

Briefing Note

Exploring Reasons & Remedies for the EU's Incapability to Devise an “Arctic Policy”: The Quest for Coherence

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The European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) are, at the time of publishing of this year's Arctic Yearbook, working on a new policy statement concerning the EU's Arctic policy. The new communication, requested by the Council of the European Union, is likely to surface in the first half of 2016, slightly passing the original 2015 deadline (EU-Council 2014). In this Briefing Note, we focus on the formulation of the EU Arctic policy as an overarching framework, which so far has found its expression in declaratory statements (communications) from the Commission and the Union's High Representative. Two main questions shine out: Why has it been so difficult to formulate a statement that meets expectations of analysts and Arctic actors and are we likely to see it finally occurring in 2016?

2016 would mark eight years since the Commission's first communication on Arctic matters. Eight years during which the geopolitical “hot” Arctic turned into a realistic “cold” Arctic. Eight years during which the EU's general approach towards the North is still a matter of debate and its policy still an emerging one – a policy in search for a clear goal and a purpose. This painful and discouraging process of elaborating a clear statement of the EU's Arctic ambitions, contrasts with the otherwise appreciable progress in the EU's Arctic-specific activities. The EU's funding

for Arctic research is still widely prized. The EU's representatives in the work of Arctic Council have been able to provide visible inputs, in particular as regards short-lived climate forcers (Joint Research Centre), birds (European Environment Agency) or to the work of PAME (DG Move and the European Maritime Safety Agency). Although leaving much to be desired, the dialogue with Arctic indigenous peoples has become regular and more substantial. Recently, consultations regarding streamlining EU Arctic funding have been carried out. While characterized by far too many deficiencies, the very fact of conducting such consultations deserves acknowledgment.

Despite this progress, during eight years, the EU's three main institutions (the Council, Commission and European Parliament) have appeared to be incapable of proposing a clear-cut overarching Arctic policy. What are the underlying reasons for this particular European incapability? The answer may lie in an issue raised by the EU institutions themselves; that is the matter of (internal and external) "coherence" and a proposed aim of formulating an "integrated" policy.

The European Parliament (EP), in its 2014 resolution, called for the formulation of a "united EU policy on the Arctic" and a "coherent strategy and concretized action plan on the EU's engagement in the Arctic" (European Parliament 2014). At the same time, the Council requested the Commission to work towards "further development of an integrated and coherent Arctic Policy" (EU-Council 2014). Consequently, the essential question is what coherence and integration could mean in the context of a crosscutting Arctic policy. Commentators – and apparently also the EP and the Council – would like to see the EU's Arctic policy statement to be comprehensive, coherent, integrated, co-ordinated, action-oriented and specific. However, could it be the case that the very nature of the EU Arctic policy and the character of the multifaceted EU-Arctic nexus make such expectations somewhat exorbitant?

Coherence, notwithstanding multiple meanings of the term, could refer to the consistence between constitutive elements of a policy, so that contradictions between a variety of policy objectives and components are avoided or minimized. But more importantly, coherence should entail encouraging synergies between these various components. The policy should therefore make a positive difference and have added value within a policy system, and not merely minimize internal contradictions (May et al. 2005; Mayer 2013; Stępień, forthcoming).

In an EU internal horizontal context, coherence may also refer to "speaking with one voice" and related uniformity between the relevant institutions. When applied to a geographical space, an external dimension to the policy coherence needs to be considered, as the policy should facilitate synergies not only between various EU actions, but also with the actions of other actors operating in the region (Gebhard 2011).

An "integrated policy" – a concept closely associated with coherence and equally ambiguous – could refer to a policy that brings together under a set of common objectives and instruments a number of interrelated sectors (e.g. fisheries and maritime transport) or a policy rooted in general EU policy frameworks (e.g. the EU's Common Fisheries Policy or the Integrated Maritime Policy) (see e.g., Meijers & Stead 2004; van Hoof et al. 2012).

In the case of a crosscutting issue like the Arctic, various components of a possible Arctic policy (fisheries, research, climate change, maritime transport, etc.) are bound together by a specific geographical label. In order to be something more than merely a label - to be more than just a

sum of these different components and have added value – the EU’s final Arctic policy product would thus need to have even a minimal degree of coherence and integration. A genuine overarching “policy” needs to make even a modest difference: either in the region or within the general EU policy framework. In our understanding two issues make this quest for coherence a critical, but at the same time perhaps an insurmountable challenge:

- the diversity of issues brought together under the Arctic policy umbrella; and
- a marginal position of Arctic issues within the EU policy system as such.

