

Report of the OSCE PA Special
Representative on Arctic Issues
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2021-2022

Foreword

As my predecessor rightly outlined in her report, climate change must be viewed as a climate crisis. We are in an emergency situation as scientists continue to raise the alarm us about the fast pace of the devastating impact of climate change which is gradually leading to human suffering. According to WWF, “we lose Arctic Sea ice at a rate of almost 13% per decade, and over the past 30 years, the oldest and thickest ice in the Arctic has declined by a stunning 95%.”¹ As we are facing a climate emergency in the Arctic and beyond, we must stay focused on achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement² as well as recently adopted Glasgow Climate Act³ at COP26 aimed at prioritizing climate change issues and strengthening national climate targets.

This report explores to what extent climate change in the Arctic affects indigenous communities, flora, and fauna. It also examines current economic, environmental and political developments in the Arctic region and urges relevant stakeholders to take immediate actions that go in line with the international commitments.

While we still can prevent and address existing issues in the Arctic, we should bear in mind that what is happening in the Arctic does not stay there, it goes beyond and has effects on the rest of the world.

This report is not an expert–scientific report, nor it is in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s mandate and resources to provide concrete responses to the fight against the climate crisis in the Arctic and beyond. However, we do have the capacity to generate political thrust around this topic, push it to the top of our national and international policy-making agendas, listen to science, and support – urgently and decisively - current frameworks for global climate negotiations.

1 [WWF, Six ways loss of Arctic ice impacts everyone](#)

2 [Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#)

3 [Glasgow Climate Pact to the United Framework Convention on Climate Change](#)

Overview of political developments

Despite attempts to approach the Arctic region as an area of cooperation rather than competition, it remains vulnerable to geostrategic interests of great powers, particularly amid global crises, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine. Due to extremely high temperatures, the ice caps are melting in the Arctic and the region is becoming the target for rivalry among superpowers who are willing to pursue exploitation of new shipping routes alongside new fishing, drilling, mining opportunities that give access to the Arctic's untapped resources. Not only states, but also transnational companies strive to establish their presence and extract as many resources as possible while damaging the delicate flora and fauna of the Arctic region.

Another geopolitical challenge that needs to be addressed is the re-emergence of an Arctic security dilemma fueled by the increased military presence in the region. These trends are also accompanied by the big melt of the Arctic, which opens up an entirely new theatre in the event of military contestation. This fuels discussion of the prospect of an 'Arctic great game' for control of the region.

According to DIIS, there are a few scenarios of potential power contestation foreseen in the Arctic.¹ The first one is about the region itself - e.g. competition for parts of the Arctic seabed, the extraction of Arctic natural resources and access to new Arctic sea routes.

In the second scenario, major political actors vie for power and the Arctic becomes just one piece in a larger political game.

In addition, there are risks of sub-threshold or grey-zone threats, the cyber domain and information operations, for all of which the Arctic represents a potentially fertile arena. The advent of new weapons technologies such as hypersonic weapons also promises to affect the military balance in the region, as does the potential role of the space domain.

The war in Ukraine means that an increase in military activities and rearmament is inevitable. New conflicts and tensions as well as shifting power balance could have a spillover effect on the political situation in the Arctic area. Despite the revival of intense military interest in the Arctic, the international community should be committed to the idea of 'Arctic exceptionalism': namely, that the Arctic should be kept free of military conflict and insulated from geopolitical spillover spread by the great power contestation.

During the Cold War, the Arctic was declared as a 'zone of peace' and it should continue to be protected from increased military activity as a low tension zone through confidence building and strengthened cooperation. Cooperation on Arctic science and soft-security issues, such as search and rescue, and disaster management and response, has proved to be a successful example of cross-border cooperation and effective trust- and confidence-building mechanisms. Therefore, the role of the Arctic Council as well as other dialogue platforms, where Arctic related issues can be discussed, is paramount. Against this backdrop, recognizing the urgency of the issue, multilateral diplomacy and fostering cooperation in times of increased tensions are essential to combat the climate crisis.

