

Speaking points:

Mr Chairman, let me first express how much I appreciate being an invited guest at this SAO meeting. I know that many aspects of your deliberations are of great interest to the European Commission, particularly since your work is of relevance also to important EU policies, notably the so called Northern Dimension.

I would like to make a few comments on the Northern Dimension and its links to the Arctic Council. Let me first say that the Commission considers the agreement reached at the Helsinki Northern Dimension Summit in Helsinki in November last year as a major achievement. The two basic documents adopted at that summit set up a new Northern Dimension policy, which we are looking forward to implement.

The main new element in this reformed ND policy is that it is - from now on- a common policy of its four partners: EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland. The observer status of Canada and the US is confirmed and is highly valued.

With the new Northern Dimension framework all partners will have an equal stake in its success. At the operational side, this means that co-financing will be the rule. This is the logical consequence of the increasing wealth of Russia. The possibility of setting up new Northern Dimension partnerships, along with the existing ones on Environment and Public Health, will be discussed in the near future, as foreseen in the ND Political Declaration. Canadian and US participation in such partnerships would be appreciated and would reinforce their relevance.

However, the Northern Dimension should not only be project-oriented, it should ensure a continuous policy dialogue on the various challenges and opportunities in the North. The four

Northern Regional Councils -the Baltic, the Barents, the Nordic and the Arctic Councils- are important actors in this dialogue and receive a prominent position as participants in the ND.

The other main new characteristic of the Northern Dimension is that it is the regional expression in the North of the EU/Russia Common Spaces, with involvement of Norway and Iceland. The Northern Dimension will also have its own priorities: health and social well-being and the protection of indigenous peoples in the High North, as well as a special emphasis on the fragile environment and on culture.

The geographical priority areas of the new Northern Dimension are the Arctic and the Baltic (and in particular the Russian Kaliningrad oblast) and the Barents Sea. The policy will remain focussed on co-operation with North West Russia, with a view to gradually closing the economic, social and environmental gaps across the external borders of the EU. Cross-border cooperation will remain its major added value.

We hope that the Northern Dimension will be perceived as a policy shared by all its stakeholders, including the Arctic Council; each one with its own geographical coverage and particular interests. Furthermore, for us the Arctic Council represents a valuable additional transatlantic link between Europe and America, besides its important circumpolar characteristic.

We would like to maintain and intensify our cooperation with the Arctic Council. Several of its priorities and activities are of great importance for the European Union, in particular the environment, climate change, transport and indigenous peoples. The International Polar Year 2007/2008 is of great importance to us. The EU, through its 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme for Research and Development, is contributing with several programmes and projects to its success, perhaps most the “Damocles” programme, which is focussed on the effects of climate change

in the Arctic. It is, in effect, the largest of all projects endorsed by the International Polar Year.

In conclusion, Mr Chairman, let me say how much I appreciate having had the opportunity to attend this SAO as an invited guest.