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What about the Arctic? The European Union's Geopolitical Quest for Northern Space

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Abstract

Over the last decade(s), the European Union (EU) has established itself as geopolitical actor seeking to actively engage in the spatial ordering of its neighbourhoods. In order to better understand the existing geopolitical nature of the EU, this article addresses the question of the EU's decade-long endeavour to construct legitimacy in its Northern Neighbourhood; an area often neglected in discussions about the EU's geopolitical role. By examining its Arctic involvement between 2008 and 2018, this article enquires into the EU's broader role as an international actor with an evolving geopolitical identity. Over the last decades, the EU has exhibited geopolitical ambitions alongside its own conceptualisation of world order, rule of law and good governance. This article establishes a clearer picture on how the EU as an amalgamation of its various institutions has tried to impose these geopolitical ambitions on a neighbouring region that itself experiences a manifold change in the early twentieth-first century. It gets to the conceptual bottom of what exactly fashioned the European Union with geopolitical agency in the Arctic region – internally and externally. The article is based on a decade of research on the EU as an emerging Arctic actor.

Keywords

European Union, Arctic, Geopolitics, Northern Dimension, geopolitical agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite a growing academic interest, the concept of geopolitics is still only of peripheral importance in the EUropean world of political science and related international relations.[1] The prevailing assumption is that the European Union (EU) cannot be classed as a geopolitical actor due to its *sui generis* polity character, the EU's history, identity, or simply its lack of military and foreign policy power. However, contrary to political science, political geography has explored the EU as an emerging geopolitical space (Klinke 2013; Mamadouh 2015), portraying it as a geopolitical subject, agent or an entity with geopolitical agency (Aalto 2002; Bachmann 2013a, 2013b; Browning and Joenniemi 2008; Kuus 2011b, 2011a, 2014; Pänke 2019; Schott 2007; Scott 2009, 2006; Siddi 2019).[2] Browning essentially describes the EU as fundamentally a geopolitical actor seeking to actively engage in the spatial ordering of its neighbourhoods (2018, 113) – immediate vicinities where the EU already acts as a geopolitical power aiming to wield influence (Ferguson 2018; Kuus 2014; Siddi 2019). Thus, the essential question is not whether or not the EU already is a geopolitical actor (*it is*), but rather how its actions beyond its borders are manifested by its geopolitical visions, (sometimes) narrated differently by the Union's various institutional actors. Accordingly, and in order to properly comprehend an already existing geopolitical nature of the EU, a nuanced understanding of EU action in its immediate neighbourhood is needed (Browning 2018, 107).

This article looks at one specific context of the EU attempting to spatially order its neighbourhood; a 'neighbourhood' that has tended to be neglected within the academic community examining the EU's geopolitical attributes: The Arctic region of the early twenty-first century. With the circumpolar North appearing in global headlines ever since in 2007-2008 and prominently being denoted as in a state of flux (Knecht 2013, 165), the EU's Arctic involvement holds out the possibility of a fascinating case study of the EU's broader role as an international actor with a steadily evolving geopolitical identity.

For years now, questions concerning the EU's identity have acquired both a geographical and internal/external security dimension (Larsen 2004, 74). In this regard, the EU's 'outside' is perceived as unstable and a threat provider to the EU's internal stability – 'the world beyond the EU's borders is a world of risks' (Browning 2018, 110). This prompts the question: How does the EU conceive of itself in its engagement with its immediate neighbourhood – especially in an internationally captivating case such as the Arctic of the early twenty-first century? For the purpose of this article, we examine *how* the EU has failed to successfully

[1] Based on Moisio et al., we use the spelling 'EUropean' to highlight the idea that Europe cannot be reduced to the EU only (2013, 754). This means that every time we use the adjective 'EUropean' we either refer to something of, from, or related to the European Union (= EU); see also Footnote 15 concerning the diverse meanings of 'the EU'. Any reference without a capital U either directly relates to the entire continent 'Europe' or to specific names, e.g. European Commission.

[2] In general, critical geopolitics has provided valuable insights how spaces of EU power have been narrated and constructed, *see* (Bialasiewicz 2011).

‘enter’ a region, while, simultaneously, having well-developed competences, bilateral relations and funding schemes for the same spatial domain.

