

## TRANSITION TO A SUSTAINABLE BLUE ECONOMY – FROM A GLOBAL FRAMEWORK TO A NATIONAL CONTEXT

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### Abstract

The sustainable use of ocean and marine resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and the sustainable health of ocean and marine ecosystems is the leading theme of the decade declared by the United Nations General Assembly as the Decade of Ocean Science (Ocean Decade 2021 – 2030).

Global challenges related to climate change, overexploitation of natural resources, environmental pollution, as well as intensive urbanization of coastal areas determine the importance and relevance of the transition to a sustainable blue economy. The topic is particularly relevant for Bulgaria, because the sectors of the blue economy make a significant contribution to the socio-economic development of the country, but due to the vulnerability of the Black Sea ecosystem, the economic potential of the Bulgarian coastal and marine ecosystem is exposed to the risk of anthropogenic and climatic pressure. Despite the challenges, Bulgaria has the potential to transform the Bulgarian Black Sea coast not only into a center of sustainable economic growth, but also into a model for applying the principles of the blue economy.

The publication presents the results of a study whose main objective is to analyze the development of policies related to the transition to a sustainable blue economy in an international, European, regional and national context and to provide an analytical basis for the formation of a recommendations for a policy framework for an effective transition to a sustainable blue economy in Bulgaria. The analytical method applied is a critical review of the framework “external” to the country, which to a large extent regulates the process of transformation of the blue economy sectors, and of key national policies leading the process of transition to the blue economy.

Conclusions are drawn for the policy development process for a sustainable blue economy, and key catalysts for accelerating the transition to a sustainable blue economy are identified, such as improved governance, monitoring and control; changing production and consumption patterns ensuring a transition to a low-carbon economy and society, zero pollution and a circular economy; focus on technological innovations and science-based ocean solutions; and involving stakeholders in the process.

Recommendations are also formulated for making a transition to a sustainable blue economy at the national level, including changing the models of isolated sector management and investment and developing a national policy framework to provide a platform for improved governance and coordination between institutions and stakeholders in blue economy sectors.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, blue economy, governance.

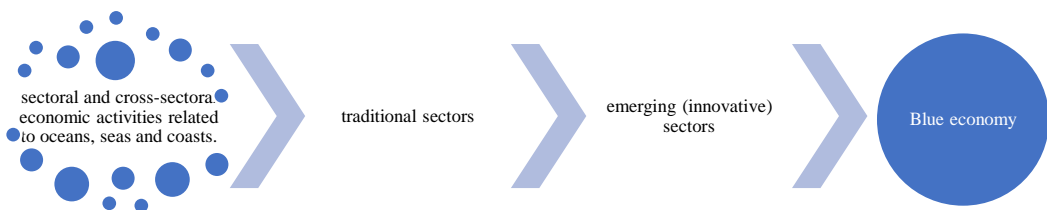
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## Introduction

Oceans, seas and coastal areas have a great potential to support and accelerate the economic growth, and at the same time are seen as the new economic frontier due to increasing number of industries competing for the resources of the oceans and seas. Interest in the economic potential of the ocean is growing rapidly, and the ocean's contribution to the global value added is projected to reach over USD 3 trillion by 2030 (OECD, 2016). Maritime industries, considered as traditional, such as maritime transport, maritime and coastal tourism, fisheries driven by global economic growth and increasing demand have the potential to grow fast by 3% – 4% annually over the coming decades (Nash, KL and others, 2017). With the development of science and technology, new ocean-based economic sectors (emerging industries), such as marine renewable energies, blue carbon capture, marine biotechnology and sustainable mining activities. All these industries and sectors related to the oceans, seas and coasts form the so-called “blue economy” (Fig. 1).



*Figure 1. Sectors and industries included in the scope of the blue economy – dynamics*

*Source: Author's research*

As a result of anthropogenic pressures, oceans, seas and marine resources are increasingly threatened, degraded or destroyed, reducing their ability to provide vital ecosystem services. The main threats are, among others, climate change, marine pollution, unsustainable extraction of marine resources and the physical changes and destruction of marine and coastal habitats and landscapes. Researchers, including Bennett, NJ and others (2019), conclude that a transformation of the way people perceive, manage and use the oceans, seas and coasts is required in order to protect the ocean health and human wellbeing.

