



EVENT REPORT

From Changing Polar Regions to Policy Responses

STRENGTHENING EU AND GLOBAL CLIMATE PREPAREDNESS

Hosted by MEP Urmas Paet
24 January 2024



OPENINGS

MEP URMAS PAET

Vice Chair of the Arctic Working Group at the European Parliament Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development



“Climate change in the Arctic has tremendous consequences for the economic and security picture, but environmental and climatic changes should retain our main peak of attention and positive action.”

In his opening speech, MEP Mr. Paet focused on the **multipronged impact of climatic and environmental changes in the Arctic region in the EU** and across the globe. In the last two years, global events have diverted the attention from the environmental dimension of the EU’s Arctic policy, and hindered international cooperation in the Arctic. Against this background, the EU must **enhance collaboration with its European and North American partners both on a scientific and political level**. In addition, **awareness of the impact of climate change in the Arctic needs to be raised** to demand stronger action from the political class. The MEP also stated that policymakers and interest groups should **reinforce the credibility of the EU’s Arctic policy** by treating Arctic actors equally instead of concentrating criticisms on their own European partners.

PRESENTATION 1: ARCTIC PASSION

DR. MICHAEL KARCHER

Project Coordinator of Arctic PASSION and Senior Scientist at the Alfred Wegener Institut



“Mitigation and adaptation to the consequences of the changing Arctic environment demand decision-making that is based on the best available information.”

Dr. Karcher presented Arctic PASSION, an EU-funded project aiming at advancing an Arctic observing system bridging the gap between the current sparseness of data on the Arctic and the provision of information required for knowledge-based decision-making in the region. The rapidly changing Arctic environment has massive consequences for environmental and human ecosystems in the Arctic region and beyond. Collaborating with +40 partners including Indigenous communities, the project strives to **enhance observation and coordination** for pan-Arctic action, to **advance the inclusion and visibility of all knowledge systems**, and to **develop services supporting emergency preparedness and responsiveness to changes**. Dr. Karcher called for sustained political support by the EU to improve the coordination of Arctic observation systems and long-term funding, for a more equitable, unified, and sustained observing system.

PRESENTATION 2: OCEAN:ICE

DR. RUTH MOTTRAM

Project Coordinator of OCEAN:ICE, Danish Meteorological Institute and the initiator of OCEAN:ICE



“The Polar regions are changing fast, and the consequences of these changes are moving fast as well.”

Referring to an anomalous heat wave that occurred in the Antarctic region in March 2023, Dr. Mottram explained that extreme **climate events in Antarctica are accelerating the melting of ice shelves and the creation of glaciers, with a direct impact on global sea levels** and knock-on consequences on the ecology of the area. Similar extreme weather events have occurred in Greenland, signaling that both **Polar regions are undergoing rapid climatic and environmental changes**. In this scenario, OCEAN:ICE’s goal is to **develop better projections to understand the current situation, foresee future extreme events, and enhance preparedness**.

DR. ANDREW MEIJERS

Science Leader of the Polar Oceans Programme at the British Antarctic Survey



“Roughly a billion tons of carbon is taken up every year around the Southern Ocean. Understanding how this process might change in the presence of climate change is critical for understanding how the changes in the Southern Ocean and the Antarctic will impact our environment.”

Dr. Meijers highlighted the fundamental importance of the Southern Ocean (SO), Antarctica, and the interaction between the two, for future developments of climate change and sea level rise. Most of the world’s human-generated heat and carbon are, in fact, taken up by and stored in the SO. Associated increases in heat being delivered to ice shelves is leading to the melting of the Antarctic ice sheet, **prompting dynamic feedbacks and, potentially, a rapid system collapse**. Critically, current models of sea level changes do not take into account these accelerating factors because of the lack of structured observing systems, making the prediction of future sea level rises extremely uncertain. OCEAN:ICE aims to observe **the relations between subpolar ocean, heat delivery, and ice shelf dynamics** with the ultimate goal of **producing new projections of sea level rise, improving regional and global climate models, and directly cooperating with policymakers for long-term planning**.

