Challenges in transboundary water governance in Europe in times of instability

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Lake Peipsi

..largest transboundary lake in Europe; shore line 520 km
- surface area 3555 km² (44% belongs to Estonia, 56% to Russia)
- shallow (7.1 m average); eutrophication issues
Lake Peipsi is a habitat of 37 species of fish; In winter – ice fishing (also as a tourism attraction)
Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation.. 

..has worked for 25 years with Lake Peipsi communities on both shores of the lake; with environmental education, heritage /nature tourism; but also with other Lake and border regions in Europe and Africa.

We had several cross border cooperation initiatives with Russian NGOs, schools… until Febr 2022
2022 – the year of turbulent changes

• 24 February 2022 Russian invasion started with airstrikes all over Ukraine.

• Ecological and economic consequences of the war, (incl. the energy crisis in Europe)—have all modified the state of the prewar environmental agenda.

• The EU has stopped at all levels any kind of support programs with Russia, Belarus.

• No further scientific cooperation, not between local stakeholders, NGOs.
Transboundary water governance in Europe

• The EU is a party to a number of international agreements, (e.g. UNECE Water Convention)

• The EU states have concluded numerous basin-specific agreements, incl. with non-EU countries; (e.g. Finnish-Russian transboundary water cooperation since 1964 - was ranked as best is the world)

• The biggest transboundary lakes in EU eastern borders: Lake Peipsi (Est/Rus); Lake Pyhäjärvi and Lake Saimaa (Fin/Rus)
• **Transboundary water commissions** between Estonian-Russia has worked efficiently since 1997: on fisheries, water management

• Today Est/Rus, Fin/Rus Commissions continue their commitments mostly unilaterally, basic data exchange exists. (agreements of fish quotas Est-Rus Fisheries Commission, reached in Dec.)

• Scientific groups, NGOs have lost their partners they worked with for decades
Beside the socio-economic catastrophe we see **environmental disasters** that will afflict Ukraine’s ecosystems for generations to come. Many impacts cross the borders

- Hazardous waste
- Water pollution (via rivers into the sensitive ecosystem of Black Sea; migratory birds).
- Bombardment of a steel plant - release tons of hydrogen sulfide into the Black Sea.

Nuclear threat (Zaporizhia nuclear plant near the front line on the banks of the Dnieper River)

- Detonation of missiles - formation of toxic gases, which pollute also across the borders.
Future..

- After the war is finished - it is impossible to know how long it may take to revive any kind of dialogue with Russia and Belarus.

- Reconciliation is a long-term process, where environmental diplomacy might have a significant role.

- Role of NGOs, community organisations!
Future..

• The paradox is that sanctions towards Russia and the accessibility of oil and gas from Rus, has increased interest in clean alternative energy in Europe and beyond.

• In long term, the post war recovery process should be used for a fundamental transformation (of Ukraine) towards a green and net-zero economy.