Over the years, an increasing number of issues started to fall under the umbrella of an emerging EU Arctic policy. While 2008 documents focused on research, fisheries, marine environment, shipping and hydrocarbon extraction, from 2011 and 2012 the Arctic label was stuck to regional development in Fennoscandia, mining, reindeer herding or the Sámi issues. Currently – based on the content of recent consultations on streamlining EU Arctic funding – terrestrial transport, infrastructure and numerous EU funding programmes are being added to the list.

The objectives or instruments of an overarching Arctic policy would have to be fairly abstract and vague in order to encompass such a diversity of components (and in addition would have to correspond to actions and positions taken by the Arctic states themselves). And indeed, so far the objectives proposed in the 2008 and 2012 communications were anything but concrete and workable (*see e.g.*, Keil & Raspotnik 2012). In 2012, the objectives virtually degraded to three buzzwords – knowledge, responsibility and engagement – which turned out to be little more than headlines for various disconnected, mostly already on-going, activities (Airoldi 2014).

Would it be at all possible, instead of these general objectives, to propose a short list of concrete, new actions or to find a single *organizing idea* (May et al. 2005) for the Union’s Arctic policy? Accordingly, climate change could be positioned as such a top priority. However up to now, it somehow has not caught broader attention to really make it an Arctic policy driving force, *i.e.* a glue that could bind together diverse issues labelled as “Arctic.” Yet, would the various interest groups within the EU actually allow the response to climate change to be prioritized over other problems and objectives? And even if climate change was to become the key organizing priority, another problem remains, namely the peripherality of Arctic issues as a concern for the EU. The Arctic appears to be fairly marginal from the point of view of a policymaker regulating for a half a billion citizens.

In that regard – as already noted by Powell (2011) – the very (analytical) starting point sounds rather simple but seems to be impossible to answer: What does the Arctic say about the (future) *extent* of Europe? Moreover, what does the European Arctic or the broader Northern Neighbourhood actually mean for the European Union in general?

The Eastern Neighbourhood (e.g. the Ukraine-Russia-EU triangle) and the Southern Neighbourhood (e.g. the Mediterranean migration crisis) undoubtedly and *in fact* matter, whereas the Northern Neighbourhood does not. Moreover, the term “Northern Neighbourhood” actually does not even exist in official EU vocabulary. The Arctic region may be (economically) relevant in the decades to come, however currently it is simply not.

Hence, a key question occurs: how to “integrate” this “not-yet-existing-policy-region” into the EU’s current policy structure?

Instead of devising an “integrated” strategy that essentially lacks a common understanding (“one thought/perception, one voice”) of what the region is and means, EU policymakers could initially focus their crosscutting Arctic activities on creating procedures, instruments and mechanisms enhancing and supporting the EU’s very presence in the region – presence which already has a couple of positive facets. Elements of such an approach could include:

- enhanced coordination within the Commission, between EU institutions and Member States;
- durable and meaningful consultation platforms for engaging Arctic stakeholders (including those from outside the EU or EEA); and
- considering long-term mechanisms for communicating the knowledge gained through the EU’s Arctic engagement to the general EU decision-making processes (for instance via impact assessments conducted before EU regulations are proposed).

Some steps towards that direction have already been taken, but the challenges are still plenty. The established inter-service group that brings together policy officers from various DGs, EEAs and EU agencies was a first necessary step for an envisaged coordinated approach. However, so far the irregular meetings have served primarily information purposes. Additionally, the channels for informing major EU decision-making processes on Arctic-specific problems are scarce, if any. The ways for better informing both EU public and Arctic stakeholders about what the EU does in the Arctic are also being discussed. However, numerous critical comments (Personal communications, Rovaniemi, Oslo, Brussels, April-July 2015) on recent consultations dedicated to streamlining EU Arctic funding indicate that the implementation of stakeholder engagement remains a major challenge. And as regards EU-indigenous *Arctic Dialogue* meetings, we are yet to see any concrete effects of this format for the EU’s activities in the Arctic.

The upcoming policy document will show whether progress has been made in any of these procedural areas, whether any concrete goals could be devised, organizing ideas found and in general whether the “Northern Neighbourhood” has any real and defined significance for the EU as a whole, a significance beyond declaratory and formal statements. The new communication might show whether the overarching EU Arctic-policy framework can be coherent, whether it can – against the odds – manifest features of an integrated policy and whether it supports many, still disconnected, EU activities in the region.

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