

PROPOSAL OF THE SAAMI PARLIAMENTARY COUNCIL ON EU ARCTIC INFORMATION CENTRE

1. Introduction

The Saami are the only indigenous people in the European Union whose status has been recognised in the EU Accession Treaties for Sweden and Finland. The Saami live in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia, and – depending on the calculation method – it is estimated that there are around 75,000 to 100,000 of them. The rights of the Saami as indigenous people are included in the scope of the EU's internal and external policy. In Sweden, Norway and Finland, the Saami are represented by elected Saami Parliaments. In Russia, the Saami are represented by Saami organisations because the Russian Saami do not have a parliamentary body. The Saami Parliaments have established an official Community body, the Saami Parliamentary Council (SPC), to secure and promote the rights and status of the Saami in international issues in particular. The Russian Saami organisations participate in this cooperation as observers.

2. Proposal of the Saami Parliamentary Council

The European Commission approved the following statement on 20 November 2008: the European Union and the arctic region. In this statement, the EU commits to continuous dialogue with indigenous peoples living in arctic regions. Furthermore, the statement notes that the EU should ponder about how participation of the indigenous peoples can be arranged as part of the EU Northern Dimension policy. Another objective of the statement is establishing an arctic EU information centre. The Finnish Council of State has proposed establishment of the EU Arctic Information Centre in Rovaniemi, Finland in connection with the Arctic Centre already operating there.

SPC supports EU's intention of establishing an arctic information centre and considers it appropriate for the centre to be established within the arctic region. SPC also supports the proposal of the Republic of Finland to establish the arctic information centre in Rovaniemi. SPC hopes that Sweden and Norway will also support this objective. SPC offers its expertise at the disposal of the EU to promote participation of indigenous peoples as part of the EU Northern Dimension policy.

In SPC's opinion, the proposed scope of duties for the information centre is too limited. SPC considers development of the EU arctic policy especially important and proposes that issues related to original peoples be listed among the main tasks of the information centre. The centre should be responsible, in particular, for establishing dialogue with the arctic indigenous peoples in compliance with the Commission's arctic statement. Dialogue would be facilitated if the centre were located within the arctic region. SPC points out that in order to achieve genuine dialogue, the Commission should ensure the opportunity of the indigenous peoples to participate in the dialogue by providing the necessary resources. SPC proposes including the centre as part of EU's external administration so that it could, in its part, ensure EU's internal and external policy relations with the indigenous peoples as well as coordinate educational and research issues pertaining to the indigenous peoples. This would be possible because the Secretariat of

the University of the Arctic is located in Rovaniemi. The centre's tasks should also include development and promotion of the status of the languages of the arctic indigenous peoples as part of the EU activities. The centre should cooperate with already existing arctic information units handling issues pertaining to indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the tasks should include climate change issues as well as cooperation between the EU and the Arctic Council. In addition, SPC hopes that the activity of the centre would also take into account implementation of the articles pertaining to indigenous peoples in the Convention on Biological Diversity ("CBD"). Articles 8(j), 10(c) and 15 of the CBD refer to indigenous peoples, and it would only be natural that the CBD implementation and promotion tasks of the Commission in relation to these issues were transferred to Rovaniemi.

SPC proposes that one sector in the European Union structural fund programmes was securing the vitality of the Saami living areas, ensuring opportunities of the Saami to promote their culture and improving the status of traditional Saami livelihoods. One task of the EU Information Centre should be taking into account the Saami aspect in EU funding and indicative programmes. SPC considers the EU InterregSápmi sub programme important but insufficient. Promoting the Saami culture should be a comprehensive objective as part of the EU funding programmes.

The General Assembly of the United Nations approved a declaration pertaining to the rights of indigenous peoples in 2007¹. All EU member states and Norway voted in favour of the declaration. The declaration ensures autonomy of the indigenous peoples² and their right to participate in decision-making in issues pertaining to them.³ In the opinion of the Saami Parliamentary Council, the EU should implement the declaration pertaining to indigenous peoples in its internal and external policy, and ensure the opportunity of the Saami to influence matters to the extent specified in the declaration. SPC is of the opinion that the arctic information centre in the scope required by SPC would support implementation of the declaration. SPC stresses the fact that cooperation between the EU and SPC must be improved to reach the obligations of the arctic statement and the indigenous peoples declaration.

SPC considers environmental protection and climate change issues the most important matters that the EU should take into account when considering the tasks of the arctic information centre apart from the indigenous peoples respect. Climate change and environmental policy must be principles included in all activities of the EU. For indigenous peoples, preventing climate change, mitigating the disadvantages caused by climate change and the right to utilise clean nature in its original state are also human rights issues. The livelihoods of the arctic indigenous peoples are based on natural resources and their sustainable utilisation, and if the natural resources are destroyed or climate change prevents their utilisation, the future of the original peoples' culture is endangered. SPC considers it especially important for the tasks of the EU Arctic Information Centre to include environmental and climate change issues.

¹ A/RES/61/295

² Article 3: Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

³ Article 18: Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

Article 19: States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.

The Board of Directors of the SPC hopes that the Commission and the states of Norway, Sweden and Finland will support the SPC proposals and commit in promoting the proposals at the national and international level. SPC hopes that the EU and SPC will start close cooperation in developing the arctic and indigenous peoples policies of the EU. The Saami Parliamentary Council hopes to receive replies as soon as possible. If necessary, the Secretariat of the Saami Parliamentary Council will provide additional information.

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Appendix: The Saami Parliamentary Council's Climate Policy Strategy