm long mollusc naval shipworm has now reached the Baltic Sea from the west and can be found in the area around the island of Rügen. Perhaps today's warmer climate supports its spreading.

The climatic differences between north and south are large within such an elongated sea. They affect as well as the salinity of the water the thickness and strength of the ice. In the Gulfs of Bothnia and Finland the Baltic Sea was often passable in winter by horse and wagon or sleigh, while this was only occasionally possible in the south. A famous exception was the march of the Swedish army of King Charles X Gustavus across the ice of the Little Belt and the Great Belt to Zealand and the Danish capital Copenhagen in January and February 1657. This unexpected and daring operation forced Denmark one year later to accept peace in Roskilde and to cede the provinces Scania (Skåne), Halland, Blekinge and Bohuslän to Sweden.

#### **Prehistoric and Viking Age**

Gradually the various ethnicities Germans, Slavs, Balts and Finno-Ugric tribes consolidated in a ring around the Baltic Sea. We also have to add the Sami people in Lapland in northern Scandinavia although they only played a modest role in European history. The Baltic Sea as a unifying element in both a positive and negative sense was visible during the Migration Period and the Viking Age, partly by population transfer, Colony-ups, trade and transport and partly through raids and armed campaigns.

After many German tribes had left their ancestral lands during the Migration Period to move south, Slavic tribes, called Wends, moved too and settled on the southwestern Baltic coast up to the river Elbe. Their religious and cultural center was Arkona on the Island of Rügen. To oppose them Danish Vikings founded as a base Jomsborg at the mouth of the river Oder. After the Christianization of Denmark and the establishment of an archbishopric in Lund in 1104, the Danish monarchy was the dominant power in the Baltic Sea area. In the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> c. King Waldemar the Great continued attacks along the southern Baltic coast as crusades and destroyed Arkona. In 1219 his son and successor Waldemar the Victorious conquered Estonia.

Also important was the establishment of the German city of Lübeck on an older Slavic settlement by Adolf II of Holstein in the year 1143. The Saxon Duke Henry the Lion was soon thereafter as liege lord a major supporter of trade and commerce of the city. He too led crusaders into the land of the Wends. The 1147 crusade against them is very significant, because then for the first time a papal bull allowed crusaders to redeem their crusading vow in

Northern Europe rather than in the Holy Land. Danes and Germans now vied for supremacy in the Baltic region.

The era of the Vikings, i.e. the period from the late 8<sup>th</sup> to the late 11<sup>th</sup> c., is firmly anchored in general consciousness, as evidenced by the well-attended Viking exhibition in Berlin in 2014. Apart from the raids by the Danes in the southern and eastern Baltic Sea, it was mainly Swedish Vikings who crossed the sea as warriors and merchants with their ships. Except for the great trading center of Hedeby (Haithabu), which was located on the southern border of Danish Jutland, there were other bases for the Scandinavian traders further away, such as Truso in the delta of the river Vistula and Grobina (Seeburg) in present-day Latvia. Presumably, the rich amber deposits on the Sambian coast were reason enough for founding the settlement Wiskiauten in today's Russian Oblast Kaliningrad by Viking merchants from Gotland and the area around Birka in Lake Mälaren.

The ultimate goals of the Swedish Vikings were still further away, in Russia, in Byzantium and the Persian Empire. Two flow paths led there. From the inner part of the Gulf of Finland, the Neva river and Lake Ladoga, where the settlement Staraja Ladoga, called Aldeigjuborg, was an important base, they had access to the huge Russian river system. From Staraja Ladoga they could reach Novgorod, called Holmgård, Smolensk, Bolgar on the shores of the Volga river, and the Caspian Sea. Further west, Pskov was beyond Lake Peipus. The river Daugava (Düna/Dvina), flowing into the Gulf of Riga, led to Smolensk and from there over the Dniepr to Kiev, the Black Sea and the hugely important Constantinople (Miklagård), i.e. today's Istanbul. It was a great export and import network, to put it in modern terms. Among the many traded goods were wax, furs, slaves and various other articles, including amber. The volume of goods exchanged is illustrated by the more than 80,000 Arab silver coins, dirhems, found mainly in the Gotland earth.

