Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1596 (2008)[1]

Protection of the environment in the Arctic Region

Parliamentary Assembly

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.) and the livelihood of its inhabitants, including the indigenous peoples.

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 joint strategy and programmes to guarantee the preservation of an environment favourable to human beings and the many plant and animal species unique to the region.

7. The Assembly expresses its support for the work of the Arctic Council, both as an important forum for increased mutual understanding and co-operation in the circumpolar area, and for the contributions it has made to the well-being of the inhabitants of the Arctic.

8. 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 nuclear-powered vessels in a state of disrepair, nuclear-powered lighthouses and nuclear waste dumped at sea or in unsafe storage sites.

9. The Assembly points out that co-operation in the Arctic region has recently made good progress, as witnessed by increased circumpolar co-operation by indigenous peoples, organisations and sub-national governments, as well as bilateral and multilateral co-operation. In bilateral terms, for instance, Norway and the

1. *Assembly debate* on 22 January 2008 (4th Sitting) (see Doc. 11477, report of the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, rapporteur: Mr Grachev). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 22 January 2008 (4th Sitting).

Russian Federation have for many years been implementing very active co-operation measures, and some areas of the two countries already enjoy special protected status. In multilateral terms, region-building with nations as major actors, focusing on the Arctic Council, is a case in point. All are important to foster peace and stability through sustainable development of economies and local communities.

10. 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.

11. 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.

12. The Assembly is convinced that international co-operation, along with a significant investment of funds, is the only means both of managing many of the challenges resulting from climate change in the region and taking advantage of new economic opportunities for the benefit of all states in the region, while preserving the environment and promoting sustainable development of local communities.

13. 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 as well as the United Nations. This is of particular importance with regard to the human dimension of the Arctic, not least its indigenous peoples. Both economic development and environmental protection are essential for the benefit of the people in the Arctic. In order to strike a balance between economic development, environmental protection and sustainable development of local communities, the Assembly supports the continued work of the Arctic Council regarding the human dimension, such as the work on Arctic social indicators that will supplement the human development indicators of the United Nations to better reflect the realities of life in the Arctic region.

14. The Parliamentary Assembly draws attention to the Northern Dimension Policy of the European Union, Iceland, Norway and the Russian Federation. This policy provides for increased opportunities and additional resources for environmental protection as well as for sustainable development in the Arctic region. Good results have already been achieved through the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership as well as through the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being. The establishment of a new Northern Dimension partnership in transport and logistics is now being explored.

15. It welcomes the initiative taken by the Russian Federation during its chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2004- 2006) to declare 2007-2008 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 cooperation in the region, particularly for environmental protection purposes.

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

17. In this context the Assembly calls on member and observer states of the Council of Europe in the Arctic region to:

17.1. 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;

17.2. endorse the efforts to follow up within the Arctic Council and other international forums the findings of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), and in particular to identify and share adaptation expertise and best practices unique to the needs and conditions of the Arctic;

17.3. 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 agreement and international conventions;

17.4. continue the discussions and consultations on economic, environmental, scientific and technological co-operation so as to enhance the effectiveness of environmental protection measures in view of the foreseeable more intense exploitation of the Arctic’s natural resources;

17.5. 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;

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

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

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

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

18. 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.

19. The Assembly stresses the importance of improving well-being and eradicating poverty among indigenous peoples and other Arctic residents, and the need for their inclusion in decision making in relation to policy planning and implementation. The Assembly notes that the position of indigenous people is a priority in the programme for the Russian presidency of the Barents-Euro-Arctic Council from 2007 to 2009.