PANEL DISCUSSION

ELISABETTA BALZI

Head of Unit 'Healthy Ocean & Seas' (RTD.B.4), DG RTD, European Commission



“We are planning to invest on both poles and to support connecting activities to have the largest impact and act quickly. We need to join forces and be effective as fast as possible.”

Ms. Balzi opened the panel discussion by positioning the **EU as a major global player in Polar sciences** and presenting some of the most relevant EU projects in this field. The EU has proved able to ensure **long-term coordination and visibility for climate change observation in the Polar regions**: the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe initiatives have already funded a vast portfolio of projects for a total of EUR 520 million. In all these endeavors, the importance of shaping projects around the **knowledge and needs of Indigenous communities** remains at the core of the EU’s approach. Ms Balzi also underlined that both poles hold a strategic significance from a research innovation perspective. Although it is important to recognize regional specificities, **cross-polar activities** such as the EU Polar Net and the Atlantic Ocean Research Innovation Alliance are crucial for pooling the necessary resources for an impactful Polar action.

CLARA GANSLANDT

Special Envoy for Arctic matters, European External Action Service (EEAS)



“The ongoing transformation in the Arctic region will be immense. The EU will support the inclusive and sustainable development of the Arctic regions to the benefits for those living in the Arctic.”

Ms. Ganslandt explained that the EU Arctic Policy, as expressed in the 2021 Joint Communication by the High Representatives and the Commission, aims to contribute to a **safe, stable, sustainable and prosperous Arctic**. There are important structural factors currently at play in the region: geopolitics and climate change. Climate change is the most comprehensive threat to the Arctic and to the Globe. But it also generate new opportunities in e.g. the field of shipping, critical raw materials extraction and renewable energy production. Understanding developments in the Arctic regions will be key in the fight against climate change. **The Arctic has the potential to play a key role in achieving sustainable value chains for raw materials, just green transition and developing strategic autonomy**. The EU will work to strengthen strategic foresight and cooperation with like-minded global partners and to advance international efforts in environmental regulation, while supporting sustainable development in the region. Asked about the possibility of an EU Antarctica policy, Ms. Ganslandt recalled the uniqueness of their respective challenges and supported the view expressed in the report to the Parliament recommending keeping Arctic and Antarctic policy fields separated to ensure the specific expertise.

INUUTEQ HOLM OLSEN

Head of Mission / Minister Counsellor, Greenland Mission to the EU



“One main difference between the Arctic and Antarctica is that you won’t hear any complaint in the Antarctic. In the Arctic, you have to make a bigger effort to connect to people living around the area where the researchers work.”

In his intervention, Mr. Olsen focused on the importance of ensuring that **Indigenous people are not only the object but also the subject of research projects in the Arctic region**. In this regard, the Greenland Government’s 2023 **Research Strategy** was developed with the specific goal of creating better synergies between external researchers and Greenlandic research institutions and local communities. Not only it is necessary to enhance transparency in terms of information gathering and sharing, but also to **incorporate Indigenous needs and generational knowledge into decision-making processes about Arctic policies**. For instance, Greenland will insist on a greater focus of research projects on the ocean dimension, as it represents an essential element of its economy and history. Mr. Olsen also asserted that, from a project perspective, engaging with people from the very onset and not just showing up with a finished product guarantees a much better outcome for both sides and that the needs of local communities are to be assessed case by case, without recurring to ineffective one-size-fits-all solutions.

CLOSING REMARKS

MEP URMAS PAET

Vice Chair of the Arctic Working Group at the European parliament Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development



“What we witnessed so far is that raising awareness is very connected to the fact that something bad already happened. In Arctic issues, we still have the chance to be faster in decision making and action before that happens.”

MEP Mr. Paet closed the event by remarking that **raising awareness about the impact of climate change on the Arctic and Polar regions is essential for making commonsense-based decisions** for the future. Looking back at past global challenges such as the COVID pandemic and the 2022 energy crisis, a bad pattern of only acting after negative events have occurred instead of developing preventive actions can be noticed. In the case of the Arctic, the negative scenarios can still be avoided. Therefore, it is important to educate policymakers and the broad public by explaining to them that Polar regions are not distant places that have nothing to do with us; instead, they are the site of crucial developments for climate change, geopolitics and human security.