#### **The Hanseatic League and the Teutonic Order**

The rise of the Hanseatic League (Hansa, German: Hanse) is closely connected with the decay of the Viking era and the founding of Lübeck. That first German city on the Baltic Sea soon became very prosperous and powerful and took over the functions that initially Hedeby (Haithabu) and Schleswig had held as commercial centers. Also, the centrally located island of Gotland with the town of Wisby played an extremely important role in trade in the Baltic region and far beyond. The Hansa took over the trade routes used by the Vikings and the first Gotland merchants, but surpassed their predecessors in efficiency and capacity, one of the reasons being the introduction of a new type of ship, known in German as the *Kogge*. Those bulky ships had more cargo space and a high stern, from which pirates could be better fought off. The German merchants also owed their superiority in Baltic Sea transport to their commercial technology (the "joint venture").

One of the pillars of prosperity from 1100 to about 1600 was the booming trade in herring in the markets

Skanör and Falsterbo in the province of Scania, which at that time belonged to Denmark. For the preservation of the herrings large amounts of salt were needed, which were purchased from either Lüneburg or France. It was above all the large Russian market that attracted long-distance traders. Scandinavian and German merchants imported a wide spectrum of Russian products such as wax, flax, hemp, skins and furs and exported others such as salt, herrings, cloth and metals.

Other important Hanseatic towns on the coast of the Baltic Sea, apart from Lübeck and Wisby, were Wismar, Rostock, Stralsund, Danzig (Gdańsk), Elbing (Elbląg), Königsberg (today's Kaliningrad), Riga, and Reval (Tallinn), furthermore Stockholm, Kalmar, Copenhagen, Viborg, and Åbo (Finnish: Turku). At the height of its power by 1400, no less than 160 cities belonged to the Hanseatic League. Its influence declined gradually during the 16<sup>th</sup> c. coinciding with an economic decline due for the disappearance of the huge shoals of herring, and clashes with the kingdoms of Denmark and Sweden, who had now grown much stronger. The Dutch and English were seeking direct contact with the important Russian market, which provided them with, inter alia, hemp and tar for shipbuilding. As a result, armed conflicts and sea battles in the Baltic became unavoidable.

While the adoption of Christianity in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Sweden passed rather peacefully, in the eastern Baltic it led to very painful conflicts. Behind the crusades, in our case the Baltic crusades, were not only religious interests, but a variety of worldly interests too. After the founding of Riga by Bishop Albert in 1201, the Order of the Brothers of the Sword one year later was set up as protection against the pagans. A devastating defeat in a battle against the Lithuanians caused its absorption by the Teutonic Order in Prussia in 1237. Both religious orders saw it as their Christian duty to convert the heathen to the Catholic faith and practiced the so-called Sword mission. In Livonia, very complicated power structures were created with the Archbishop of Riga, the Teutonic Order and Denmark as main rivals for power. In 1346 the Danes sold Estonia to the Order. Both in Livonia and Prussia the Teutonic Knights succeeded in subduing the native population, despite severe rebellions. After that, the fight against the still pagan Lithuanians continued. However, Lithuania was not converted to Christianity by war and devastation, but in a peaceful way by the Poles. By defeating the Teutonic Order in a main battle in 1410 the combined Polish and Lithuanian forces under King Władysław II Jagiełło and Grand Duke Vytautas (Witold) succeeded in breaking the Prussian supremacy in the Baltic Sea area. The Teutonic Order existed in Prussia until the Reformation (1525) and in Courland, Livonia and Estonia until 1561.

In Finland it was the Swedes who partly through peaceful colonisation, and partly through conquest gained supremacy and introduced Christianity. This was not only a result of the

Swedish race against the Danes for domination of the Baltic Sea, but also particularly of rivalry with the Novgorodians to the east, who were making the heathen pay tribute and converting them to Russian orthodoxy. Until 1809, Finland remained a part of the Swedish kingdom. In that year Sweden lost a war against Russia and Finland became a Russian Grand Duchy until it gained independence at the end of the First World War.