The blue economy or sustainable ocean – based economy is emerging in response to this increased international pressure on ocean and sea resources and is setting a new trend of growth that is both environmentally sustainable and socially just. According to authors (Cisneros-Montemayor, 2019), the achievement of the triple goals (economic, social, environmental) requires many changes in industrial development, policy planning and attitudes regarding social and environmental problems

and can be seen as an opportunity to move towards ambitious social and environmental goals. The combination of economic activities included in the concept of blue economy must contribute to: (i) provide social and economic benefits for current and future generations; (ii) restore, protect and maintain the diversity, productivity, resilience, essential functions and intrinsic value of marine ecosystems; and (iii) be based on clean technologies, renewable energy and circular material flows that will reduce waste and promote material recycling (WWF, 2015). The need of transformation in production and consumption patterns, as well as improved management and control of human activities, gives impetus to the gradual development of conceptual scientific models, policies and regulation, as well as good practices, including technological solutions and innovations aimed at achieving the goals of sustainable development (WB, 2019). This transformation is led at the international level by the UN, OECD, World Bank, EC.

Although there is a lack of a common definition, the scientific and institutional publications are united in the understanding that the sustainable blue economy is not simply a term uniting economic sectors dependent on the resources of the oceans, seas and their coasts, but above all a term describing an integrated maritime policy, a tool for achieving sustainable development, considering the three aspects – social, economic and environmental. Since the Rio+20 conference (UN DESA, 2021), the sustainable blue economy is seen as an ambitious framework for ocean governance, applying a result-oriented management approach and requiring the involvement of both institutions and stakeholders.

## **Methodology**

The publication presents the results of a study whose main objective is to analyze the development of strategic policy frameworks for ocean governance, related to the transition to a sustainable blue economy on international, European, regional and national level and to provide an analytical basis for the formation of a recommendations for a policy framework for an effective transition to a sustainable blue economy in Bulgaria.

The methodology used includes a literature review and study of official documents of international organizations and institutions (UN, OECD, EC, World Bank, etc.), national strategic documents and scientific publications on the subject.

The survey examines successively international, European, regional and national contexts. The publication includes the international conventions, political commitments, strategies and programs adopted at the global level analyses the contribution of the European Union to the development of policies and tools for a sustainable blue economy, as well as the contribution of the regional Black Sea cooperation in policy formulation and implementation, and focuses on the national context.

The analytical method applied is a critical review of the framework “external” to the country, which to a large extent regulates the process of transformation of the

blue economy sectors, and of key national policies leading the process of transition to the blue economy.

Conclusions are drawn for the policy development process for a sustainable blue economy, and key catalysts for accelerating the transition to a sustainable blue economy are identified. On the base of the analysis and findings, the recommendations are also formulated for improving the strategic framework on the national level.

### Blue economy policy development – an international context

Figure 2 presents important steps taken by the international community in the transition to a sustainable blue economy.



Figure 2. Sustainable blue economy – international framework for policy development

Source: Author's research

Already at the end of the 1950s, humanity's concern for the oceans and the marine environment and for the overexploitation of their resources led to the adoption of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UN, 1982) – a fundamental document that aims to improve security, cooperation and economic and social progress and regulates the protection, use and study of the seas and oceans and their resources.

The importance of oceans for sustainable development is widely recognized by the international community and is embodied in Chapter 17 "Protecting oceans, all seas and coastal zones, and the conservation, rational use and development of their living resources" of 'Agenda 21' (UNDSO, 1992) – the main document adopted at the first Earth Summit organized by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Chapter 17 recognizes the "marine environment" (including the oceans and all seas and adjacent coastal areas) as an asset that provides opportunities for sustainable development, and whose protection requires new approaches to the management and development of marine and coastal areas at national, sub-regional, regional and global level.

The concept of “blue economy” was formalized in 2012 at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). It is a response to growing concern in the international scientific community that the resources of the seas and oceans are limited and that the health of the planet's “blue heart” is drastically deteriorating. In the Rio+20 outcome document (UNCSD, 2012) *The Future We Want Report*, paragraphs 158 to 180, states reiterated the importance of “conserving and sustainably using the oceans and seas and their resources for sustainable development, development, including through their contribution to poverty eradication, sustainable economic growth, food security and the creation of sustainable livelihoods and decent work, while protecting biodiversity and the marine environment and addressing the impacts of climate change”.

