

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Union policy for the Arctic

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. welcomes the joint communication published by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 27 April 2016 and believes that the priority areas for a future integrated EU Arctic policy outlined in the communication are a step in the right direction;
2. stresses that the challenges facing the Arctic region require concerted efforts at local, regional and international level, and praises the Commission for ensuring that integrated policies to help meet regional needs and objectives are based on the region's specific geographical and demographic characteristics;
3. notes that this is the third communication on the Arctic region. In the first Commission communication, published in 2008, proposals were made for measures to protect and preserve the Arctic region, based among other things on various environmental agreements and international cooperation. In addition, measures were proposed to promote sustainable use of resources and a multilateral governance model in the Arctic region. The purpose of the communication was to promote a structured and consistent approach to Arctic matters and to open new cooperation perspectives with the Arctic states;
4. notes that in 2012 the Commission published a joint communication with the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in which the possibility of new transport lanes (including the North-East passage) opening up due to climate change and improved potential for sustainable resource use based on new technology and knowledge come to the fore to complement a strong environmental protection dimension. The communication also highlights the importance of international cooperation to underpin peace and security;
5. wishes to highlight the three priorities for a future integrated EU policy set out in the latest communication: climate change and safeguarding the Arctic environment, sustainable development in and around the Arctic and international cooperation on Arctic issues. One of the biggest challenges is to find a balance between ensuring environmental well-being and exploiting the fresh opportunities afforded by socioeconomic development;
6. notes that the communication continues with approaches previously set out in relation to climate and the environment, sustainable development and regional cooperation. The CoR's opinion seeks to draw particular attention to those issues which received less attention in the previous communications (such as socioeconomic matters) or which have been singled out as new priorities;
7. supports the communication's objectives on regional security, stability, sustainable development and prosperity. The communication gives a full picture of EU activity in the Arctic region. Sustainable development remains central to EU policy in relation to the Arctic dimension, but increasing mention is also made of the ability to adapt. The communication states that future activities should highlight the traditional living environments of those living in the region, as well as the impact of economic development on the Arctic's fragile environment. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that the communication strongly underlines the need to enhance coordination in matters relating to the Arctic region;

8. points out that the communication considers the Arctic region from two different perspectives. Looked at from Europe's perspective, Europe's northernmost regions are located in the Arctic region and are characterised by their remoteness, challenging conditions, and sparse and ageing population. From an overall Arctic perspective, the communication highlights natural resources (minerals, forests, the maritime economy and fisheries), highly developed communities and solid know-how, for instance when it comes to developing environmentally sustainable technological solutions. The analysis set out in this opinion focuses on the European perspective;

9. notes that in the Commission's communication the term 'Arctic region' covers the area around the North Pole, north of the Arctic Circle (latitude 66 degrees, 32 minutes North). This includes the Arctic Ocean and territories of the eight Arctic states: the United States, Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation and Sweden. Greenland and the Faroe Islands, which have a large degree of autonomy but are officially part of Denmark, are not part of the European Union but have signed fisheries and trade agreements with the EU. Greenland also has the special status of being an EU overseas territory. A total of 4 million people live in the Arctic region, of which around one third are members of indigenous groups;

10. points out that the definition of the Arctic region used in the communication refers very narrowly to the region north of the Arctic Circle. The impact of the EU's integrated policy will extend far beyond this region. The Committee of the Regions proposes that the geographical definition of the Arctic region given in the communication be broadened, in light of issues such as promoting sustainable development, adapting to climate change and fostering European competitiveness and taking account of the needs and potential of local communities and indigenous populations;

Climate change and safeguarding the Arctic environment

11. considers it significant that climate change mitigation and adaptation, together with protection of the fragile Arctic environment, are very prominent among the policy measures presented in the communication. On top of the consequences of the warming of the Arctic region that also have an impact on EU activity, it is important to note how European and global action has an effect on the progression of climate change in the region. The global climate agreement will have a significant impact on the future of the Arctic region as well. The communication also draws attention to other international agreements or the need to conclude such agreements, including in the sphere of environmental protection;

12. recognises the importance — both now and in the future — of the research activity and scientific collaboration relating to the Arctic region which are highlighted by the Commission. The EU-PolarNet initiative set out in the communication is a good example of wide-ranging, significant scientific cooperation involving universities and research institutes from across Europe. The initiative is aimed at strengthening interdisciplinary cooperation and determining scientific priorities over the short and long term with respect to research into the Arctic region. In this connection, the network's proposed objective is to broaden cooperation with Arctic stakeholders. The Committee of the Regions believes that, when deciding on the goals and means of carrying out research into the multidimensional reality of the Arctic region, it is particularly important for there to be cooperation with local and regional representatives too;

13. would like to place greater emphasis on the role played by Arctic towns and cities in development work. Towns and cities are key players in this work and in adaptation to the changing context. Investments in municipal infrastructure and energy-efficient solutions, for example, and the solutions needed for public services especially in sparsely populated regions are giving rise to new business activities. The Committee of the Regions points out, however, that the particular challenges posed by long distances, sparsely populated areas and an ageing population will continue to require special attention within the framework of development policy;