Both the Hanseatic League and the Teutonic Order have left many extraordinary and beautiful architectural monuments, especially castles and churches, but also – in the case of the Hanseatic League – patrician houses. Among the many imposing castles in the Baltic region, the huge Marienburg, in Polish Malbork, should be highlighted. It is probably the biggest and the most beautiful medieval castle in Europe, restored very meticulously by the Poles after the heavy destruction suffered during the Second World War. Worth mentioning is the fact that it was built by the Order in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. but belonged to Poland from 1457 to 1772 as well as after 1945.

### **The Livonian War**

The decay of the Teutonic Order in Livonia created a momentous power vacuum that Ivan IV of Moscow wanted to use to his advantage. In 1558 the disastrous Livonian War began, which lasted until 1583, with the invasion of Russian troops in the territory of the Order. Other stakeholders during the years of war, devastation, sieges, battles and punitive expeditions were Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and Lithuania. The aim was to gain influence, land ownership and control of trade routes. In one of the battles, at Orsha in 1564, the Russians were defeated by the Lithuanians. As a result of their common defense against the Russians, the two states of Poland and Lithuania, which had a personal union since 1386, united into a real union in Lublin in 1569. In the end, the Russians lost their access to the Baltic Sea and could only operate direct trade with the West via Arkhangelsk.

### **Rise and Fall of the Swedish Great Power**

The founder of the Swedish national state was Gustav Eriksson Vasa, who had begun a successful rebellion against the union king Christian II of Denmark-Norway-Sweden and in 1523 himself was elected king of Sweden as Gustav I. Christian had lost favour as a consequence of the Stockholm bloodbath in 1521 and the Kalmar Union between the three Nordic countries did not function any longer. Some years later he was also deposed as king of Denmark. Both Sweden and Denmark-Norway became Protestant countries.

In this context the famous *Carta marina* should be mentioned. This earliest detailed map of the Nordic countries, including the Baltic Sea region, was drawn by the Swedish catholic ecclesiastic Olaus Magnus in 1527-1539. After the seizure of power by Gustav Vasa and the introduction of Protestantism in Sweden, he spent some years as refugee in

Gdańsk, where he got inspiration from Nicolaus Copernicus and the cartographer Bernard Wapowski.

Gustav Vasa turned his gaze to Russia, but his armies were not very successful in fighting Ivan IV of Moscow. His sons Eric XIV and John III continued his Baltic-Russian policy, but with different emphasis. Through his marriage to the Polish princess Catherine Jagiellonica in Vilnius in 1562 John sought a *rapprochement* with Poland. After severe internal conflicts in Sweden he could ascend the throne of Sweden. After his death, his Catholic-bred son Sigismund became king of both Sweden and Poland-Lithuania, but was deposed in Sweden after some years and could not regain the throne there. So there were now two hostile lines of the Vasa dynasty: a Catholic in Poland-Lithuania and a Protestant in Sweden<sup>1</sup>.

With King Charles IX, the half-brother of Eric and brother of John, the economic foundations for the rise of Sweden to a great European power were laid. When his young son Gustavus Adolphus ascended the throne, he however faced three “inherited” wars with Sweden’s neighbor countries: one Danish, one Russian and one Polish. Peace was made with the Danes in 1613 and the Russians in 1617; with Poland a six-year truce was made. His military successes included the siege of Riga with supposedly 160 ships and the capture of the city in 1621. The Swedish fleet was now strong enough to ensure the transport of thousands of soldiers and horses as well as weapons, food etc. over the Baltic Sea.

With a Swedish army, Gustavus Adolphus landed in Pomerania end of June 1630. In addition to political, religious and economic interests the dynastic conflict with his cousin Sigismund Vasa played an important role, because the King of Poland had never abandoned his claims to the Swedish throne. After successful campaigns and battles Gustavus Adolphus fell in the battle of Lützen, not far from Leipzig, in 1632.

In the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 Sweden gained important possessions on the coast of northern Germany as well as significant customs duties and could therefore maintain its supremacy in the whole Baltic Sea region. The old Swedish dream of a *Dominium maris Baltici* seemed to have come true, albeit without the King.

