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Protection of the environment in the Arctic Region

Report
Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs
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Summary

The Arctic region is an area with extreme environmental and geographic conditions and a great wealth of natural resources.

Its environment is extremely vulnerable and requires special protection to preserve its biological diversity and unique surface and marine ecosystems. Traditional environmental management patterns developed by indigenous peoples have helped maintain the environmental balance and also the productivity of the region's natural assets.

Intensive economic exploitation of the Arctic territories for the benefit of the countries bordering the Arctic Ocean, as well as countries planning to develop their economies using the Arctic's natural resources, calls for the design and implementation of a single strategy and programmes to ensure the preservation of a congenial environment for human activity and for the numerous unique plant and animal species.

The Assembly firmly believes that only through joint efforts and co-ordinated action can we hope to achieve the desired result, namely mutually beneficial economic development of the Arctic region while at the same time preserving its environment.

In this context, the Assembly calls on the member states to find ways of implementing joint and bilateral activities and co-operation to protect the Arctic environment.

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A. Draft resolution

1. The Arctic region is unique by reason of its geographical location and the entire range of extreme environmental conditions encountered there. It plays a key role in the global physical, chemical and biological equilibrium. It is also highly sensitive to climatic variations, and the reactions triggered in the Arctic have such far-ranging consequences for the global state of the environment that researchers regard this region as the first to show the signs of future climate change. It is also a region with a great wealth of natural resources (minerals, natural gas, oil and fish stocks).

2. As a result of climate change there is a high risk of warming of the Arctic region, which could predictably lead to gradual melting of the polar ice cap over the course of this century with serious ecological consequences such as the disappearance of summer ice, rising sea levels, a decrease in seawater salinity, modification of ocean currents (not least the Gulf Stream) and lower temperatures in Western Europe.

3. In the far north, especially the Barents Sea, there are significant hydrocarbon resources, currently estimated at 25% of world reserves. Technological progress has made it possible to begin exploiting these deposits, which are essential to Europe's energy supply.

4. The Parliamentary Assembly nonetheless underlines that exploitation of the region's particularly rich mineral resources especially in the Russian Federation (coal, copper, nickel, cobalt, etc.), involves highly polluting activities.

5. The Assembly is aware of the serious threat that pollution and climate change represent for the region's existing biological resources (fish, marine mammals, reindeer, bears, birds, etc.).

6. Intensive economic exploitation of the Arctic for the benefit of the countries bordering the Arctic Ocean, as well as those planning to develop their economies using the Arctic's natural resources, necessitates the formulation and implementation of a strategy and specific programmes to guarantee the preservation of a congenial environment for human beings and for the many plant and animal species unique to the region.

7. The Arctic region is exposed to a particularly serious radiological risk from European and Russian nuclear waste owing to liquid radioactive waste carried along by the marine currents (in particular the Gulf Stream), the presence of decommissioned nuclear power stations, nuclear submarines and other vessels in a state of disrepair, nuclear-powered lighthouses and nuclear waste dumped at sea or on unsafe storage sites.

8. The Assembly points out that co-operation in the Arctic region has recently made good progress. Norway and the Russian Federation have for many years been implementing very active bilateral co-operation measures, and some areas of the two countries already enjoy special protected status. The co-operation must now be extended to the entire region, so as to foster peace and stability through sustainable development.

9. The Assembly underlines that the highly vulnerable environment of the Arctic region requires special protection to safeguard its biodiversity and unique terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Traditional ways of husbanding natural resources developed by indigenous peoples play a significant role in maintaining the environmental equilibrium and have a favourable impact on natural productivity.

10. The long-standing co-operation between Norway and the Russian Federation could serve as a model for bilateral co-operation activities to foster the environmental protection and sustainable development of the Arctic. The implementation of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, aimed at combating global warming, itself constitutes a positive example of multilateral co-operation.

11. The Assembly is convinced that international cooperation, along with the investment of large sums of money, is the only means of solving many of these problems and promoting a form of economic development beneficial for all states in the region, while preserving the environment.

