European Commission

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Keynote remarks by Commissioner Síkela at the Arctic Circle Assembly

Reykjavik, 8 October 2026

President Grímsson, Distinguished guests,

Flying towards Iceland is truly impressive - you immediately admire its raw, dramatic beauty.

And just as much as one admires the landscape, one must also admire the resilience of its people.

For centuries, Icelanders learned to thrive in this unique environment and achieving more than much of the rest of the world.

Today, Iceland ranks first on the UN Human Development Index.

You have managed to build society that is healthier, better educated and more prosperous than anywhere else.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have been tasked with preparing the EU's new Arctic Strategy at a moment of profound change.

Climate, geography and geopolitics are being reshaped.

Polar ice is melting, new trade routes are opening, resources are being uncovered, and competition for influence is intensifying.

We believe the Arctic's future must be shaped – first and foremost – by the people who live there.

That is why I have travelled across the Arctic over the past months.

I've met leaders, businesses, representatives of local communities and young people simply to listen to the visions of the people who experience the ongoing changes most directly.

In two weeks, the Commission will adopt the new Arctic Strategy, so this Assembly is a crucial moment to finalise our thinking.

I see five elements as essential.

First, an Arctic that works for its people.

Indigenous Peoples have called the Arctic home for centuries.

That's why the social resilience and wellbeing have been the foundation of our partnership.

Without them, none of our collective security, climate and economic goals can be achieved.

Together with Arctic partners, we will invest in regional development, education, political dialogue, and community engagement.

Our goal is to ensure that every EU action delivers benefits to Arctic communities.

Second, cultivating a Northern Neighbourhood.

For Europe, the Arctic is not the high north. It is part of our neighbourhood.

More than 500,000 Europeans live here.

Three of our Member States are present.

We envision a Northern Neighbourhood anchored not only in proximity, but in common purpose.

Through partnership and deeper engagement, we can deliver results.

Third, strengthening security and resilience to threats.

Over the past year, we've seen global conflicts intensify.

Today the region sits at the nexus of geopolitical rivalry.

A secure, peaceful, and resilient Arctic is central to our Northern Neighbourhood vision.

We want to strengthen security by working with like-minded partners to better protect sub-sea cables, expand icebreaker capacity, and make better use of satellite data.

Together we can build Arctic-ready capabilities and enhance societal resilience, while avoiding duplication with NATO.

Fourth, economic investment.

The Arctic and the EU are already economically intertwined.

Five Arctic countries participate in the EU single market, with others we have close trade ties.

Through Global Gateway, we aim to mobilise transformative investment – in the infrastructure that connects people, the innovation that creates jobs, and the partnerships that strengthen strategic autonomy.

Transport, digital, space, critical raw materials, and research all offer clear opportunities for deeper collaboration.

And fifth, and perhaps most importantly, accelerating the fight against climate change.

The Arctic is warming nearly four times faster than the global average.

Climate is the main determinant of the ongoing changes - it threatens ways of life that the local population have sustained for thousands of years.

The world must do more.

And Europe will.

Climate runs through the whole strategy. Every action in the Arctic, must be taken with the climate in mind.

Colleagues,

The Arctic is changing fast.

But one thing must not change – our commitment to peace, partnership, and the people who call it home.

Thank you for your attention.

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