Due to the large upgrade of the fleets of all countries in the Baltic Sea area in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c., a great demand for oak and pine trees arose. Well grown oak was used for the hull, tall and slowgrowing pine for the masts. Added to this was hemp for rigging, tar for sealing the boards and many other products for shipbuilding. This whole issue involves not only political, economic and strategic, but also environmental aspects that deserve investigation. It makes the importance of the Russian market not only for the countries bordering the Baltic Sea, but also for Dutch and

English more understandable. The Danes benefited from this intense ship traffic, as since 1429 they were entitled to custom duties from ships passing Öresund. That custom brought huge revenues and existed until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> c.

Relations between Denmark-Norway and Sweden have in fact until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> c. been influenced much more by rivalry, wars and hatred than by friendship. Particularly painful for the Danes war the loss of today’s Swedish provinces Skåne (Scania), Halland, Blekinge and Bohuslän through the Peace of Roskilde in 1658, which was confirmed two years later in Copenhagen. With Poland-Lithuania, peace was made in the Oliwa monastery near Gdańsk (Danzig) in 1660, in which the Polish king waived claim to the Swedish throne and Livonia was handed over to Sweden. The Russians and Dutch also made peace.

The expansionary period under Charles X Gustav was now over, Sweden had reached the peak of its territorial expansion as a major power in the Baltic Sea area. As evidence of the many campaigns on the continent, invaluable manuscripts, books and works of art are kept in Swedish libraries and archives as war booty and loot. These include the famous *Codex argenteus* Bishop Ulfilas in the University Library of Uppsala, which fell into the hands of the Swedes at the storming of Prague in 1648.

The *Dominium maris Baltici* of the Swedish kingdom lasted half a century, until it was lost to a large extent during the reign of King Charles XII. After great initial successes against Danes, Russians and Poles, in 1709 Charles suffered a devastating defeat against Peter the Great at Poltava in today’s Ukraine. The Baltic provinces were subsequently lost and ceded to Russia at the Peace of Nystad in Finland in 1721. The so-called “Great Nordic War” (1700-1721) thus ended with the demise of the Swedish supremacy in the Baltic Sea region. Instead, Russia and Prussia came to power, in between Poland-Lithuania, while Denmark now played a more modest role in the European arena. With the founding of St. Petersburg on the Neva, which in 1709 became the capital of Russia, the Baltic Sea region gained one more significant city of great importance for European culture.

#### **The Baltic countries in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> c.**

Despite its weakness, in the early 1740s Sweden dared to wage a war of revenge against Russia. It ended with a defeat and some territorial losses in eastern Finland. More wars against Prussia and Russia followed, one of which ended in 1809 with the loss of all of Finland. To make up for this disgrace, the king was deposed and the Swedes invited a field marshal of Napoleon’s to become the new king. It was done in the false hope that he would lead the country in alliance with Napoleon to defeat Russia and regain Finland. However, this was not to be. Instead Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, now King of Sweden as Charles XIV John, joined the coalition against Napoleon and took Norway from Denmark. As a result, in 1814 Norway became an

<sup>1</sup> For details, see Ekdahl 2014, 131-137.

independent state in union with Sweden. This union was dissolved in 1905.

During the wars with Russia the Baltic Sea was the scene of many great sea battles, especially in the Gulf of Finland in front of the newly built castle Sveaborg, today's Suomenlinna. The naval strategy changed. The Russians built a galley fleet that could operate in the Finnish archipelago unmolested by the great Swedish warships. Only towards the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. did the Swedes also build a usable galley fleet. In the 19<sup>th</sup> c. sailing ships were increasingly replaced by steamships.

It would be presumptuous to try to outline Polish history, so I will refrain. I just want to remind of the tough fate met by the nation in the late 18<sup>th</sup> c., when the formerly so mighty *Rzeczpospolita* Poland-Lithuania disappeared from the European map. Russia, Prussia and Austria divided the country into three parts, but could not tame the irrepressible desire for freedom. What followed was the saddest period in Poland-Lithuania so far. Repeated uprisings were brutally crushed: in 1830-31 during the Polish-Russian war (the so-called November Uprising) and in 1863 (the January Uprising). At the same time Polish and Lithuanian art and culture flourished, often in secret, and names such as Adam Mickiewicz, Jan Matejko, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Władysław Reymont, Ignacy Paderewski and not least Frédéric Chopin joined the ranks of many others as the greatest in European cultural history.

