Estonia as an aspiring Arctic Council observer state: the Arctic’s inventive neighbour

Estonia is the northernmost non-Arctic country. We are directly affected by developments in the Arctic. With its knowledge, long-time experience in polar research and inventive approach, Estonia has a lot to offer to the sustainable development of the Arctic. This is why Estonia is applying for observer status on the Arctic Council.

Ensuring the sustainable development of the Arctic requires international cooperation and broad-based political support. This should not be the task of Arctic countries alone, instead, it should be the responsibility of all countries and international organisations, especially those close to the Arctic.
Why are we applying?

- **We are feeling the immediate impact of climate change.**
  The Arctic is the litmus test for climate change. July 2020 saw the highest temperature recorded in the Arctic. We need prompt and science-based action. Estonia has proven that when it comes to smart and sustainable solutions, the size of a country is irrelevant. We are located at the Baltic Sea, the test pool for climate change, which means that many of our solutions can be applied quickly in the Arctic.

- **We are close to the peoples of the Arctic in terms of both geography and culture.**
  Our location at the crossroads of many regions, our long-time experience in polar research and our Finno-Ugric roots give us a unique insight into the indigenous peoples of the Arctic and their interests.

- **We bring our expertise to the table.**
  The observer status would allow Estonian scientists to share their expertise on issues related to the Arctic and offer solutions derived from Estonia’s experiences that are needed for the environment, security and welfare of the region. Estonia’s experience in multilateral organisations as a forward-looking, tech-savvy and responsible member of the international community makes us a good candidate for observer status in the Arctic Council.

- **We have smart companies and novel solutions.**
  It is not only Estonian scientists who have a lot to offer when it comes to the work of the Arctic Council. Estonian companies — in fields such as e-health or clean technology — can offer new and efficient solutions for the Arctic.
What makes us suitable candidates?

We have long-time experience in polar research. Many of the early polar explorers of the Russian Empire came from or had links with what is now Estonia. For many decades, one of the focal points in the cooperation between Estonian ethnographers, linguists and folklorists and their Russian, Hungarian and Finnish colleagues has been the indigenous peoples of the Urals, Siberia and the Far East. Our interest in the polar regions has been consistent — as a young independent country, Estonia signed the Svalbard Treaty in 1930. Between 1940 and 1991, Estonian scientists continued polar research and since 1991, we have been committed to Arctic topics on several levels. We are committed to the Arctic also as a member of the European Union. Estonia supports the EU’s Arctic policy and participates in several EU-financed programmes related to the Arctic.

The findings of our scientists can be applied easily in the Arctic. This is demonstrated by the fact that the research initiated and expedited by Estonian scientists in many international programmes (including Horizon 2020) have reached working groups of the Arctic Council. Expertise gained by Estonian universities in polar research is used in research programmes by numerous research institutions and universities in Northern Europe, Russia and other countries. For example, in Estonian territorial waters, rapid changes in ice cover duration and the subsequent reaction in sand and gravel shores as well as changes in extreme water levels offer a rare opportunity to understand, quantify and model how similar changes can affect the Arctic shores.

We have the genes of Northern peoples. The world’s largest genetic database of Siberian peoples is located in Estonia. Relying on our internationally recognised expertise in genetic research and personalised medicine, underpinned by legislative support, we can provide individual feedback on disease risks arising from genetic characteristics and on suitable potential treatment schemes. Estonia can quickly collect and analyse genetic samples of Northern peoples, and consider their genetic characteristics in the prevention and treatment of diseases.

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Seals in the Baltic Sea (Photo: Remo Savisaar)
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We will bring e-Estonia to e-Arctic. Estonia’s experience in and knowledge about the creation of a digital society can help polar communities adopt readily available and cost-effective digital solutions (for example, an e-health system, health information network, patients’ portal and online booking system would make medical services available despite infrastructural limitations). These solutions, in turn, would boost local economy and business.

We are connected by linguistic ties. Our extensive knowledge of the languages of the Northern (Finno-Ugric and Siberian) peoples and expertise in linguistic studies offer an insight into their past processes, including changes in climatic conditions, which cannot be recreated by other research methods. One of the cornerstones of this is the unique common competence of Estonian geneticists, human geographers and social scientists, allowing them to comprehend the processes connected with and affecting the movement of indigenous peoples due to climate fluctuations or social and economic changes.

Our companies can reach the Arctic quickly. In addition to digital solutions providers, Estonia has many companies that can operate and provide output suitable for the Arctic climate and can contribute to the local quality of life. Most of these companies are in shipbuilding, clean technologies, maritime information systems development, fishing, transport and logistics. Monitoring and navigational devices, seamarks, metal items for harbours, geographic information systems, antennae and satellite ground stations produced in Estonia are suitable for Arctic conditions.
ESTONIA:
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