

Briefing Note

The EU's Arctic Future Following the Spring of Statements

Adam Stępień & Andreas Raspotnik

In April 2016, the European Commission and the European Union's (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy published their new Joint Communication on "An integrated European Union Policy for the Arctic".¹ In the following June, the Foreign Affairs Council (the Council of the European Union's configuration that brings together the member states' foreign ministers), in turn, issued its Conclusions on the Arctic policy,² endorsing the Commission's priorities and reiterating the EU's strong regional interest.

The authors of this briefing note published analyses of both documents.³ For the Arctic Yearbook 2016, we try to take a step further and consider possible future pathways for the Union's Arctic affairs, including the likely implications of the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal from the EU (so-called Brexit).

2016 and a Spring of Statements

While only proposing a strategic outlook, the 2016 Communication built on earlier EU actions and recommended a more focused view of the EU's role in the Arctic. First, emphasis was laid on climate change and related efforts with regard to Arctic research, global climate mitigation and regional adaptation strategies. Second, the European Arctic took centre stage with the EU stressing the need of multidimensional regional economic development, which goes beyond

Adam Stępień is a Researcher and PhD candidate at the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland. Andreas Raspotnik is a Senior Fellow at the Arctic Institute and received his PhD from the University of Cologne and the University of Edinburgh.

large-scale extractive and transport projects and rather emphasizes support for northern innovation and entrepreneurship. Third, enhanced *EUropean* engagement in Arctic international cooperation was highlighted. Accordingly, the Union aims to be regionally visible via its research funding capabilities – its key soft power tool in the Circumpolar North, increased collaboration with local stakeholders and active participation in related forums, especially the Arctic Council.

These are certainly not new or surprising Arctic philosophies. The “EU Arctic Policy” – not unlike Arctic policies of Arctic and non-Arctic states – remains a very diverse set of ideas, trying to reconcile contradictory values and interests.

Perhaps most importantly, the EU’s “integrated policy for the Arctic” continues to encompass exclusively actions of the Union itself, merely taking note of Arctic policies and activities of the EU member states. By summer/autumn 2016, quite a few EU states published Arctic policy statements or pronounced objectives or interests in the Arctic related to their various scientific, economic and diplomatic activities in the region.⁴

The new policy update aims to integrate EU internal and external policies and does not link up the EU policy with member states’ Arctic policies, a deficiency criticized by some actors.⁵ Ideally, while not designed to coordinate member states’ activities, the policy could serve as a blue print that inspires Arctic-related actions within the Union’s member states and beyond.⁶

So far, the Commission positioned the EU as an actor filling the gaps in the existing patchwork of member states’ Arctic-relevant actions and identifying Arctic dimension to various initiatives the Union had already been carrying out. Such an approach is likely to continue in the future.

The Future Policy

In addition to the new Joint Communication and the related Conclusions, the European Parliament (EP) is expected to publish its fourth Resolution on the EU’s Arctic policy in November/December 2016. Although resolutions by the EP have no binding character as such, the expressed opinions do give certain political impulses and – in the Arctic setting – have had an impact on both the Union’s Arctic policy process and its regional credibility. Freer to openly pronounce problematic issues or give expression to concerns of interest groups or civil society actors, the EP’s voice is often more courageous and/or controversial than that of its EU institutional counterparts. Yet, little is currently known about the forthcoming EP Resolution.

Apart from the Parliament’s statement, the EU’s Arctic affairs should enter a quieter phase for the coming three-four years with the latest Joint Communication serving as an authoritative guide for the Commission services for the foreseeable future. Moreover, several ongoing or soon to be launched processes will unfold. First, from 2016, the [EU-Polarnet](#) project will hold stakeholder consultations contributing to its work on the European Polar Research Program. The latter is to be completed by 2019/2020. Second, the Commission plans on carrying out outreach and dialogue activities over the coming three years with conferences to be organized in Brussels and the (European) Arctic. At the same time, dialogue meetings with Arctic indigenous peoples should take place, as before, on an annual basis. The idea of establishing a Brussels-based representation for the Sámi people living in the EU and in the European Economic Area (i.e. Norway) will continue to be considered, although failed attempts in the past years are not

particularly encouraging. Third, processes ideally leading to defining overarching investment and research priorities for the European Arctic will be implemented throughout 2017. These include primarily the European Arctic Stakeholder Forum, bringing together national and regional authorities, and EU decision-makers and involving in some – so far unclear – way a broader spectrum of Arctic stakeholders. As EU regional and development funding is slowly shifting towards investment loans, the European Investment Bank is likely to be involved in this format. In addition, a network of managing authorities of EU programmes operating in the European Arctic will be set up, with the aim to contribute to the work of the aforementioned forum. At this point it is unclear how the envisaged priorities will be framed and how they are to influence the post-2020 EU multiannual financial framework. As a follow up to the forum's work, annual stakeholder conferences are to be organized starting from the end of 2017.

Future Developments

However, regardless a silent EU-Arctic policy phase, several EU and international developments – while not Arctic-specific – can be of relevance for the Circumpolar North in the years to come. For instance, the UN General Assembly has started the negotiation process on the new implementing agreement for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea regarding protecting biodiversity in the areas beyond national jurisdiction (i.e. in high seas), which is potentially of crucial importance for the Central Arctic Ocean. The EU is likely to take a strong stance on establishing marine protected areas and regulating the utilization of marine genetic resources. Moreover, the Union is currently preparing to ratify the highly Arctic-relevant Minamata Convention on Mercury. Already in February 2016, the Commission adopted a related ratification package with proposals for amending EU legislation. Similarly, the Commission has also proposed a Clean Air Policy Package with legislative changes potentially limiting the EU's air pollution footprint in the long term.