12. The Assembly considers that, in response to the environmental protection issues facing the Arctic region, all states in the region must pool their efforts in the framework of the Arctic Council.

13. It welcomes the initiative taken by the Russian Federation during its chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2004-06) to declare 2007-08 "International Polar Year". This has made international co-operation and scientific research in the region a key focus for the countries concerned in association with other organisations seeking to develop co-operation in the region, notably for environmental protection purposes.

14. In this connection, the Assembly draws attention to the importance of the National Plan of Action for the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment implemented in Russia by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), including from man-made sources of pollution, as a model regional scheme for joint action in the light of the positive experiences and the progress made in Russia.

15. In this context the Assembly calls on member and observers states of the Council of Europe in the Arctic region:

15.1. to make preservation of the sustainability of the Arctic ecosystems, as a vital element of the global ecological equilibrium, a key principle of all national and regional economic development programmes;

15.2. to develop international co-operation, with a view to the implementation of joint and bilateral measures for the protection of the Arctic environment, particularly within the framework of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the existing bilateral agreements;

15.3. to continue the discussions and consultations on economic, environmental, scientific and technological cooperation so as to enhance the effectiveness of the environmental protection measures in view of the foreseeable more intense exploitation of the Arctic's natural resources;

15.4. to take into account the Arctic region's particularities and the need for specific environmental management schemes when devising and implementing national policies for the protection and management of the natural environment;

15.5. to develop sustainable natural resource management strategies by taking measures aimed at:

15.5.1. safeguarding the Arctic region from any form of uncontrolled development and non-sustainable exploitation of its natural resources;

15.5.2. eventing the increased risks of pollution arising from the economic exploitation of the region and its natural resources;

15.5.3. managing growth in regional tourism in a sustainable, environmentally friendly manner.

16. Lastly, the Assembly encourages in particular the Arctic Council to adjust the existing environmental protection strategies and programmes, devise new ones and implement them bearing in mind the plans for intensive exploitation of the Arctic's natural resources.

B. Explanatory memorandum, by Mr Vladimir Grachev

1. Introduction

1. At a time when the natural resources of the shelf zone of the Arctic Ocean and the adjacent coastal territories are being intensively exploited for the benefit of European countries, environmental protection in the Arctic is an important task not only for the Russian Federation but for all European countries. The environmental security of the countries situated within the geographic zone influenced by the Arctic region must be ensured based on the principles of economic equivalence of costs, such costs being scientifically justified and necessary to accomplish the task. Alternative production methods, alternative technologies for developing natural deposits and territories and environmental protection measures should be agreed upon and approved in advance. With a view to achieving the optimum cost/benefit balance, the development of the Arctic region should be based on systems-analysis methods and a targeted planning approach.

2. The aim of this report is to identify appropriate ways of co-ordinating joint activities in environmental protection in the Arctic region, including co-operation with the UN agencies and other international organisations.

2. Identification and consideration of the unique geographical features of the Arctic region in a context of intensive economic development

3. The Arctic region embraces the north polar zone including the Arctic Ocean and the coastal zones of the adjacent continents of Eurasia and North America. In terms of physical geography, its border is defined by the 10ºC mean July isotherm. The Arctic region encompasses the territories, continental shelf and special economic zones of eight Arctic states.

4. Unlike other regions, the Arctic is characterised by:

– extreme natural and climatic conditions for human survival and economic activity;

– human survival and economy completely dependent on supplies (fuel and food) involving complicated transport arrangements (by air and by sea);

– the extreme vulnerability of the environment, and its low self-purification and self-recovery capacity;

– unique natural systems which provide living environments for the numerically small indigenous peoples of the north.

5. The Arctic Ocean and the adjacent seas are unique marine ecosystems. Some of them are among the most productive in the world and, as well as supplying many species of migrating birds with food, are a source of income for the major fishing fleets of the countries of the Arctic region.

6. The Arctic region is where the major atmospheric flows, sea and river currents converge. These flows and currents are a crucial factor in the long-range transport of pollutants and their possible accumulation in the region, due to the natural ability of the marine environment to absorb pollutants from air, ocean currents, coastal rivers and sea ice.