At the UN Summit on 2015 the Member States unite and adopt a final document (UN General Assembly, 2015) – “Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, which also includes Goal 14: “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”. Goal 14 reaffirms the importance of ocean issues on the global agenda and places ocean health at the heart of sustainable development. On the base of the achievements of science and innovation the international community continues its efforts to restore the oceans and seas and to implement Goal 14. In order to develop a sustainable and equitable ocean economy by 2030 significant advancements in establishing a knowledge-driven framework for informed decision-making and policy formulation is needed. The sustainable use of ocean and marine resources for sustainable economic growth is a leading theme of the decade, announced by the UN General Assembly as the Decade of Ocean Science (Ocean Decade 2021 – 2030).

### **European contribution to policy development**

To the ongoing deterioration of the quality of the marine environment, loss of biodiversity and unsustainable use of oceans, seas and coastal areas, the European Commission and Member States are responding with efforts to overcome the fragmentation of sectoral marine policies and decision-making processes and to introduce a comprehensive and more coherent policy framework. The maritime policy of the Union is based on the principles of taking no preventive action, prioritizing the removal of damages to the marine environment at their source, and the polluter pays. Figure 3 traces the main steps in the development of European policy for the transition to a sustainable blue economy.

In its document *Strategic Objectives 2005 – 2009* (Commission of EC, 2005), the European Commission called for an integrated approach to maritime policies. In October 2007, the Commission launched the “Integrated Maritime Policy for the European Union” (EC Commission, 2007(1)) – a policy framework which aims to promote the sustainable development of all maritime activities and of coastal regions by improving the coordination of policies affecting the oceans, seas, islands,

coastal and outermost regions and maritime sectors, as well as through the development of cross-sectoral tools. The Integrated Maritime Policy gives impetus to the development of important initiatives, among which: “Blue Growth” – a long-term strategy adopted in 2012 to unlock the potential of the blue economy and support the development of sustainable maritime economic activities (EC, 2012 (1)); Marine Knowledge 2020: roadmap – a response to the need for adequate data and knowledge about the marine environment for the sustainable development of activities related to the sea (European Commission, 2014); Marine Spatial Planning, regulated through Directive 2014/89/EU (EC, 2014) – a response to the increasing human impact on the oceans, together with the rapidly increasing demand and competition for marine space for various purposes. The aim is to promote the sustainable growth of maritime economies and the use of marine resources through better conflict management and greater interaction between different maritime activities.



*Figure 3. Sustainable blue economy – European context for policy development*  
*Source: Author's research*

During the period 2019 – 2024, reflecting the European Green Deal (EC, 2019) as Europe’s sustainable growth strategy, EC and member states have put forward reforms and investments aiming to achieve a sustainable low-carbon, resource-efficient and circular European economy and society. The blue economy is considered a key pillar for achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal and related EU strategies due to the significant role and importance of the ocean as a climate regulator, a source of “clean” energy, oxygen, food and other critical humanity resources. Considering the importance of the healthy oceans the EC called for a new approach making a transition from ‘Blue Growth’ to a ‘Sustainable Blue Economy’ and developed “A New Approach for a Sustainable Blue Economy in the EU – Transform-

ing the EU Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future” (EC, 2021) that ensures coherence between and facilitates the coexistence of blue economy sectors, and seeks synergies in the maritime space, without to harm the environment. The analysis of European policies in the field shows that the ambitious policy of the EU and the declared intention of the blue economy to be the engine of the “green” transformation put maritime industries under great pressure. The transformation focuses on key areas of action such as achieving climate neutrality and zero pollution; moving to a circular economy; protecting biodiversity and investing in nature by ensuring the ecological protection of 30% of the EU's marine territory; climate change adaptation and coastal resilience; sustainable food production; approving the management of the maritime space To achieve these ambitious goals and to make this transformation happen, support with adequate regulatory and financial incentives and tools is needed.

### Regional context – Black Sea Basin

Regional marine conventions, sea basin strategies and plans are strategic instruments aiming to coordinate the efforts on the regional scale to protect the marine environment. They can be a forum for sharing knowledge and making legally binding decisions. Figure 4 presents key steps in the transition to a sustainable blue economy in the Black Sea region.