This study is based on a decade of research on the EU as an emerging geopolitical actor within the Arctic context. First, we lean on extensive analyses of the EU’s Arctic policy documents over the last nine years, and the conducted discourse analysis therein, either by ourselves or other scholars engaged in the same topic (Authors, et al). Further, a total of 27 interviews were held during the same period (2010-2018) with various policy officers from the European Commission (hereinafter ‘Commission’) and the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as with Members of the European Parliament (EP) and representatives from EU Member States, predominantly taking place in Brussels. These were semi-structured interviews with the small group of people that have been or are still working on the EU’s Arctic policy. Speaking to (some of) the same individuals several times over an extended timespan between 2010 and 2018 allowed us to re-visit the same themes year after year and getting first-hand account on the Arctic policy learning process of EU policymakers.

These conversations provide key background information that is essential to understand the policymakers’ (changing) approaches towards the Arctic region, although we do not quote all of them directly in this article.[3] We also start from the premise that individuals and intra-institutional dynamics matter when studying policy and its related developments in Brussels (Kuus 2014). ‘Policy documents do not emerge from a pre-given political mandate; they actually emerge from lengthy processes of drafting, consultation, and negotiation. The task is to examine not only policy implementation but also its conception’ (Kuus 2014, 39). For that reason, our analysis goes a step beyond the to-date only fully comprehensive study of the EU’s Arctic policy – Raspotnik (2018) – while we also add an understudied dimension to the empirical understanding of the EU’s Arctic endeavour, namely that of linking it to the notion of the EU as a ‘geopolitical actor’ in its immediate neighbourhood, or near-abroad. Consequently, we argue that although the EU (as a collective of actors and interests) does not behave according to a traditional ‘geopolitical actor’, by analysing its intra-institutional and multi-actor (and multi-voice) approach to a geographic area – here the Arctic – it still exhibits clear characteristics of geopolitical ambition and interests.

The article starts by briefly describing today’s Arctic, followed by a summary of the EU’s first engagement with its ‘northern neighbourhood’, especially in relation to its Northern Dimension (ND). This serves as basis for our analysis on the EU’s decade-long quest to create its very own Arctic policy role, while engaging with a northern geographic space beyond the confines of the Union. In turn, we draw conclusions about how the EU’s northern engagement helps us to further comprehend the EU as a geopolitical actor.

[3] *See* Authors and (Stępień 2015) for additional quotes and the use of interviews.

2. THE EU AS A GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR?

From its very beginning and throughout the Cold War, threats to the European Economic Community were (predominantly) fashioned as European-internal, based on Europe's World War II experience. However, with the Union's widening and deepening, internal threats were (thought to be) overcome with now external factors being perceived as principal threat determinants of EUropean stability. This includes civil wars at the EU's borders, transnational threats (e.g. terrorism, mass immigration or global heating) or the rise of China and Russia (Germond 2013, 81; Rogers 2009, 847). Hence, the 'control' of bordering regions/countries and maritime spaces is considered vital for EUropean security and permanency. The representation of related risks classifies involved actors along an inside/outside line: The unstable 'outside' provides a threat for the stable 'inside' (Germond 2013, 81).

Eventually, these positions, worldviews, foreign policy paradigms and security assessments became manifest via the EU's constitutional bases (most recently the Treaty of Lisbon)[4] and have been demonstrated in various (foreign) policy frameworks, *inter alia*, in the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), the 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy (MSS), and most recently in the 2016 Global Strategy for the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union (hereinafter 'Global Strategy') (Council of the European Union 2014; European Council 2003, 2008; High Representative 2016). Moreover, they were implemented in the EUropean policy approaches towards its immediate neighbourhood, as most explicitly visible in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP serves as the prime example of what Jones (2011) referred to as 'making regions for EU action' – the construction of symbolical, territorial and institutional spaces in order to promote EUropean solutions to govern and tackle challenges (partly) outside its very own territorial space (Jones 2011, 42).

According to Rosamond, the EU's external character is inevitably (co-)constituted by its internal history and developed processes of cooperative and multilateral governance (2014, 134). In the course of decades, the EU has achieved independent agency due to its supranational elements. However, especially its external action draws a different picture with distinct legal competences and national/supranational interests and positions characterising respective agenda- and policy-making. Hence, we do not assume the EU to already be a given actor in a certain political and geographical setting, but rather ask what exactly fashions the Union with geopolitical agency in a distinct case and region.