7. Something that poses a serious threat to Arctic ecosystems is global warming, which in polar regions is occurring ten times faster than the global average. Symptoms of global climate change include unstable weather, catastrophic floods, avalanches and mudslides.

8. The reduction in sea ice observed in the Arctic Ocean in the 20th century occurred against a backdrop of significant annual and multi-annual atmospheric variability. In 2005, when temperatures in the Arctic region north of the 65th parallel were the highest since record keeping began in the mid-19th century, the area of the sea ice in the northern hemisphere in September decreased to its lowest level since satellite, and hence more accurate, observation began.

9. The layer of Atlantic water in the Arctic Ocean has increased and become warmer. Over the past decade, land snow cover in the northern hemisphere has been reduced. There are some indications that precipitation in the Arctic region increased in the 20th century. Also, the mass balance of ice in the northern hemisphere was negative, and warming was observed in numerous permafrost areas.

10. There has been an increase in the annual flow of rivers entering the Arctic Ocean, and its seasonal redistribution. In particular, over the past twenty to twenty-five years, the main change in the seasonal flow of rivers in the Arctic Ocean basin has been the marked increase in their water levels in winter. The total annual flow of the six largest rivers in Russia (Pechera, Ob, Yenisei, Lena, Yana, and Indigirka) from 1936, when records began, until 1999 has increased by 7%, and is still rising.

11. Whereas over the entire 20th century the temperature worldwide rose by 0.6ºC, in the Arctic region, it rose by 5ºC. According to scientists, this trend is set to continue, bringing with it the threat of more natural disasters.

12. Due to the low temperatures, the process of self-purification of waters in the Arctic territories is very slow, while permafrost and poor soil inhibit the growth of tundra vegetation.

3. Inventory of sources of negative impact on the Arctic environment

13. Major sources of pollution include the global and regional transport of substances. Global pollution is primarily caused by the transport of pollutants by the Gulf Stream, Siberian rivers and the atmosphere. Regional sources have emerged as a result of industrial activity in the countries of the Arctic region.

14. Heavy metals (mercury, cadmium and lead) make their way into the marine environment via precipitation, river water and local industrial facilities.

15. Recent studies have shown that the content of pollutants (petroleum hydrocarbons, synthetic surfactants, phenols, chlorine organic compounds, polyaromatic hydrocarbons, heavy metals, artificial radionuclides) in seawater, soil, plants and animal and bird tissues remains very low and rarely exceeds the natural regional level or maximum concentration limits.

3.1. Stable organic compounds

16. Virtually all stable organic compounds have been found in the Arctic, although in significantly lower concentrations than in temperate zones. Some substances, however, occur in quantities that could potentially have an adverse effect on certain animal species and humans in the future.

17. The presence of stable organic compounds in the Arctic is accounted for by local industrial activities and long-range transport by air currents.

18. The most severe heavy metal impact on Arctic ecosystems is made by local sources of pollution. Nickel and copper deposition combined with acidification causes serious damage to the soil and ground vegetation.

19. Mercury and cadmium pollution studies have produced some very alarming findings. Despite the fact that their concentrations in all environments are within established maximum limits, according to some estimates, they could soon impact on the health of certain animal species and the humans who consume them.

20. The amount of mercury is on the rise both in lake and seabed sediments. Its concentration has apparently also been increasing in the tissues and organs of some sea mammals over the past twenty to thirty years. This is thought to be due to the increasing global flow of mercury which settles and accumulates in the Arctic owing to the cold climate.

21. In some regions of the Arctic, in particular Greenland and western Canada, the increase in mercury concentration has been aggravated by high natural levels, due to local geological conditions.

3.2. Acidification

22. Acidification of the Arctic ecosystems is, at present, a sub-regional problem. The main source of acidification is precipitation containing sulphur and nitrogen oxides. Most of the waste is deposited in the vicinity of industrial facilities, but the air pollution can travel tens of kilometres from the emission source. Average annual excess concentrations have been observed for six substances: sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, nitrogen oxide, phenols, suspensions and formaldehyde.

