

ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE NORTHERN DIMENSION

The aim of a Northern Dimension to EU policies is further development of regional cooperation in northern Europe and a greater role of the EU in existing organizations, especially in the Baltic Sea area and the Barents region. The need for better coordination in cross-border cooperation is underlined, as well as the effective use of available financial instruments, those of the EU in particular. The Northern Dimension policies aim at providing added value by the EU in various fields of regional cooperation, such as energy, nuclear safety, environment, trade, transport and communications, health and other social issues. An important element of the Northern Dimension is the recognition of the positive interdependence between Russia and the Baltic Sea area and the European Union.

RESULTS THROUGH DIALOGUE

A key event in the Northern Dimension process will be the Ministerial (foreign ministers) Conference on the Northern Dimension, to be held in Helsinki on November 11-12, 1999. The Conference was welcomed in the Conclusions of the Cologne Summit, and an action plan for the Northern Dimension has been recommended.

Environmental contamination in the Baltic Sea area and the Arctic is on the increase. The worst affected areas are located in Northwest Russia, the Baltic States, and Poland, where air emissions and water discharges from energy generation, industrial plants and traffic, along with untreated municipal sewage, agricultural pollution, toxic substances, heavy metals, and poor waste management, are significant environmental hazards. Other serious problems are nuclear power stations with inadequate safety measures, the storage of radioactive waste and spent nuclear fuel, and contaminated soil. New threats are also emerging, adding to the prevailing dissatisfactory situation. These include increased risk of environmental accidents and loss of natural habitats and biodiversity.

The Interim Report by the EU Commission on the Northern Dimension (December 1998), as well as the Guidelines and the Cologne Conclusions provide a good basis for the strengthening of environmental cooperation between the EU and its northern neighbours, particularly in the Baltic Sea area and the Barents area. Cross-border cooperation is strongly underlined in the report. More effective use of technical assistance and investment support is expected for projects spanning the Russia-Baltic and Russia-Poland borders, as well as for border projects between the EU and the partner countries. This is an important political element of the Northern Dimension, and particularly relevant to the environmental cooperation. Interdependence and the need for intensified cooperation is probably easiest to demonstrate in the field of the environment. The intensified cross-border cooperation also reflects the important political objectives of the Northern Dimension, such as enhancement of public participation, democracy and political stability.

The priority of the Northern Dimension should continue to be the environment - together with nuclear safety. In addition, promoting the integration of environmental considerations into all economic activities, in the energy, transport and forestry sectors in particular, is important. High

environmental standards, including the implementation of environment impact assessment (EIA) procedures should be a prerequisite for investments and intensified exploitation of natural resources. Special attention should be paid to

- solving acute environmental problems in Northwest Russia, the Baltic States and Poland, for example, municipal waste water treatment, waste management and air pollution abatement;
- ensuring sustainable development in energy, transport, land use planning, forestry and trade policy with special emphasis on the sustainable use of natural resources; and
- institutional strengthening of environmental authorities as well as enhancement of environmental awareness.

INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

Environmental cooperation has a long history in Northern Europe; for this reason, there is a lot of information on existing problems and on bilateral and multilateral action programmes for solving or mitigating the problems. Among the important regional cooperation organizations and processes are the (Pan-European) Environment for Europe, Agenda 21 for the Baltic Sea Region, the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and the (circumpolar) Arctic Council. The enhanced participation by the EU in the environmental cooperation - in the context of the Northern Dimension - will necessarily focus on these and also some other organizations.

On the initiative of the Nordic Council of Ministers (ministers of environment), the European Commission will prepare a review on the environmental component of the Northern Dimension. Information will be compiled on activities within the sphere of the Baltic Sea and Barents regional environmental action programmes as well as on projects identified by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic international financial institutions. Additionally, the review will take into account the Pan-European Project Preparation Committee (PPC) and potential programmes of international financial institutions for Russia, the Baltic States and Poland. The first draft of the review is expected in time for the Ministerial Conference on the Northern Dimension in November 1999.

SPECIFIC POSITION OF RUSSIA

In the case of the Russian Federation, bilateral relations with the EU are governed by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). The PCA also is the framework for the environmental cooperation. The implementation of the PCA will increasingly direct the TACIS programme, which is the EU's most important financial instrument regarding support to Russia, in the Northern Dimension context, as well. The EU also has an important new instrument, the Common Strategy on Russia, adopted by the European Council in Cologne. In theory, the Common Strategy and the Northern Dimension are different instruments, but in practice they are supplementary and mutually supportive. The work plan of the Common Strategy, to be agreed for every presidency, is also essential for the implementation of the Northern Dimension.

NORTHERN DIMENSION AND THE PRIORITIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

Priorities for action in the EU's Northern Dimension policies must reflect the interests of the EU and its member countries, as well as those of the Baltic States and Poland. Norway and Iceland have also shown interest in participating.

In the environmental sector, Russia also considers the Northern Dimension as an opportunity for improving the functioning of the environmental administration and for stimulating cooperation with the EU. Russian environmental authorities hold that particularly environmental safety must be part of any intensified economic activities.

Finland, and the Ministry of the Environment, propose the following projects, programmes and programme areas as priorities:

- St. Petersburg water and environmental services improvement project;
- Development of the water and sewage sectors in Northwest Russia;
- Solid and hazardous waste management in St. Petersburg and in the Leningrad Region - with special attention on the remediation of contaminated soils;
- Environmental problems in Northeast Estonia;
- Pre-accession water supply and wastewater projects in the Baltic States, including transboundary issues;
- Development of sustainable forestry and the conservation of biological diversity in Northwest Russia.

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