¹ [Danish Institute for International Studies](#)

Overview of the latest trends in climate change and its impacts

Climate change impacts in the Arctic are already occurring at a magnitude and pace unprecedented in recent history and much faster than projected for other world regions. The latest IPCC report warns that by 2050 the Arctic will become profoundly different under all warming scenarios.¹

The Arctic together with the Antarctic is seen as a flagship area for climate change since some of the most extreme climate change impacts forecasted to take place by mid-century elsewhere in the world have already been observed in these regions and have resulted in unparalleled changes.

The Arctic region is warming up to four times as fast as other regions in the world, according to recent research.² The region has warmed at approximately three times the global average rate from 1960 to 2020, with the region's surface temperature increasing by more than 3 degrees Celsius.³

Temperature extremes yielded some unprecedented impacts on the Arctic environment, including the first rainfall observed at the top of Greenland's glacier. The warming has also caused the rapid melting of sea ice. According to recent forecasts, summer sea ice could disappear entirely as early as 2035.⁴

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- 1 [Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)
 - 2 [The Arctic is warming four times faster than the rest of the world](#)
 - 3 [Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress](#)
 - 4 [Arctic summer sea ice could disappear as early as 2035](#)

ARCTIC WARMING NEARLY 3°C (5°F) SINCE THE MID-1960s

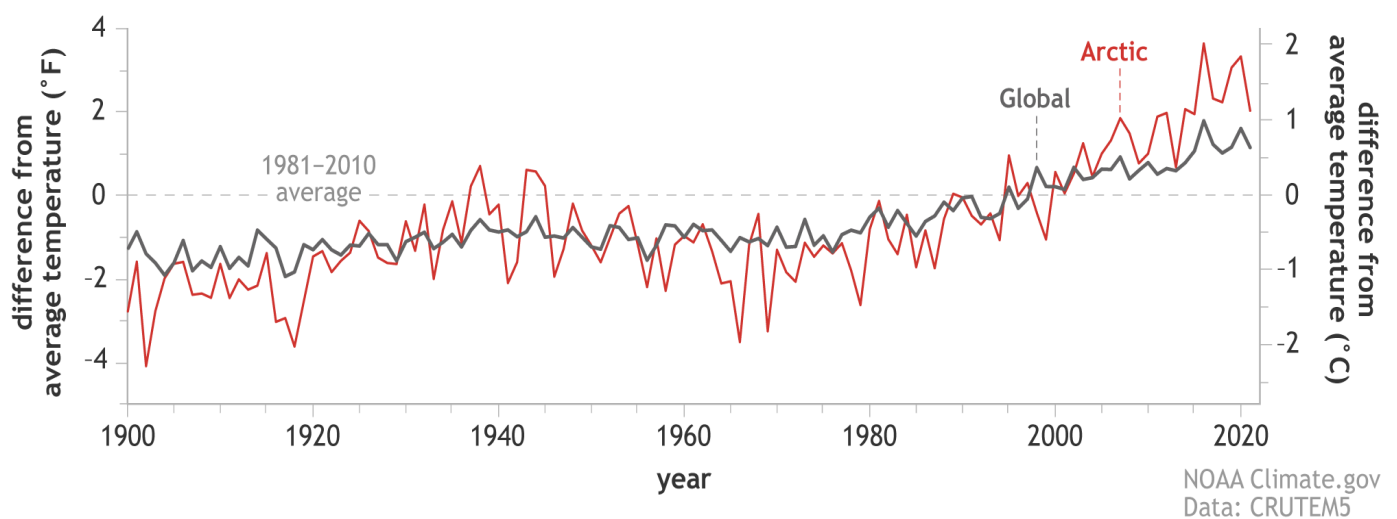


Fig 1. Arctic warming compared to the global average from 1900-2020¹

1 [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 2021 Arctic Report Card](#)