Central to this assumption is the question of 'who is the EU?' and what do we mean by 'the EU' when it comes to EU-policy-making. For the Arctic-case on hand we accept two propositions simultaneously: That internally any so-called 'EU-policy' is a patchwork of various institutional interests with sometimes diverging voices, specifically the Commission and its Directorate-General (DG) for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (MARE), the EEAS, the EP, as well

[4] The Treaty of Lisbon amended both the Treaty on European Union (TEU) (Treaty of Maastricht) and the Treaty Establishing the European Economic Community (Treaty of Rome), the latter renamed to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

as certain Member States; but that externally, Arctic states perceived the EU's policy output as coming from a singular cohesive actor only. Accordingly, we aim to open the internal black-box of an externally perceived unitary actor and counteract a persistent simplification of the institutions of geopolitics, and specifically those of the EU (Kuus 2014, 36–37). Thus, we follow Kuus' assumption that the 'union is both an institution and a process of continuous dialogue and negotiation among the member states' (2014, 44). Moreover, also the institution 'EU' is further composed of different institutions, which themselves consists of numerous departments and individuals.

Over time, this multidimensional Union has steadily developed a tacit geopolitical discourse and related ideas, exhibiting certain international ambitions alongside its own conceptualization of world order, core values, rule of law and good governance (Germond 2013, 81 and 83; Kuus 2011a, 1151).[5] Yet, this rather fuzzy geopolitical doctrine primarily emphasises the EU's stabilising and democratising role in the world system and its neighbourhood through political and economic cooperation and specific politics of norm diffusion (Scott 2006, 17–18) and not necessarily via the 'classic' perspective of military presence and the external projection of related power.[6] Basically, the aim of the EU has been to implement 'self-supporting structures in neighbouring regions', that would bring these regions more or less in line with EU standards (Schott 2007, 294).

These leitmotifs have led to the formation of a distinct EUropean 'space': A EUropean cosmos, characterized by supranationality in which European nation states cede sovereignty; multilateralism based on the rule of law; and commonly agreed values such as the irrelevance of military force within EUrope and between the EU's Member States (Bachmann 2015, 695–97).[7] As such, 'space' is not defined as physical space in a strict geographical sense – the geographical demarcation of a certain territory – but rather as socially constructed space. In the present EUropean case, 'space' is therefore understood as EUrope's identity, presence and power that operates within a system of structures, processes and flows (Bachmann 2009, 2015, 685).[8] Eventually, these leitmotifs have not only influenced the way the EU perceives and interacts with its border areas and neighbouring regions but essentially also 'played a key role in the pursuit of political goals' (Schott 2007, 285). Although the EU is indeed engaged in normative policies – in relation to Manners' (2002) infamous 'Normative Power Europe' –

[5] According to Knecht & Keil, "[g]eopolitical ideas are particular strategic ways of thinking that assign specific roles to certain actors and spaces and are constructed to serve distinct material or normative interests at a certain point in time" (2013, 187). Although maybe different in meaning, we do not see a terminological difference between geopolitical visions, ideas or leitmotifs and use these terms interchangeably. Thus, we appreciate Dijkink's subsuming definition of both geopolitical codes, visions and representations as a category of foreign policy belief systems (1998, 297).

[6] Among many others, Ó Tuathail provides comprehensive overviews on the history of 'geopolitics', *see* for example (Ó Tuathail 2005; Ó Tuathail, Dalby, and Routledge 2003)

[7] Bachmann perceives 'the externalisation aspect of internal preferences [as] essential' for the evolution of EUropean spaces of interaction as these internal modes form the basis of global visions (2015, 698 and 700).

[8] '[I]dentity' derives from the Union's integration process and its system as political-economic organisation. 'Presence' is the role and function that the EU exercises within the structures of the international system. 'Power', again, describes the ability to influence the geopolitical system (Bachmann 2009, 2015).

these policies primarily serve the EU's own security and economic interests (Sarto, Del 2016, 227).[9]

Moreover, we start from the premise that 'distance in international relations (…) is an "illusion"' (Henrikson 2002, 441); meaning that in addition to an undoubtedly existing physical geography, distinctive mental perceptions of space form and re-form images and ideas of a physical, hard reality and accordingly influence and determine actions. Accordingly, geography is not a given fixture, but rather 'the ways in which political actors conceive and practise international politics in spatial terms' (Kuus 2014, 33). Geopolitics is consequently not a universal set of principles but rather a practice produced in specific bureaucratic and policy-making locations (Kuus 2014, 38). This becomes relevant when reading the EU's Arctic policy documents – statements that do not emerge from a pre-given political mandate, but rather lengthy processes of drafting, consulting and negotiating with stakeholders with different interest, expertise and specific legal competences (Kuus 2014, 39). Leaning on these notions of geography, geopolitics and the EU, we turn to examine how to best understand the EU's ordering and engagement with the broader region to its north.

