CLEARING CHEMICAL AND CONVENTIONAL MUNITIONS FROM THE SEA

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Tonnes of dangerous chemical and conventional munitions were dumped into Europe’s seas following the end of the world wars in the previous century, and today they pose a risk to marine life and seafarers.

It is estimated that the Baltic Sea alone has around 50,000 tonnes of chemical munitions, 500,000 tonnes of conventional weapons, and 10,000 wrecks on its seabed.

This danger is exacerbated by an increase in “blue economy” activities, such as installing offshore wind farms and laying deep-sea cables.

Lawmakers are today pushing the European Union to take action to clean up seabeds and ensure Europe’s waters are safe from hazards.
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The European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the European Parliament has the pleasure to invite you to an online conference on “Maritime Security and the Blue Economy – Unexploded munitions and chemical residues in the sea – in search for lasting and economically viable solutions” taking place on Wednesday 17 November 2021.

Anna Fotyga is a Member of the European Parliament and spokesperson for ECR Foreign Affairs.

The 20th century was marked by wars that shook both Europe and the wider world. One of the lesser examined yet lingering consequences of warfare in Europe is the dangerous refuse that still litters our sea beds. Following the World Wars, many seas were used as ‘easy’ dumping grounds for unwanted chemical and conventional munitions from unused war stocks.

Although justified at the time for safety and security reasons, such as the fear of leakages and explosions, these hazards never dissipated at the depths of the seas. Munitions stocks still affect the Baltic Sea, the North
Sea, the Adriatic Sea, the Japanese and Australian coastlines, and the Atlantic coast of the United States and Canada.

The Baltic Sea represented a key area of strategic interest to the European Union, which today shows through the unknown tonnes of unexploded munitions and chemical residues that remain scattered across its floor. Due to incomplete documentation regarding quantities and locations of munitions dumps, it is impossible to determine the exact amount of chemical munitions lying on the seabed containing toxic substances, such as mustard gas, which represents a severe hazard for the environment and coastal communities.

The dumped munitions pose a threat to human life and the marine environment that endangers not only fishing and navigation but also the development of offshore energy, aquaculture, shipping, tourism and other sectors of the blue economy. There is a plausible risk for dumps from decades past to cause an ecological disaster and poison large areas of the Baltic Sea. This is a problem that deserves our attention.

Experts and stakeholders agree that the dumped munitions and chemical weapons on the seabed, now more than ever, must be cleared. Changes to ocean temperatures, salinity and density levels are having an unknown effect on the toxic refuse. Additionally, human use of the sea for energy, aquaculture and other resources is expanding, and the old munitions threaten our relationship with our waters.

In response to this issue, the ECR Group, together with MEPs from various political groups, called on the President of the European Commission to take urgent action, making nine specific recommendations. Furthermore, the European Parliament resolution on Chemical Residues in the Baltic Sea, April 2021, calls on the European Union to commit to clearing the Baltic Sea of WWII shipwrecks and chemical weapons. The resolution was approved with a large majority.

The EU has extensive experience in mine clearance across the world, with operations spanning the Balkans, Africa and Asia. For the Baltic Sea, the EU must draw on that experience and adapt accordingly.

The European Commission knows of this problem, and a detailed study with more decisive actions is anticipated. In 2019, a Colloquium on the Challenges of Unexploded Munitions in the Sea took place, which was a crucial step in sharing experience and knowledge between relevant stakeholders. There is an excellent opportunity for the EU to turn this matter from a struggle into another example of the EU’s positive and effective engagement, more so given that this challenge lies within many European waters.

The event will be hosted by ECR Group MEP Anna Fotyga and split into three segments: From a global problem to best solutions’, ‘the state of play and calls for further action’; and ‘Research, innovative technologies and economically viable solutions’.

Keynote speakers will include EU Commissioner for Environment, Seas and Fisheries Virginijus Sinkevičius, who is responsible for developing a sustainable blue economy, and Jacek Sasin, Deputy Prime Minister of Poland and Minister of State Assets, who will focus on Polish experiences in dealing with unexploded ordnance and chemical residues.

Join us for our next international conference on maritime security and the blue economy on Wednesday 17, November 2021, 10:00-15:30. The event can be followed live on the ECR Group’s Social Media Channels.
Greater deep-sea economic activities increase the risk of harm from munitions and chemical weapons dumped into European seas during the first and second world wars, EU Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius has said.

The installation of offshore windfarms and a greater emphasis on laying undersea cable for energy and digital reasons enhances the likelihood that these weapons will be disturbed, potentially leaking harmful chemicals into the ocean, or even triggering an explosion, the Commissioner warned.