3.3. Hydrocarbons

23. One major threat to the Arctic environment, related to hydrocarbons pollution, comes from oil and natural gas extraction and transportation. Local damage to the marine environment is caused by the dumping of oily water from ships. The main oil and gas fields are located in the Norwegian shelf, south and north of Alaska (United States of America), the Mackenzie region (Canada), and the Russian Arctic. In the near future, the development of discovered oil fields may begin in the Barents Sea, on the western coast of Greenland, and in northern Alaska. Drilling sludge/mud also poses a threat to the marine environment during oil extraction.

24. One major hazard when developing oil fields is oil spills in the case of tanker and pipeline accidents.

25. Oil and other man-made pollution changes the structure of ecological communities throughout the entire basin. Shifts in environmental parameters have led to a reduction in the reproduction of biological material at every stage of the food chain, and to a decrease in commercial fish stocks and catch levels.

3.4. Radioactivity

26. Potential hazards in terms of radioactive pollution in the Arctic by man-made radionuclides include nuclear power plants, nuclear-powered fleet bases and maintenance sites and radioactive waste handling, storage and temporary burial facilities.

27. Careful study of radioactive environmental pollution has shown that the highest concentrations of radionuclides in the Arctic region occurred in the 1960s, mostly as a result of above-ground nuclear weapon tests, underground atomic explosions, tests for civilian purposes, spent nuclear fuel storage and radioactive waste burial.

28. Today, the main sources of man-made radioactive pollution in the Arctic are global fallout from above-ground nuclear weapon tests and emissions from European nuclear fuel processing plants.

29. Overall, the findings show that the situation with regard to radioactive pollution in the Arctic remains stable.

3.5. Pollutants carried by sea currents

30. It is generally acknowledged that in addition to the large amounts of pollutants from land-based sources, situated within the territories of the sub-Arctic states, polluted waters carried by sea currents, primarily the Gulf Stream, are having an ever more noticeable impact on the Arctic seas.

4. Environmental protection activities in the current context of intensive economic development of the Arctic region

31. The Arctic is becoming the scene of intensive economic development, with oil and gas fields being explored and developed on the shelf and oil terminals being constructed.

32. Given the extremely low self-purification and self-recovery capacity of Arctic ecosystems, a special approach is needed when planning future economic activities, and in particular when developing new oil and gas fields both on land and on the continental shelf of the Arctic seas, all of which requires an environmental impact assessment and environmental protection feasibility study.

33. At the same time, a number of specific outstanding issues need to be addressed, most notably past leaks of radioactive substances, the disposal of nuclear submarines and arrangements for handling nuclear waste and spent nuclear fuel.

34. The most common challenges facing the northern territories include building sewage treatment plants, improving water supplies for settlements and establishing a toxic non-radioactive waste processing system.

35. Something that could have a major positive impact on the environment is the introduction of state-of-the-art energy efficiency and energy saving technologies.

36. In 2006 the Russian Federation embarked on a project devised by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to support the National Plan of Action for the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (NPA-Arctic), as a model regional programme of action to prevent land-based sources of man-made pollution from having a negative impact on the marine environment. It is worth noting that the NPA-Arctic project is the largest UNEP project under way in Russia today.

37. The first step under the UNEP/GEF project has been to frame a Strategic Action Programme (SAP), which provides for specific measures to tackle the most pressing environmental protection issues in the Russian Arctic, with deadlines for their implementation and an estimate of the cost of the work. The SAP is expected to be approved by the relevant federal executive authorities and executive authorities of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. The SAP has now entered the final development stage and will be presented shortly at national level.

38. In the course of preparing the SAP, the first strand of the project was implemented, namely a comprehensive diagnostic analysis of the state of the Russian Arctic environment. Pre-investment studies, which are the second strand, have also been carried out, providing a detailed justification for an optimum set of environmental protection measures requiring significant investments. It is planned to develop environmental recovery measures, which could be implemented by the Russian Federation and the funding partners, in particular those from the Arctic countries.

39. An improvement in the Environmental Protection System (EPS) for the Russian Arctic is expected to follow from the SAP and will constitute the first stage of its implementation. The EPS will include changes and improvements in the legal, administrative, institutional and industrial sectors, which will be implemented within the SAP.

