



UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development Peer Learning Round Table on SDG 14: Life Below Water

2 April 2025, Geneva

PANEL 2:

Distinguished delegates,

Thank you, I am Valbona Mazreku from MilieuKontakt an ngo based in Albania - which you all probably know, is a tourist spot on the Mediterranean sea! I would like to share input from yesterday's Civil Society Forum.

As the presentations we just have heard, data is essential to understand the scale of the problem. And I want to focus on pollution of our oceans and seas with waste. Our seas have become dumping grounds, and that is killing them.

Land based pollution is a huge problem, including for the Mediterranean - plastic waste and other pollution enters the seas via rivers and other water bodies.

More than 230.000 tons of **plastic waste** are leaking into the Mediterranean **every year**.

Microplastic pollution is already very high,

The Mediterranean which has only 1% of global water content, already concentrates 7% of global microplastic pollution!

When we eat fish, we eat microplastics.

Our babies are born with microplastics, and studies show this does irreversible harm to our health. Therefore, the most **urgent policy need is to end plastic pollution**, let me give 3 points how to do that:

1) All Member States should ensure we agree this year on the global treaty to End Plastic Pollution, which is going into its final round of negotiations here in Geneva in August this year.

The plastic treaty has to agree on a **cap** on plastic production.

There is no real recycling of plastics, only downcycling! Plastic recycling is a myth.

Instead, we need innovation and use of local fibres from agricultural waste for example, to produce the substitutes to plastics that we need.

2) All Member States need to pass legislation now to **end single use plastics in their countries**. Most of these single use plastics are not essential, the substitutes exist, what we need is the right incentives.

3) Therefore, we need to pass financial mechanisms that put fees and fines on plastics, and that are invested into substitution of plastics and in scaling up good practices.

For example, my NGO is working in Albania with economic actors from hotels, restaurants and shops, on creating 'low-plastic zones' as part of our RIVERCLEAN project. There are more than 700 businesses - big and small - in 14 municipalities that have joined, working together to reduce plastic waste by moving to product substitutes, such as made from paper, carton, and reusable containers and cutlery. In the first year we reduced already 27,000 kilograms only of plastic waste, it is really not so difficult! With financial incentives and clear rules and standards, it would be even easier!

This is not only good for the Mediterranean, but also for our economy, as plastic pollution and a dirty sea is bad for tourism.

Thank you

PANEL 2:

My name is Ira Ponedelnik, I represent **Green Network** (Belarus, in exile) and am a board member of **Climate Action Network EECCA**.

It is important to emphasize that **Ocean Literacy matters for all of us – including landlocked countries**. I personally also love the ocean, even though I come from Belarus, a country with no coastline. I was fortunate to implement a project through the Sustainable Ocean Alliance and even tried to create an Ocean Hub in Belarus. But the reality is, access to **funding and partnerships** for landlocked countries remains **extremely limited**.

One of the key barriers to developing ocean literacy in the EECCA region is language. Many teachers and educators simply do not speak English and are unable to use the valuable

materials created by international colleagues. If we want ocean literacy to be truly inclusive and global, we need more **localized, translated, and accessible resources**.

So my question is: how can we ensure that landlocked countries are meaningfully included in ocean-related funding, programming, and data initiatives under SDG 14?

In the EECCA region, some governments often claim that **SDG 14** is not relevant. It means that these governments do not collect important data or share unreliable data. But landlocked countries contribute to ocean degradation — through **plastic and microplastic waste**, and **industrial pollution**. Ignoring SDG 14 is a missed opportunity. Localizing the SDGs means adapting — not excluding — goals that seem “distant.” All countries impact ocean health.

I welcome that today's discussion on the ocean follows last year's climate — because they are deeply interconnected. Oceans are dying from climate change. I follow CSOs recommendation from last year that we urgently need funding not only for mitigation and adaptation in coastal areas, but also continued support through initiatives like **EU4Climate** and **EU4Water**. We urge the EU to keep engaging **Eastern Partnership** and **Central Asia** countries in those initiatives.

We also need to strengthen **civil society and expert engagement** in water and ocean governance, especially in the EECCA region. The **UNECE Water Convention** is a key framework for **transboundary cooperation**. In **Moldova** and **Ukraine**, civil society has a seat at the table in the **Dniester River Commission**. We need more such examples in **Central Asia and the Caucasus**, where civic space is shrinking under laws like the **foreign agent legislation**.

Following my colleague's speech about plastic pollution, it is important to talk about **pollution from military and armed conflict activities**. The ongoing war is devastating the **Black Sea** ecosystem — underwater mines have killed thousands of marine species, while chemical and hydrocarbon pollution is escalating. We urgently call for a **ceasefire**, accountability, and a **fund for Black Sea restoration**.

Looking ahead to the next global agenda beyond 2030, we must go further: **recognize the rights of nature** and consider **non-human actors** in decision-making. The **Mar Menor lagoon in Spain** is now a legal entity — this is not symbolic, but a practical step toward safeguarding ecosystems and future generations.

Finally, I urge Member States to **protect civic space**. Civil society is not a threat — it is essential to achieving both climate and ocean goals.

Thank you.