Dumping obsolete, damaged, or expired munitions into the sea was considered a safe and cost-effective method of disposal until the late 1960s and was widely carried out following the end of both world wars.

However, a leakage in the munitions could create a danger for seafarers, marine life and human health, the environment chief said. Many of the weapons are already greatly corroded, having been underwater for over 70 years.

It is estimated that the Baltic Sea alone has around 50,000 tonnes of chemical munitions, 500,000 tonnes of conventional weapons, and 10,000 wrecks on its seabed. Off the Belgian and Dutch coast, around 35,000 tonnes of munition were dumped after the first world war.

“We need to be aware of the risks. We need to assess them carefully. And we need to take action,” the EU Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius said of the threat posed by underwater munitions.

A safe and secure maritime space...
is essential for preserving the EU's strategic interest, such as freedom of navigation, border control, the supplies of essential materials, or indeed our food security," he added.

The Commissioner's concerns were backed by Polish deputy prime minister Jacek Sasin, who called the dumped munitions "a ticking chemical bomb at the bottom of the Baltic Sea".

Sasin said it would be irresponsible to pass the task of clearing up Europe's seas to future generations and called for interinstitutional and cross-border cooperation.

"Let me remind you that Poland fell victim to the countries that invaded us and that dumped munitions at the bottom of the Baltic Sea. We cannot be the only ones to pay the price," he said.

Sasin also warned that Europe risks an "environmental disaster" unless action is taken.

**CLEARANCE**

The current naval policy is aimed at removing risks rather than clearing dumped weapons, which generally means that underwater munitions are detonated in a controlled way, Commander Herman Lammers, director of the NATO Naval Mine Warfare Centre of Excellence, explained.

When it comes to mines, detonating them is a faster and safer option, but it of course comes with environmental risks, he said.

This approach was criticised by Terrance P. Long, the head of a Canadian NGO pushing for the clearance of underwater munitions, who called for a halt to blowing up munitions in the ocean.

Doing so, he said, destroys fish life and causes noise levels of over 300 decibels.

Long also condemned the lack of international cooperation on the issue, saying that most environmental charters aimed at healthy oceans neglect that "munitions have the ability, by themselves, to destroy the ocean."

"I honestly believe that we're not able to clean up munitions or address them adequately with the existing protocols and international conventions that are available today," he said.

**SOLUTIONS**

Dr Margo Edwards of the University of Hawaii shared the US state’s experience of clearing munitions. The ocean surrounding the Pacific islands was used as a dumping ground for chemical weapons following World War II.

The Japanese attack on the port of Pearl Harbour during the war also resulted in munitions, planes, and shipwrecks settling on the seabed.

The university documented the underwater munitions using manned submersibles. Sonar was deployed to map the seafloor, as metal objects produce different sound waves.

These machines, equipped with robotic arms, found that some of the chemical munitions in the ocean were heavily corroded.

Dr Edwards argued action is needed rapidly before the metal casing of the weapons corrodes entirely.

"I worry that by waiting, we might be waiting too long," she said.

In April, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for the European Union to forge plans for the removal of shipwrecks and chemical munitions.

Vaidotas Verba, Lithuania's ambassador to international organisations in Vienna, called on the European Commission to establish an expert group to map exact locations and to propose sustainable solutions to monitor and clear the munitions.

Several European companies already operate in the field of munitions removal and detonation, offering autonomous vehicles and robots capable of handling detonators.

ECR group MEP Anna Fotyga, one of the organisers of the conference, called on the Commission to commit to providing funding for efforts to clear munitions from seabeds.

"The time to take steps is now," she said.

Her plea was echoed by fellow ECR MEP Kosma Złotowski, who also called for the Commission to invest to prevent further harm.

"Economy, science, politics – we must unite those three parts to achieve the simple purpose which is to avoid real catastrophe," he said.

To watch the event, click [here](#).
Europe’s destructive twentieth-century conflicts resulted in thousands of tonnes of conventional and chemical munitions dumped into European waters. Today, these corroding weapons pose a danger to human health and to maritime economic activities. Now, more than ever, these dumped munitions must be cleared, says MEP Anna Fotyga.

Anna Fotyga is a Polish EU lawmaker from the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group and a member of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs.

You recently organised, with the ECR group, an event on clearing chemical and conventional munitions from the sea, most of which have been underwater for decades. Why do you feel that now is the right time to address this issue and what did you want to highlight with the event?

There’s no question that we have been dealing for decades with weapons or remnants of weapons, both chemical and conventional, all over the world.

These are primarily remnants of the Second World War, but some have been there since the First World War. What has changed is our thinking and the positive opportunities coming from technological development. What was considered impossible to
grasp in terms of the scope of the problem now is much more possible.