Furthermore, the 2016 Communication showed that the EU has no clear approach towards resource extraction in the Arctic, as the document is largely silent about the issue. The EU policymakers either avoid the topic or try to satisfy – with the language of “responsible” and “sustainable” development – all sides of the debate: regional actors favouring extractives including resource companies, as well as environmentalists or indigenous reindeer herders concerned by impacts. Consequently, no clear EU actions as regards Arctic non-renewable resources should be expected. Moreover, it remains to be seen what economic development trends take hold in the Arctic in general and in Europe's northernmost regions in particular.

Based on the Union's previous Arctic experiences, one can observe a rather cautious approach taken by the Commission and the European External Action Service that nowadays builds on a “soft footprint” strategy. Reading between the lines of the 2016 Communication, this soft approach suggests that Arctic actors should propose and request areas where the EU can support their legitimate efforts, rather than the EU taking the initiative itself.

However, the Arctic – while perhaps not yet a “negative priority”⁷ – is unlikely to be anywhere close to the top of the agenda for the Union in the coming years. Europe continues to struggle with multiple crises, including the influx of migrants and a sluggish economic recovery, currently threatened by the vows of, *inter alia*, the Italian and German banking systems. Politics around the

continent are facing challenges from populist, anti-EU parties, and the ‘experiment’ of the UK commencing a process of withdrawal from the EU only adds to these problems.

Brexit: Does it Matter for EU Arctic Affairs?

It is highly unlikely that the Union’s priorities in the Arctic would change without the UK. The 2013 UK’s Arctic policy document indicated that the EU was not a particularly important element in the country’s Arctic deliberations, in contrast to the Finnish, French or German statements. However, lengthy and tedious negotiations leading to the actual withdrawal will consume much of the EU institutions’ energy and leave even less space for marginal issues such as the Arctic. More importantly, Brexit will have concrete implications for the EU’s Arctic actorness. British polar research (with flagship institutions such as the British Antarctic Survey), economic activities in the region or London’s maritime insurance sector have so far constituted a very important part of the EU’s northern credentials.

Furthermore, without British financial contribution, significant cuts in the EU budget can be expected, including financing dedicated to regional funding. That may negatively affect the amount of EU money flowing up north. Even without Brexit, the next two years will be a time of struggles by Europe’s northernmost regions to retain present levels of EU (and EEA) financing.

However, research funding should be affected to a lesser degree especially as the UK is likely to financially participate in the successor of the Horizon 2020 programme. British institutions have always been crucial partners in EU-funded research projects. A lack of British involvement in EU projects would be against the interests of both UK’s and EU’s science actors as well as detrimental for the scientific outputs. Although at the moment a certain degree of uncertainty may lead to a more cautious approach towards including Britons in research funding applications,⁸ it would be rather surprising if withdrawal negotiations resulted in limiting British participation in pan-European projects and research infrastructure cooperation in a longer perspective.⁹

Coda

In our Briefing Note last year, we asked if the Union would be able to devise organising ideas for its “Northern Neighbourhood”, eventually encompassed in one “integrated policy”. We also wondered if the Arctic could have a real and defined significance for the EU beyond declaratory and formal statements only. Much (sea) ice has melted since then, the Union’s institutions have published updated versions of its Arctic perspective and the Brexit (debate) has seemingly shaken the EU to its very foundations. European Arctic states – both EU member states and non-member states – and the broader (Arctic) public need to be aware that the Circumpolar North will only remain of peripheral concern for policymakers in Brussels. Yet, periphery does not necessarily need to have only a negative connotation. A peripheral region – within the current governance system set up by the Arctic states – that fosters active cross-border cooperation, i.e. in terms of infrastructure or telecommunication developments, could attract *EUropean* attention. Eventually, the EU Arctic policy could facilitate a win-win situation for both

the periphery (the European Arctic) and the centre (Brussels) that goes beyond the previous, tedious debates on Arctic Council Observer status or the banning of seal products.

Notes

1. European Commission and The High Representative, 'An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic', JOIN(2016)21final (27 April 2016), https://eeas.europa.eu/arctic_region/docs/160427_joint-communication-an-integrated-european-union-policy-for-the-arctic_en.pdf
2. Council of the European Union, 'Council conclusions on the Arctic', (20 June 2016), <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10400-2016-INIT/en/pdf>
3. Raspotnik, Andreas and Stepień, Adam (21 June 2016), "The EU pledges to actively follow-up on its Arctic commitments" in High North News at <http://www.highnorthnews.com/the-eu-pledges-to-actively-follow-up-on-its-arctic-commitments/>; Stepień, Adam and Raspotnik, Andreas (3 May 2016), "The EU's new Arctic communication: not-so-integrated, not-so-disappointing?" *ArCticles: Arctic Centre Paper* at <http://lauda.ulapland.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/62370/ArCticles-1-2016-EU-Arctic-Policy-Stepien-Raspotnik.pdf>
4. Including Arctic Council members (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), as well as Arctic Council observers such as France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK.
5. As expressed by some participants of an outreach seminar organized by the EEAS in Brussels on 2 June 2016.
6. Interview with an EEAS official, conducted by Andreas Raspotnik on 14 June 2016.
7. Interview with a European Commission official, conducted by Adam Stepień, August 2015.
8. Sample, Ian (12 July 2016), "UK scientists dropped from EU projects because of post-Brexit funding fears", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jul/12/uk-scientists-dropped-from-eu-projects-because-of-post-brexit-funding-fears>
9. Yet, the case of excluding Switzerland from various programmes following country's limitations on the free movement of persons could suggest that some problems may occur.