ARCTIC SEA ICE EXTENT, 1979–2021

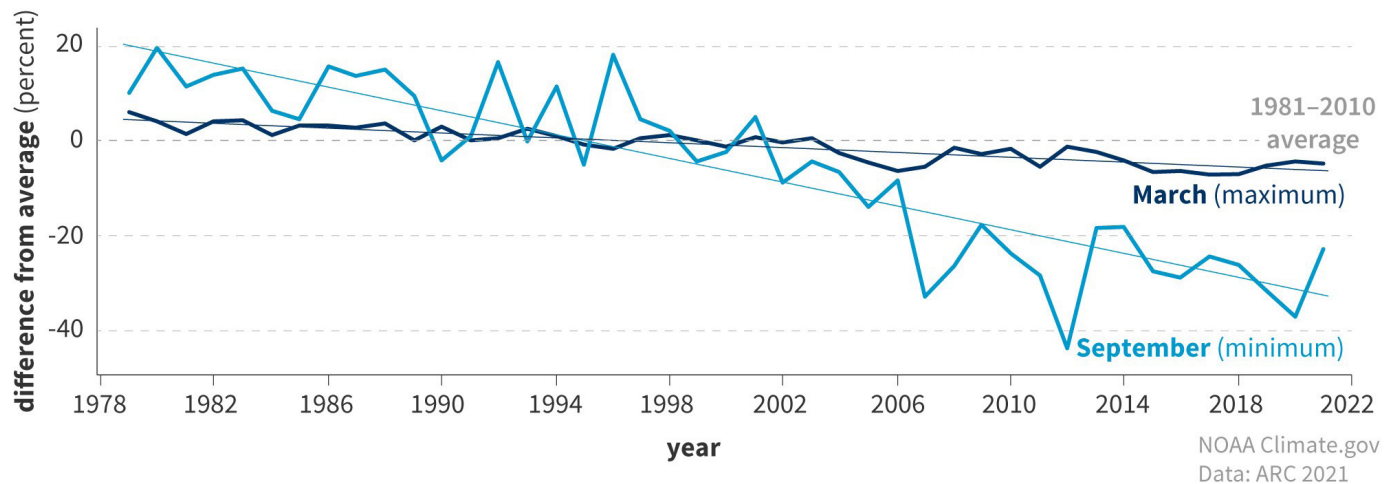


Fig 2. Percent difference from average sea ice extent in the Arctic at each year's summer minimum in September (bright blue) and winter maximum in March (dark blue) from 1979–2021.¹

¹ [NOAA 2021 Arctic Report Card](#)

This is happening in addition to the retreating glaciers and thawing permafrost that are causing local and regional scale hazards as well as ocean acidification that is depleting marine resources like fish, according to the latest NOAA report.¹ The Arctic Ocean is acidifying faster than the rest of the global oceans, which threatens the entire ecosystem that the ocean supports.

Alongside this, the loss of sea ice diminishes the Arctic's ability to cool the global climate. It can also alter lower latitude weather systems to an extent that makes previously rare and impactful weather events, like droughts, heat waves, and extreme winter storms, more likely.²

The persistent melting of the Greenland ice sheet and other land-based ice is raising seas worldwide, exacerbating the severity and exposure to coastal flooding, disruptions in drinking and waste water systems, and coastal erosion for more communities around the planet.³

Furthermore, permafrost stores large amounts of carbon that once released will inevitably exacerbate global climate change. Even under low levels of global warming, permafrost thawing could represent the emissions of a medium-sized country. Scientists warn that melting permafrost and its effects in the Arctic and Antarctic are no longer an early warning, but drivers of the global climate change.⁴

Inevitably, as climate change evolves, massive changes in agricultural, hunting, herding, fishing patterns, and both natural and artificial land destruction result in a lack of land to continue traditional indigenous lifestyles, creating a threat to indigenous people's culture.