*Figure 4. Transition to a sustainable blue economy – Black Sea context*

*Source: Author's research*

The Convention for the Protection of the Black Sea from Pollution, adopted in 1992 in Bucharest, reflects the concern of the six Black Sea states about the deteriorating ecological condition of the Black Sea. The parties to the convention undertake to cooperate with each other and with other parties to establish appropriate scientific criteria for determining rules, standards, recommended practices and procedures for the prevention, reduction and control of pollution of the marine environment of the

Black Sea. As a result, in 2009, Sofia adopted a Strategic Action Plan for the protection and restoration of the Black Sea, which requires considering the activities in the coastal areas and their impact on the state of the marine environment.

The EC's call for the implementation of an Integrated Maritime Policy (EC Commission, 2007(2)) directs efforts of the EC and the Black Sea countries towards better coordination and in 2008 the initiative for Black Sea regional cooperation called "Black Sea Synergy" was announced.

An important step accelerating the regional cooperation in the Black Sea region is the initiated by Bulgaria and Romania and approved on 21 May 2019 by the Ministers of the Black Sea countries "The Common Agenda for the Black Sea" (CMA). This strategic document is a unique strategic framework for the blue economy, strengthening the regional dialogue between participating parties and stakeholders to jointly address the challenges and opportunities of the blue economy sectors in the region, ensuring environmental sustainability while promoting growth and promoting blue economy projects. The overall Black Sea agenda is complemented by its science pillar, the Black Sea Strategic Research and Innovation Program (SRIA), which provides valuable data for science-based decision-making. The Common Maritime Program for the Black Sea focuses on the development of a competitive, innovative and sustainable blue economy, as well as the promotion of investments in the Black Sea blue economy.

The two strategic documents represent a good basis for the development and implementation of regulatory and financial instruments for the transformation of the blue economy sectors to a sustainable mode, as well as for changing the management model of marine and coastal areas to apply the principles of integrated sustainable development.

### **National context**

Bulgarian blue economy includes all sectors related to the sea and coastal areas, including coastal and marine tourism, marine living resources, maritime transport, port activities, shipbuilding and repair, and marine non-living resources, etc. These sectors are the backbone of the blue economy of Bulgaria, and they depend on the quality of the natural ecosystems (World Bank, 2020). This is a large and fast-growing segment of the Bulgarian economy, which has taken significant steps to modernize and diversify over the last decade, and which will play an important role in improving environmental, social and economic development. The development of the blue economy can decisively stimulate growth and economic development, as well as the creation of jobs in Bulgaria

At the same time, the economic potential of the Bulgarian coastal and marine ecosystem is exposed at risk from anthropogenic and climatic pressures. Urbanization, pollution, the impact of climate change – all these natural and anthropogenic impacts are putting serious pressure on the coast.



Bulgaria is progressing in harmonization of legislation and in aligning the sectoral policies with the EU blue economy framework. Some of the important strategic documents, that facilitate the transition to the sustainable blue economy are presented on Figure 5. The lack of a national vision/strategy or other type of framework document to provide a platform for improved governance and coordination between institutions and stakeholders in the blue economy sectors, as well as to define priority maritime sectors was identified.



*Figure 5. National strategic documents supporting the transition to a sustainable blue economy*  
*Source: Author's research*

An important step towards a more sustainable use of the Black Sea and its more effective protection, as well as towards transition to a sustainable blue economy in Bulgaria is the adoption of the Maritime Spatial Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria (MPPRB) for the period 2021 – 2035, developed in fulfillment of the obligations of the country under EU framework directives (Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EU); Marine Strategy Framework Directive (2008/56/EC and Directive 2014/89/EU to establish a framework for maritime spatial planning). The increased competition between economic sectors and urban development for marine and coastal resources and territory, as well as the continued deterioration of marine environment and the loss of biodiversity, necessitating the implementation of an integrated maritime policy. One of the main objectives of the Maritime Spatial Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria (MSPRB) is “creating conditions for sustainable growth of the maritime economy”, as well as reconciling existing and future activities on the use of marine spaces and efficient use of natural resources. At this stage, it is not possible to assess the effect of the adoption and implementation of the MSPRB. A next step of the study is to assess the extent to which the document fulfills the role of a political tool for the transition to a sustainable blue economy at the national

level and to draw conclusions and recommendations for upgrading and improving the instrument.