40. The EPS is the third main strand and should pave the way for the development of a comprehensive legal framework for environmental protection, sustainable natural resource management and the judicious and environmentally sound development of the non-renewable resources of the north. This strand is particularly important as it will ensure that the SAP is implemented at both federal and local levels.

41. The fourth and final strand includes three demonstration projects, which are to serve as a basis for the wider application of environmental recovery and damage prevention methods in the Russian Federation and other states, both Arctic and non-Arctic. The first demonstration project is aimed at creating the necessary conditions for joint environmental protection management by executive authorities, extraction companies and the indigenous peoples of the north. The second project will demonstrate the opportunities for using seaweed to decontaminate seawater while the third will deal with the ecological rehabilitation of decommissioned military facilities with a view to converting them to civilian use.

42. In addition, a whole series of smaller pilot projects has been considered and approved within the framework the NPA-Arctic project. These were proposed by local authorities in certain regions and are aimed at improving the environmental situation in enterprises, waters and communities situated within their territory.

43. The NPA-Arctic project is expected to have a positive impact on the state of the environment in the Arctic at international level, especially the Arctic Ocean basin and its shelf seas, and to contribute to the implementation of two important international agreements: the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) and the Global programme of action for the protection of the marine environment from land-based activities.

44. As a member of the Arctic Council, Russia advocates forging relations on an equitable basis, through implementation of the programme for assessing each country’s contribution to the pollution and degradation of Arctic ecosystems. Such contributions can effectively be determined via statistical observation of total emissions of pollutants from stationary sources, emissions from mobile pollution sources, marine and land-based discharge of waste water, hazardous waste generation and unsustainable land management.

5. Arctic sites requiring special protection

45. Much of the Arctic consists of landscapes which have been virtually unchanged by human activity, and where the traditional environmental management methods practised by indigenous peoples have been preserved. Research into little-developed regions of the Arctic has shown that all types of landscapes and the individual components thereof (soil, vegetation, animal tissues) are polluted with chlorine organic compounds, which typically build up in food chains and, as a result of biological accumulation, reach significant concentrations in animal tissues. The highest concentrations of chlorine organic pesticides have been found in north-eastern areas, that is, in places where they have never been used. This confirms the important role

played by tropospheric transport in carrying pollutants from more southerly latitudes (Europe, South-East Asia, North America) and the extent to which these enter land and marine ecosystems through precipitation. Some transport of pollutants occurs through migratory birds (which bring polyaromatic hydrocarbons from western Europe and chlorine organic compounds from South-East Asia).

46. One pressing question facing the Arctic today is how to combine non-intensive traditional environmental management, as practised by the numerically small indigenous peoples of the north, with modern intensive forms of natural resource development. Some of the areas inhabited by indigenous peoples are currently of major interest to the extraction companies, whose activities have a destructive effect on traditional environmental management systems. Yet as we all know, not only are these more traditional systems not damaging, but they also actively help preserve the quality of the environment and the cultural values of the ethnic groups concerned.

47. Intensive industrial impact on the environment leads to depletion of the resources on which traditional environmental management systems rely. Thousands of square kilometres of reindeer pastures and fishing grounds have been lost. This, combined with heavy metal emissions, has led to serious disruption to or complete destruction of plant ecosystems for tens of kilometres around iron and steel plants. The impact of these factors, however, can scarcely be observed outside the 200-kilometre zone around such enterprises.

48. Conservation areas and other specially protected areas in Russia are the most efficient way to protect Arctic biological diversity. At present, Russia has 12 specially protected natural areas of federal significance in the Arctic, including 11 conservation areas and the Franz Josef Land Federal Nature Reserve. In addition, 23 regional nature reserves and a number of other specially protected areas of regional significance have been established in the Arctic zone.

49. In all, specially protected natural areas make up about 5% of the total area of the Russian Arctic.

50. The functioning of Russia's state conservation areas and national parks depends, to a large extent, on pre-existing facilities and staff and their enthusiasm. Today, without additional support, the stable functioning of conservation areas as a key factor in sustainable development and the preservation of biological diversity could be seriously undermined.