We also no longer think of the Baltic Sea or other seas as a dumping site for weapons. Now, we think about the climate consequences, we think about environmental protection, and we also think about public health. We know that the deteriorating state of those dumped munitions may negatively or even devastatingly influence the health of people.

We also increasingly think of possibilities to invigorate the economic use of seas, like the Baltic Sea or the North Sea.

Today, we are able to clearly define the barriers [dumped] munitions pose to a variety of human activity and to life in seas. And therefore, with the possibilities of innovative technologies, we once more approach this problem.

This event that I was able to host gathered important speakers from all over the world to discuss this problem – from the University of Hawaii, from Canada, from the whole of Europe including EU commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius, deputy prime minister of Poland Jacek Sasin, and high ranking diplomats of the Council of Baltic Sea States, national diplomats, military commanders, and renowned scientists.

**Speaking at the ECR event, EU Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius warned that the economic threat posed by these munitions is becoming more acute. What threat do these weapons pose to the blue economy?**

Every sector of the blue economy may be endangered by [dumped munitions]; there are agents within the scope of chemical weapons that are simply disastrous for human beings.

Any human activity, be it fisheries or construction or even navigation, that comes into incidental contact with some of those chemical agents may result in disastrous consequences. That is one thing.

Secondly, when we speak about fisheries, the same agents attack species living in seas. So, it may indirectly endanger those who eat fish.

It is particularly detrimental to tourism, and we know that countries all over the world look to their seas as an enormous possibility to enhance their national economies.

For Europe, it is extremely important – the Baltic Sea is an area for sailing, for sunbathing, for a variety of tourist activities, and the impact of this kind of danger is more than obvious.

There are also already programmes of activating offshore terrains to produce energy through wind turbines. And obviously, a danger is posed to this kind of investment without eradication [of underwater munitions].

What I think is in the best interest of all of us, of the general public, is to engage to diminish or to eradicate this problem. It is more feasible now than decades ago because of technological progress. New technologies enable us to successfully detect and neutralise those harmful agents.

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What type of solutions are available to clear munitions from Europe’s waters?

There are a variety of concepts on how to do this. But all speakers [at the ECR conference] agreed that the time has come to undertake action.

Individual actors now use different tools and methods. Some are used already by Americans, by Canadians, by Japanese, some are used by Baltic states. There is also minesweeping activity led by NATO or NATO allies already taking place in the seas.

I wouldn’t like to suggest which particular method of clearing dumped munitions is better and in what situation. It is up to scientists and technical experts certainly.

We had a panel during our conference in which the business community showed novel approaches in their methods and indicated new and innovative possibilities.

**Should the navy be involved in clearing munitions, or do you see it as a private sector issue?**

When you’re speaking about the navy, you clearly speak about the security and defence aspect of this only. And as I outlined in this interview, it is much broader. It is about the environment, it is about public health, and it also covers areas including trade, civil navigation, commercial navigation, and other economic activities.

I think that perceiving this problem only in the defence or military aspect was a major barrier to taking action until now. What I see as a possibility for a new approach is action taken in the civilian remit as well. [Underwater munitions] present a danger to communities larger than national divisions.
As an MEP and a politician, I am predominantly engaged in defence, security, and foreign affairs. But in this issue, I clearly see contemporary civilian problems that need solving.

In terms of the geography of clearing waters, it tends to fall to certain member states. Could you expand on what the role of the European Union should be here?

When we speak about territorial waters, it is, of course, a responsibility of member states. Nevertheless, these are remnants of the Second World War and, while no member state refuses to clean its waters, we have to remember which countries attacked and which were the victims.

As you can see, the situation is complicated and I believe that it is time to discuss this issue as a European responsibility as well.

Joint political consent and action are needed to solve this problem. Otherwise, we are simply immersed in a variety of historic discussions that are not necessary, and we’re not adding to the positive solution of this problem.

What would you like to see as the next steps from a policy perspective?

Commissioner Sinkevičius gave a speech [at the ECR event] and it was attended by members of the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE). European Commission officials were present throughout the debates, monitoring the sequence of events, listening to the arguments.

I think that the speakers were so high profile and high ranking that I now count on some initiatives on the part of the Commission. We’ll stay in touch. I’m very positive about the engagement of the Commission.

We intend to attract also other institutions and organisations. I think that the UN is a very good platform for action as they have the same kind of interest in this topic.

Knowing well how complicated the process may be, I remain cautiously optimistic because I see momentum. [Under past EU-funded programmes in this area] everything was focused on mapping and assessment. Now we have to introduce pilot programmes and, if successful, continue this.