¹ [Ibid](#)

² [Arctic Answers Brief. How is rapid Arctic warming influencing weather patterns in lower latitudes?](#)

³ NOAA 2021 Arctic Report Card

⁴ [If you're not thinking about the climate impacts of thawing permafrost, \(here's why\) you should be](#)

The damage done by the climate crisis goes beyond the indigenous people and reverberates on a global scale. The fluctuations in temperatures will eventually exacerbate the food crisis. Polar vortices increase heat waves, and the unpredictability of weather caused by ice loss is already causing significant damage to crops, on which global food systems depend. This instability will continue to mean higher prices for everyone and a growing crisis for the world's most vulnerable.

Overall, the Arctic is tethered to societies worldwide through a myriad of exchanges – the natural circulation of air, ocean and contaminants, the migration of animals and invasive species, as well as the human-driven transport of people, pollution, goods and natural resources. In the meantime, the Arctic's climate crisis will alter living conditions, and geopolitical and security dynamics between Arctic states while creating opportunities for economic exploitation and numerous multifaceted threats across the world.

Indigenous communities

The region, which is strongly affected by the climate crisis and growing interest in the Arctic's economic potential, is seeing a structural change in the lives of its population of 4 million people.¹ At present, most Arctic indigenous peoples have become minorities in their countries' Arctic areas, except in Greenland and Canada. While many Arctic indigenous communities remain heavily dependent on hunting, fishing, and herding and are more likely to depend on traditional foods than nonindigenous Arctic inhabitants, there is much variation. Arctic indigenous peoples' political relationships with their national and local governments, and their ownership or claims regarding land, are also significant factors in the responses to Arctic climate change by the indigenous peoples and by Arctic nations' governments.

The economic development may exacerbate Arctic pollution problems, including higher exposure to mercury, air pollution, and food contamination.² Warmer temperatures and longer warm seasons may increase insect- and wildlife-borne diseases. Climate change may lead to damage to water and sanitation systems, reducing protection against waterborne diseases. Changes in Arctic indigenous cultures may increase mental stress and behavioral problems.

Arctic indigenous communities (Inuit and Saami, in particular) have been defined as the “most vulnerable groups”. As climate change unfolds, the traditional lifestyle and overall life of indigenous communities are severely impacted. Given these dynamics, the active involvement and political representation of the indigenous communities in the issues that affect them are required in order to build a sustainable and vibrant future for the local population.

¹ [The Arctic: Opportunities, concerns and security challenges](#)

² Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress

Economic activities and sustainability in the Arctic

As the permafrost thaws and the ice cap melts, climate change paves the way for new economic possibilities as well as imperiling the resilience of the local communities and infrastructure. Warming trends have bolstered the development of the new strategic shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR) which can become an attractive alternative to the Suez Canal Route.

