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"Arctic footsteps in Brussels"

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

9th Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region

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Madam Chairman, Honourable members of the Arctic region parliaments and European Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking you for your invitation to open the deliberations here today.

As a former parliamentarian myself, I am especially pleased to be here for your ninth session.

Your Assembly is living proof of the political importance of Arctic issues.

Moreover, it is a welcome reminder of the high quality of democratic debate in the Arctic regions.

Your meeting today is taking place well outside the Arctic Circle. I am well aware that your choice of venue and the invitation from our host, the European Parliament, owes nothing to chance.

Indeed, the European Union is an Arctic player in its own right. A unique combination of history, geography, economics and scientific discovery link the European Union to the Arctic. Three EU Member States – Denmark (with Greenland), Finland and Sweden are partly located in the Arctic. In the case of Denmark, Greenland is an Arctic overseas territory outside the European Union with strong ties to it. Two Arctic States – Iceland and Norway – are members of the European Economic Area. And, as you know, Canada, Russia and the United States are strategic partners for the European Union.

European policies in areas such as the environment, climate change, energy, fisheries and transport have a direct bearing on the Arctic regions.

The EU's Integrated Maritime Policy, which I am in charge of steering, on behalf of the Commission, recognises that all sea basins have their own specific features. So we work to deliver tailored solutions for each of them.

This is especially true when we look at the Arctic region

The environmental changes, affecting the Arctic, will have an impact on its populations.

Whatever the future holds, one thing is certain: these changes and the opportunities that the Arctic offers, are set to impact greatly on the daily lives of Europe's citizens, in the not-too-distant future.

The Arctic regions are extremely vulnerable to current and projected climate change. The impacts of this will produce feedbacks, that will have globally significant consequences. That affect global climate and thus human populations and biodiversity. Strong global action against climate change is more urgent than ever.

Arctic nature - and the people living and working in the Arctic, have been among the first to suffer. For their sake and ours, the European Union will continue to lead the fight against climate change. A real global effort is needed, to keep us below the dangerous threshold of a 2°C global temperature increase

That is why we must work together to tackle the challenges we face.

Since 2008 the Commission has sought to structure an EU policy for the Arctic, around three main axes:

First, protecting and preserving the Arctic. This is something that affects each and every one of us – and not least the populations of the Arctic regions.

Second, enhancing governance in the Arctic, by helping enforce and build on the relevant agreements and other arrangements

And third, promoting the sustainable use of resources, in accordance with the highest environmental and safety standards. That is an absolute priority.

As the search for oil and gas, continues, the recent – and ongoing – disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, has made us realise, just how vulnerable and fragile our marine ecosystems are. The potential impact of a similar accident in Arctic waters, hardly bears thinking about. I firmly believe that making any activities on the continental shelf as safe and responsible as possible, is a common responsibility. Much knowhow exists in the EU, on polar research and technology, safety and oil response. It would be a missed opportunity not to capitalise, on this expertise. Let us make sure, such accidents do not occur – in the Arctic or beyond.

Our concern for sustainable resource management, applies also to fisheries. Fish stocks are moving northwards. The retreating ice is opening up once inaccessible fishing grounds. This situation calls for moves to establish sound and sustainable management measures. And with a sizeable fishing industry and the world's largest market for seafood products, the European Union must be at the forefront of such moves.

We must keep a close eye on the development of maritime transport in the Arctic, as well. This year's September Arctic sea-ice level is approaching the 2007 all-time low. Last year two German ships made the first commercial passage through the northern sea route, along the Russian coast. Following this example, this year's ice-free season is seeing many such commercial passages. And we have already seen a collision between oil tankers on this route.. EU Member States combined have the world's largest merchant fleet, so many of the vessels passing through Arctic waters will come from the European Union. It is my firm conviction that fair and reliable access, in accordance with international law, must be matched by high environmental standards for Arctic shipping.

Ladies and gentlemen, Members of Parliaments;

How effectively we address these challenges, will depend greatly on our willingness to communicate and cooperate. The better our understanding of the social, economic and cultural needs of the other side, the more effective and sustainable our solution will be. The EU and its Member States are already the largest contributors to Arctic research and highly committed to the fight against climate change. Let us build on these commitments in a climate of collaboration.

The Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region has a key role to play, in making the voice of the Arctic heard in Europe. It has an equally important role, in explaining how relevant the EU is for the Arctic region as a whole.

To conclude, I would echo the words of Bruce Jackson, the distinguished writer, photographer and filmmaker: "The fact that the Arctic, more than any other populated region of the world, requires the collaboration of so many disciplines and points of view to be understood at all, is a benefit rather than a burden". Let us work together to ensure that this is true.

I wish you all a successful conference.

Thank you.