### Outlook

And so I conclude my panoramic overview, in which I have focused on the earlier history of the Baltic Sea region. I refrain from taking a look at the 20<sup>th</sup> c., because its ups and downs are well known.

Finally, I would like to make a personal observation in respect to the ecology of the Baltic Sea and the Baltic Sea region. We all know that this great and beautiful sea is in danger of degenerating into a garbage dump for the

surrounding countries. The list of pollutants is long and includes visible loads, such as the tons of ammunition and poison gas containers etc., that were dumped near the island of Bornholm after the Second World War<sup>2</sup>, or the barrels of mercury-containing substances, dumped in the Gulf of Bothnia. However, most of the dangerous pollution is invisible. In the Baltic Sea water it is so high that a few years ago you could read in Danish newspapers that the sale of Baltic salmon in Denmark was prohibited. Whether that still applies, I do not know. I however know that in Sweden children and pregnant women are advised not to eat fish from the Baltic. Eutrophication from agriculture and sewage from factories and households are two of the main contributors, which up until 2016 have caused the death of 16 per cent of the seabed in the Baltic Sea. According to Swedish environmental studies carried out at the University of Stockholm, this figure is three times higher than it was at the turn of the millennium. It will take a long time for those vast areas to be regenerated. The almost annually recurring algae carpet is obvious to us all. I still remember the foam in the Gulf of Riga, which I could see from the airplane during preparation for landing in Riga some years ago. Wastes from synthetic material make up a large part of the pollution of the oceans, and the Baltic Sea is no exception. Off the coast of Poland and Lithuania in 2011 and 2012 over 27 tons of "ghost nets" were taken out of the water by the WWF, the World Wide Fund for Nature. A continuation of this action off the German coast has been announced.

I conclude with the hope that international conferences will discuss the ecological problems associated with the Baltic Sea region in its many aspects and that they will be brought to light thanks to HELCOM – the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission - Helsinki Commission. This would certainly also have been supported by Professor Tadeusz Poklewski-Koziół if he had still been with us. We all hold him in honourable remembrance.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Selle 2016.

**Streszczenie****Ze studiów nad bogatą historią krajów nadbałtyckich**

Artykuł poświęcony pamięci profesora Tadeusza Poklewskiego-Koziell prezentuje historię Bałtyku i otaczających go państw jako elementu je jednoczącego, a niekiedy również dzielącego. Autor proponuje panoramiczne spojrzenie, koncentrujące się przede wszystkim na starszych dziejach tego regionu. Prezentację zaczyna od charakterystyki Bałtyku jako morza słonego, a następnie przeprowadza porównanie jego indywidualnych cech z innymi akwenami morskimi. Przyglądamy się mu w czasach prahistorycznych i w okresie wikingów, w czasach Hansy, Zakonu Krzyżackiego i wojny inflanckiej w 2. poł. XVI w., w którą zaangażowani byli nie tylko Polacy, Litwini, Rosjanie i Niemcy, ale także Duńczycy i Szwedzi. Istotne dla mającego nastąpić rozwoju było szwedzkie marzenie o *Dominium maris Baltici*, które faktycznie było zrealizowane w XVII wieku, ale wkrótce okazało się nierealne. Po utracie w 1809 r. Finlandii na rzecz Rosji, Szwecja zmniejszyła się do obecnej powierzchni, podczas gdy Rosja i Prusy stały się nowymi mocarstwami w regionie bałtyckim. Pod koniec XVIII w. Rzeczpospolita została podzielona na trzy części. Pomimo ucisku sztuka i kultura rozwijały się nadal. Autor zauważa, że w przeciwieństwie do prezentacji wydarzeń politycznych sporadycznie omawiane są takie kwestie jak handel i rynek, architektura, kartografia, sztuktnictwo, nawigacja, kwestie dynastyczne, etc. Artykuł kończy się kilkoma osobistymi uwagami związanymi z ekologią Morza Bałtyckiego i jego regionu. Wyrażono nadzieję, że wiele problemów wynikających z zanieczyszczenia środowiska zwróci uwagę opinii publicznej w zgodzie z duchem *Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission* [Komisja Ochrony Środowiska Morskiego Bałtyku], znanej jako *Helsinki Commission (HELCOM)*.