Sustainable development in and around the Arctic

14. views sustainable exploitation of natural resources as a key aspect of sustainable economic growth and efforts to increase prosperity in the Arctic region. A prerequisite for this is efficient transport and telecommunications links. It is important to develop more comprehensive north-south transport connections, such as the TEN-T connection from Finland to the Arctic Ocean via Norway, as well as east-west connections to link regions in northern Norway, Sweden and Finland to the EU's transport network. Investment in the Arctic region — including investment in roads, railways, broadband and electricity networks — generally ripple out into the broader region and so have a positive impact on business conditions throughout the country in question, including those in industry;

15. highlights in this regard the EU's Blue Growth strategy, which promotes long-term, sustainable maritime development. Measures included in the strategy that are associated with marine knowledge, maritime spatial planning and integrated maritime surveillance are being promoted in the Arctic Ocean too. Development measures linked to promoting aquaculture and exploiting maritime energy are of particular importance in the Arctic region;

16. stresses that harnessing Arctic know-how in relation to industry, energy, 'cleantech' and infrastructure development, as well as tourism, will boost the competitiveness of Europe as a whole. It is important to promote research cooperation between Arctic universities and research centres. Promoting innovation, and turning it into products and commercial services, is particularly in the spotlight as a means of furthering sustainable development. Enhancing the business environment in the Arctic region is an aspect of implementing the digital single market strategy;

17. points out that the priorities for the EU's 2014-2020 cohesion policy programming period in the Arctic region are research and innovation, the competitiveness of SMEs and transition to a low-carbon economy. Northern regions' smart specialisation strategies and, in terms of cross-border cooperation, the Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic, Interreg Nord, Botnia-Atlantica and Sweden-Norway programmes — aimed at creating robust, competitive and sustainable communities — will provide a strong basis for projects in the EU's Arctic regions financed via the Structural Funds. The EU's external border programme Kolarctic CBC will also support cooperation with the northern regions of Finland, Sweden and Norway as well as the Barents region;

18. stresses that implementation of the future cohesion policy should also make a variety of financial instruments available for development efforts in the Arctic region, instruments that can be used to find ways of promoting local industry, and for improving the know-how, innovation, products and services that enhance the competitiveness of the EU as a whole. New issues that are of central importance include developing the circular economy in the Arctic, as well as the general concept of Arctic design. It is important for the EU to be closely involved in research and investment activity in the Arctic region, including in the future programming period;

19. highlights the communication's reference to the potential of new technology associated with electronic communications, for instance in maintaining and developing local business, know-how and culture. This is especially important for the representatives of indigenous people. The communication mentions the Commission's annual meetings with representatives of indigenous peoples of the Arctic region. Taking the views of Arctic indigenous people into account and involving them in decision-making is particularly important, including in national and regional affairs;

20. welcomes the strong emphasis on the importance of cooperation in implementing an integrated policy for the Arctic. Another issue highlighted is the need for more effective use of the various funding instruments to promote investment in the Arctic region, which is why the Commission proposes a temporary forum for European cooperation in the Arctic (European Arctic stakeholder forum). Representatives of the EU institutions, Member States and local and regional authorities are invited to take part in this cooperation forum, whose role is to determine key investment and research priorities for EU funding up to the end of 2017. The Committee of the Regions proposes that the precise configuration and remit of the forum be specified, as the forum is still in its initial stages;

21. proposes that, as part of the cooperation forum's work, the Commission put together a guide on the funding opportunities available in the Arctic region (as was the case for the EU's Baltic Sea Strategy) and that it provide information on the subject through various events and networking meetings. This should also include providing input, alongside the work carried out by the European Arctic Stakeholder Forum, to the annual Arctic forum, which the Commission proposes to set up as of 2018;

International cooperation on Arctic issues

22. views promoting international cooperation as one of the key issues in the communication. The growing strategic significance of the Arctic region may lead to conflicting interests, meaning that close international cooperation will become even more important. Arctic cooperation takes place in the framework of several existing structures. The Arctic Council is a

leading intergovernmental forum which promotes cooperation on Arctic issues between countries, indigenous communities and other people living in the Arctic region. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Barents Regional Council work to promote stable and sustainable development in the Barents region. EU Baltic Sea cooperation is also linked to the overall framework of Arctic cooperation;

23. stresses the importance of ongoing cooperation with Russia in the framework of the Northern Dimension. The possibilities for bringing enterprises, researchers and citizens together afforded by cooperation have helped develop specific environmental, business and cultural projects;

24. believes it is important for existing cooperation structures to be used in working towards the goals of the communication. The EU is actively involved in the work of various international organisations and forums. It has applied for observer status on the Arctic Council, and it is important for the Member States to push for the completion of this process;

25. finally, notes that the Arctic region's strategic importance to the EU is increasing all the time, as is the need for the EU to take steps to overcome the challenges posed by the Arctic region's natural environment and specific socioeconomic conditions. The EU should promote cooperation between Member States and non-EU countries to ensure the stability of the Arctic region's overall environment. It is important to bolster the integrated approach not least by seeking out links and synergies between the various funding programmes and other funding tools. Local and regional authorities must be involved in key programmes and projects to promote regional cooperation, transport links and sustainable economic development in the Arctic region.

Brussels, 8 February 2017.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*

Markku MARKKULA