6. Conclusions

51. The environmental protection issues facing the Arctic region can be successfully resolved only through the joint efforts of all the Arctic states within the framework of the Arctic Council. In our view, there is a need to adjust, further develop and implement strategies and programmes to protect the environment, taking into account plans for the intensive development of the Arctic's natural resources.

52. Another equally important task is to develop international co-operation in the implementation of environmental protection activities within the framework of the Barents Euro-Arctic Regional Council and bilateral agreements.

53. The long-standing co-operation between Russia and Norway is a successful example of bilateral co-operation on environmental protection and sustainable development in the Arctic, while a good example of multilateral co-operation would be the implementation of the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in tackling global warming.

54. When framing and implementing national environmental protection and management policy, due consideration must be given to the unique characteristics of the Arctic, as a region requiring the development and introduction of special environmental management arrangements. A primary consideration when devising economic development programmes, therefore, must be the need to maintain the sustainability of Arctic ecosystems, as the key element in the global environmental balance.

Reporting committee: Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs.

Reference to committee: Doc. 10769 and Reference No. 3222 of 29 May 2006.

Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 20 December 2007.

Mr Ivan Brajović, Mr Mauro Chiaruzzi, Mrs Pikria Chikhradze, Mr Valeriu Cosarciuc, Mr Osman Coşkunoğlu, Mr Taulant Dedja, Mr Hubert **Deittert**, Mr Tomasz Dudziński, Mr József Ékes, Mr Savo Erić, Mr Bill **Etherington**, Mr Nigel **Evans**, Mr Iván Farkas, Mr Adolfo **Fernández Aguilar**, Mr György Frunda, Ms Eva Garcia Pastor, Mr Konstantinos Gioulekas, Mr Peter Götz, Mr Vladimir **Grachev**, Mr Rafael Huseynov, Mr Stanisław Huskowski, Mr Jean **Huss**, Mr Fazail İbrahimlı, Mr Ilie **Ilaşcu**, Mr Mustafa Ilicali, Mrs Fatme Ilyaz, Mr Ivan Ivanov, Mr Bjørn Jacobsen, Mr Gediminas **Jakavonis**, Mrs Danuta Jazłowiecka, Mr Victor Kolesnikov, Mr Juha Korkeaoja, Mr Gerhard Kurzmann, Mr Dominique Le Mèner, Mr François Loncle, Mr Aleksei Lotman, Ms Kerstin Lundgren, Mr Theo Maissen (alternate: Mr John **Dupraz**), Mrs Maria Manuela **de Melo**, Mr José Mendes Bota, Mr Vladimir Mokry, Mr Stefano Morselli, Mr Tomislav Nikolic, Mrs Carina **Ohlsson**, Mr Pieter Omtzigt, Mr Germinal Peiro, Mr Ivan **Popescu**, Mr Cezar Florin Preda, Mr Jakob Presečnik, Mr Lluís Maria **de Puig**, Mr Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando, Mrs Adoración Quesada Bravo (alternate: Mr Gabino **Puche**), Mr Dario Rivolta, Mr René **Rouquet**, Mrs Anta Rugāte, Mr Fidias Sarikas, Mr Hermann Scheer, Mr Andreas **Schieder**, Mr Mher Shahgeldyan, Mr Steingrímur J. Sigfússon, Mr Hans Kristian Skibby, Mr Ladislav Skopal, Mr Christophe Spiliotis-Saquet, Mr Rainder Steenblock, Mr Vilmos Szabó, Mr Bruno Tobback, Mr Nikolay **Tulaev**, Mr Victor Tykhonov, Mr Tomáš Úlehla, Mr Rudolf **Vis**, Mr Harm Evert Waalkens, Mr Mykola Yankovskyi, Mrs Maryam Yazdanfar, Mr Blagoj Zašov, Ms Rodoula Zissi.

NB: The names of those members present at the meeting are printed in bold.

See 4th Sitting, 22 January 2008 (adoption of the draft resolution, as amended); and Resolution 1596.