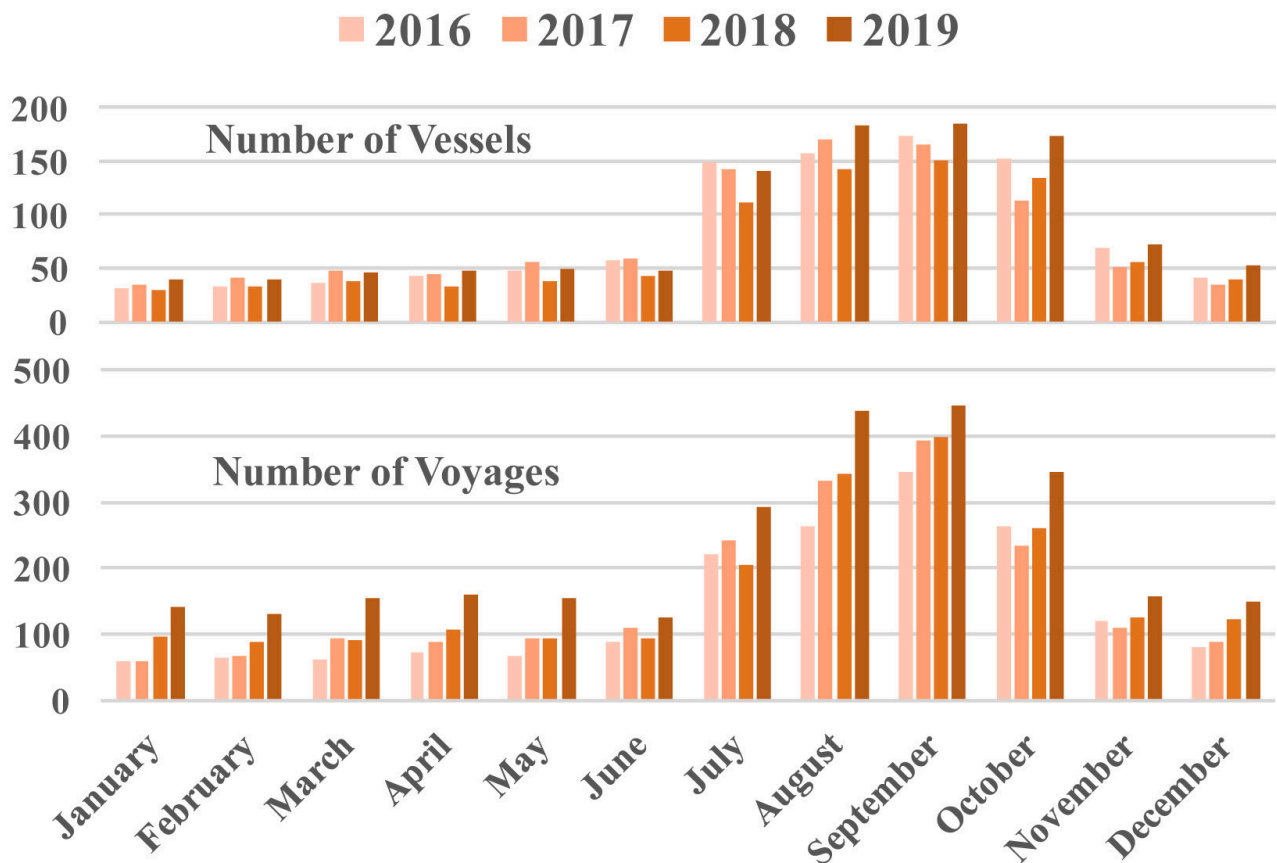
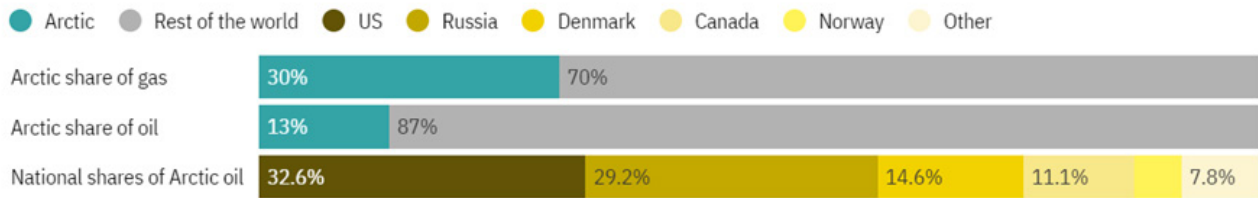


Fig 3. The number of vessels and voyages per month on the Northern Sea Route in 2016–2019.¹

¹ [Recent ship traffic and developing shipping trends on the Northern Sea Route—Policy implications for future arctic shipping](#)

Moreover, Arctic continental shelves might constitute the geographically largest unexplored prospective area for petroleum remaining on Earth, as well as its reserves of hydrocarbons and various minerals. Overall, the shrinking cap of the Arctic has not only created opportunities for mining, gas and oil exploration, commercial fishing, and tourism, but such increased economic development has also generated controversial discussions of its impact on ecology, climate change, local livelihood, and strong competition in the market.



Source: E. Wong, Journal of George Mason University (2013)/US Geological Survey

ENERGY MONITOR

Fig 4. Arctic share of undiscovered oil and gas globally, and national breakdown¹

[1 The enduring threat to the Arctic from Big Oil](#)

Given the harsh living and economic conditions alongside the fragile environmental situation, which is also disrupted by the economic activities in the region, there is a need for a roadmap for the sustainable development of the Arctic region and its inhabitants. The delivery of sustainable development will enhance the community resilience and ensure the environmental protection of the region, eventually resulting in enhanced health and prosperity of Arctic communities.