Although the country formally fulfills its commitments under international agreements, as well as transposing European legislation, the practical implementation of policies and the achievement of key goals remains a challenge for Bulgaria. The fact is indicative that after the finalization of the Maritime Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria and the program of measures for the period 2016 – 2021 (adopted by RMS No. 1111 of 29.12.2016 in implementation of the Framework Directive on Maritime Strategy 2008/56/EC) Bulgaria does not achieve a good state of the marine environment for the most of the monitored indicators, and in the new period a large part of the planned measures are of an institutional nature, including ensuring effective coordination between the competent authorities for the implementation of the Marine Strategy.

The study shows that despite the recommendations in international and European documents Bulgaria does not fully apply the ecosystem approach in the development of strategic documents (in particular the MSPRB), as well as the process of evaluating ecosystem services has not been completed. This is considered as a key to providing information on which to base policy decisions for the sustainable growth of maritime industries.

The conducted study concludes that in Bulgaria have not been applied a governance approach to ensure a balance between economic growth, the protection of the welfare and rights of the local community, and the protection of the environment.

There is a contradiction in the priorities and goals of the sectoral, cross-sectoral policies regulating the sectors of blue economy, and the horizontal policies related to the welfare and rights of the local community, and the protection of the environment. The policies do not adequately address the challenges to the sustainable development of the blue economy in Bulgaria, and do not sustainably engage the interested parties in the stages of policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Stakeholder involvement is theorized as a key element for evidence-based, transparent policy-making. The study of national policies and strategic documents shows that there is a lack of a single national database, oriented towards the sectors of the blue economy and enabling the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies, as well as the NSI does not maintain national statistics on the indicators by which, at the European level, an annual assessment of the state of the blue economy. This report analyzes the context for the transition to a sustainable blue economy in Bulgaria and creates a basis for subsequent analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing Bulgaria's transition to a blue economy.

## **Conclusions**

The Blue Economy is a concept that focuses on the sustainable use of ocean and maritime resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and the

lasting health of ocean and maritime ecosystems, applying a holistic and interdisciplinary approach integrating the principles of marine science, environmental protection, socio-economic development.

Global challenges related to climate change, overexploitation of natural resources, environmental pollution, as well as intensive urbanization of coastal areas determine the importance and relevance of the transition to a sustainable blue economy. For Bulgaria, the topic is particularly relevant due to the following circumstances: (1) the sectors of the blue economy have a significant contribution to the socio-economic development of the country; (2) vulnerability of the Black Sea ecosystem – the economic potential of the Bulgarian coastal and marine ecosystem is at risk from anthropogenic and climatic pressure; (3) despite the challenges, Bulgaria has the potential to transform the Bulgarian Black Sea coast into an example of sustainable economic growth and a model for applying the principles of the blue economy.

The method of analysis used is a critical review of the framework “external” to the country, which to a large extent regulates the process of transformation of the maritime economic sectors and of the fundamental policies for the transition to the development of a blue economy. The study traces the development of policies related to the transition to a sustainable blue economy in an international, European, regional and national context. The analysis finds that in international, European, regional and national contexts policy instruments have been developed and implemented to achieve a sustainable blue economy. The analysis forces the conclusion that the process of developing policies for a sustainable blue economy requires the involvement of both institutions at all levels of government and stakeholders. The transition to a sustainable blue economy requires a change in production and consumption patterns; improved management and control of human activities; a focus on scientific discoveries and technological innovations ensuring a transition to a low-carbon economy and society, zero pollution and a circular economy. Although our country formally fulfills its commitments under international agreements, as well as transposes European law, the practical implementation of policies and the achievement of key goals remain a challenge for Bulgaria. Based on the identified weaknesses and gaps identified in a national context, recommendations are made for the necessary actions, including reforms and policies for full compliance with the EU framework for the blue economy, as well as with the international agreements and initiatives to which our country has joined. Emphasis is placed on the need to adopt a national vision/strategy or other type of framework policy document to provide a platform for improved governance and coordination between institutions and stakeholders in the blue economy sectors, as well as to define priority maritime sectors for development. This also requires changing the models of sectoral management and investments to integrated one; the improvement of the utilized policy instruments and data base; the valuation of natural capital and ecosystem services is an important tool.

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