

Joint Arctic Council and European Commission Seminar

Brussels 7 July 2004

The Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council organised a joint seminar on Arctic Issues with the European Commission in Brussels on July 7 2004. The Seminar was held in the EFTA headquarters and was co-chaired by Mr. Thórir Ibsen Deputy Head of the Icelandic Mission to the EU and Mr. Alistair MacDonald Head of Unit, DG Relex.

The aim of the seminar was to explore possible synergies and areas for co-operation between the Arctic Council and the European Commission on issues concerning the Arctic. The seminar was attended by representatives of the European Commission (DG Relex, DG Environment, DG Research, DG Regio and the Joint Research Center), representatives and experts from the Arctic Council, and representatives from the Missions of Arctic Council members states to the EU. The list of participants is attached.

In an introductory statement of the Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, the importance of the relations between the Arctic Council and the European Union were stressed; relations that were both of institutional nature and related to shared interests. The Arctic Council had followed closely the development of the Second Northern Dimension Action Plan and had the opportunity to contribute to its elaboration. One of the objectives Iceland set when assuming the chairmanship of the Arctic Council two years ago, was to seek a stronger co-operation with the EU, not merely on the policy level, but also on projects in areas where both the Arctic Council and the European Commission were working. To signal this intention, one of the first acts of the Icelandic chairmanship was to meet with representatives of the EU Presidency. Subsequently a contact was taken with DG Relex to explore the possibility of a joint seminar on Arctic Issues. In preparing this seminar the Arctic Council identified a number of projects that are currently being undertaken by the Council that could form a basis for further co-operation between the Arctic Council and the European Commission. Some of these projects, which had been presented in writing to the various Directorate Generals of the European Commission with the help of DG Relex, would be presented in more detail during the seminar. It were the sincere wish of the Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council that this seminar would be the beginning of fruitful co-operation of the Arctic Council and the European Commission on the development and implementation of concrete projects in the Arctic Region.

DG Relex during an introductory statement underlined the importance the EU puts on Arctic issues. This is seen for example under the Northern Dimension with the Arctic as a cross-cutting issue, to ensure that key priorities relevant to the Arctic such as the environment and nuclear waste, economic development and human resource development are given proper attention. A seminar such as this gives an important opportunity to learn about each others' activities, to share results, to provide the opportunity to identify "gaps" to be further addressed, and to develop networks and contacts among all actors. DG Environment in a brief introductory statement underlined the importance of the Arctic as the climate memory of the past, and the Commission's interest in further research, noting also the importance of knowing more of the costs arising from climate change and mitigation efforts. DG Research stressed the support provided to Arctic issues under the Framework Programme for RTD and in its coming Calls for Proposals. DG Joint Research Centre stated that its interests in security and reliability of energy supplies, climate change (monitoring and measurements of methane releases in permafrost and wetland areas), fisheries monitoring and mapping of boreal forests and tundra had important Arctic components that should be exploited. Importantly, impacts of climate change is of common interest to these areas of study.

A series of very informative presentations were made at the seminar on a number of current projects and areas of work of the Arctic Council, including the Arctic climate impact assessment, human development, environmental monitoring and assessment, and protection of the marine environment. The agenda of the seminar is attached.

There was a general consensus that closer co-ordination and sharing of information would certainly bring mutual benefits to the work of the Arctic Council and of the European Commission. Such co-operation might focus on circumpolar issues of global significance and should permit the proper involvement of a wide range of stakeholders.

An exchange of views addressed possible areas for co-ordination, identification of shared interests and the approach towards areas of common interest. A large number of areas were mentioned by participants as suitable for further elaboration, including for example:

- Identification of areas of common interest and potential synergy, e.g. impact assessments of climate change that link the Arctic to central regions of Europe and Eurasia supported by long term

monitoring initiatives and selected field studies in relation to for example the permafrost areas.

- Parallel efforts to support Marine Protection Strategies which all countries should have an interest to support. All the EU member states are already covered by this strategy, which should form a strong platform of support within the Arctic Council, make possible a more proactive support and involvement.
- Co-ordination and information-sharing in relation to on-going activities is important. The actors have to find a flexible and well-adapted way of promoting co-ordination and easy access to information.
- A wide range of funding sources was mentioned at the seminar. These available instruments must be explored thoroughly to ensure that arctic issues can be given their proper priority there.
- The potential that is offered by the upcoming International Polar Year (2007) could be further elaborated and exploited by the participants including the EC.

A number of new project initiatives were emphasised that should be exploited by key stakeholders: the Environmental Network for the European and Russian Arctic Region (ENERAR); European-Russian-Ukrainian GMES NETwork for Monitoring of Oil Spills and Oil & Gas Pipelines (ERUNET); GMES (Global Monitoring for Environment and Security) that offers a broad platform for co-operation on data gathering and information exchange.

Participants expressed their thanks to the Arctic Council and the Icelandic Mission to the European Union for having taken the welcome initiative to organise this seminar.