Annotated Report of Implemented Activities

(August 2021 – present)



Participation in the 2021 Arctic Circle Conference, Reykjavik, 14-17 October 2021

I took part in this event with the two-fold aim of establishing contacts with relevant stakeholders and promoting the report of my predecessor, Torill Eidsheim.



Side Meeting with the EU Special Envoy on the Arctic

The meeting aimed to establish contacts with the newly appointed Envoy as well as receive inputs for my work. Moreover, possible synergies between EU and OSCE activities in the Arctic were also discussed.



Side Meeting with the Chairperson of the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region

The goal of this meeting was to align my efforts as Special Representative to the ones of the Conference and reflect on the best way of bringing the Arctic issues to a wider platform of the OSCE.



Meeting with the Icelandic Senior Arctic Official

The meeting with the outgoing Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, Iceland, was an opportunity to take stock of the chairmanship's achievements and cast a look ahead on the incoming chairmanship and their priorities.



Participation in the COP26, Glasgow, October 2021

I took part in the Glasgow conference primarily in my national capacity while also promoting A Parliamentary Plea for Resolute Climate Action of the OSCE PA General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment.



Organization and chairing of a meeting with OSCE PA Arctic delegations, on-line, February 2022

The informal meeting was held to discuss Arctic policy priorities within the Assembly and in view of proposing a draft supplementary item for the Annual Session



Report to the OSCE PA Standing Committee, February 2022

I reported on my latest activities as Special Representative at the Winter Meeting and proposed a workplan for the near future.



Sponsoring a supplementary item on the Arctic Region at the OSCE PA Annual Session in Birmingham, July 2022

I proposed a draft supplementary item that aims to raise awareness of the current situation in the Arctic, including growing security challenges and climate change impacts on the region.

Conclusion

Instead of proposing to you a work plan, I would like to invite you to think about the future of this mandate and the Arctic policy, in general.

As you have read, the current state of affairs in the Arctic is deeply troubling. The Arctic populations face enormous challenges that cannot be tackled alone. The impacts of the events occurring in the Arctic extend well beyond the region and have undeniable effects on the rest of the world. These issues are interconnected and far-reaching and should not be addressed in silos.

The melting of glaciers, environmental degradation and the plight of Indigenous communities should be a wake-up call for world leaders. It is not too late to slow the melting and prevent the worst repercussions of these trends. However, if we continue our inaction, the window of opportunity might close on us forever.

Unfortunately, climate change and global warming related issues are not the only ones plaguing the region. As the economic potential of the melting ice and increased accessibility of natural resources attracts more political actors, the odds of the Arctic becoming an arena for global contestation in the foreseeable future are impossible to deny. We have a responsibility to get ahead of these trends and use cooperation and dialogue to address both current and emerging security issues.

As the supplementary item I am sponsoring this year suggests, we as parliamentarians have an important role to raise awareness of the Arctic issues and its impact on the rest of the world. Moreover, it is our duty to ensure that our governments follow through their climate-related commitments.

Therefore, I encourage you all to make the best use and coordinate key parliamentary assets - notably legislative, oversight and public awareness capacities – including within international parliamentary fora, to support and provide long-term strategic political leadership to efforts aimed at building resilient, sustainable and climate-friendly societies.

What we need to remember as parliamentarians is that climate change is beyond short-term politics, and we should encourage our parliaments and governments to depoliticize this issue and have a long-standing commitment across all institutions.

Our commitment to climate action should extend to maintaining the Arctic as a low-tension zone. I urge you all to keep the Arctic free of military conflict and insulated from geopolitical spillover spread by great power contestation. Risks associated with climate change must be viewed as interconnecting with regional security and economic interests. The fate of the planet resides in the Arctic. I hope you are up to the task of saving it.

Bryndís Haraldsdóttir



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