3. THE GEOPOLITICAL ARCTIC OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In the summer of 2007, the Arctic region hit global headlines with a blurry picture of a Russian titanium flag, planted more than 4,000 m beneath the North Pole at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. Predictions of an ice-free Arctic Ocean ruled the airwaves in September 2007 as the Ocean's sea ice extent reached a record low – 38 per cent below average (Comiso et al. 2008, 6). '[O]ne static geographic […] region' (Conley and Kraut 2010, 1) eventually became seen as a 'multi-faceted [global] security risk' (Dittmer et al. 2011, 204). With the Arctic slowly emerging from its status as a frontier to become a new global region that is interconnected with and exposed to a globalized world, strategic debate concerning the region's ultimate accessibility and its related future increased (Dodds 2010, 72; Heininen and Southcott 2010, 1–2).

But what exactly does the term 'the Arctic' entail? The answer to such a question is by no means straightforward. In considering 'the Arctic', a geographical delineation is not enough, with an additional historical or ideational angle needed in order to truly understand what 'the Arctic' encapsulates (Archer 2010, 2–3). Despite the Arctic sub-regions varying greatly in its physical geography, accessibility, climate, population and related national identity perception – the many 'Arctics' of the Arctic – the area has surfaced as *one* global region. Ideas emerged of an area that developed from being considered a natural icy fortification to a distinct political region, where first and foremost eight heterogeneous states

[9] While the term 'normative' has generally been associated with 'doing good', geopolitics has too often only been denoted as 'doing bad' (Cadier 2018, 77).

and several non-governmental stakeholders jointly deal with a region in a constant state of flux (Dolata 2015, 3).

The Arctic Circle (66°32'N) is used as the regional delimitation, defining the geographical area north of it as 'the Arctic'. This area covers the territories of the Arctic Eight (A8): Canada, Denmark (in relation to Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. For some of these states, their Arctic territories hold a prominent place in both domestic and foreign policies with national concerns and priorities brought together in specific Arctic policies/strategies over the last decade (Bailes and Heininen 2012; Brosnan, Leschine, and Miles 2011)(AuthorA). In varying degrees, the region plays a role in the national self-perception of the A8 with a particular understanding of 'our Arctic only' recently being challenged by a literally opened maritime Arctic space and increasing regional interests of non-Arctic states (AuthorB et al). In an Arctic setting, sovereignty essentially relates to possession goals – land, waters and the resources they contain (Griffiths 2011, 7); 'natural' variables that were allegedly called into question by increased global interest in the region with some Arctic states having identified sovereignty problems of Arctic outsiders that essentially lack such 'natural' Arctic possessions (Aalto 2013, 108; Wegge and Keil 2018, 93–96). Eventually, climate change was not only re-shaping the physical geographies of the Arctic but essentially also its commercial, political, and scientific relevance and importance (Wegge and Keil 2018, 88).

Legally, the region is 'governed' by a complex array of international treaties and programmes, bilateral agreements, national and sub-national laws, and non-governmental and governmental initiatives (Roo, de et al. 2008, 11). Politically, the Arctic Council (AC) is the main institutional structure, basically bringing together three categories of participants: The A8 as member states, six indigenous peoples' organisations as permanent participants and currently thirteen non-Arctic states, fourteen intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary organisations and twelve non-governmental organisations with observer status in the AC (Arctic Council 1996, 2019).

Today's regional system of the Arctic can be characterised as a stable, somehow institutionalised and formalised, yet exclusive network of eight states that contains both a robust legal and organisational element (Kobza 2015, 9). The A8's regional political spectrum entails strong aspects of national sovereignty in order to assert exclusive political and narrative competence over Arctic space. And yet, these states are brought together by a regional-consensual understanding of common stewardship for an Arctic commons (Knecht and Keil 2013, 180).[10] Eventually, this institutional regional set-up serves as producer and circulator of certain Arctic ideas and effectively contributes to the prevailing spatial order of the region (Dodds 2012, 12). Accordingly, the policy efforts of the AC operate as a consolidation of a 'territorially bounded future vision of the Arctic', where the possession of

[10] Cracks might be appearing in this consensus, with the US Government currently taking a strong stance against Russia and China in the Arctic (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy 2019; U.S. Department of State 2019).

an Arctic shoreline or regional territorial presence is prioritised in the dominated Arctic perception of who is eventually 'in' and who is 'out' (Dodds 2012, 22). In other words,

> whereas in most intergovernmental organizations the key divide is between states (which are members) and non-state entities (which are observers), in the Arctic Council it is between actors with a territorial stake and those that, although interested in the region's outcome, are fundamentally outsiders (Steinberg and Dodds 2015, 109).

Eventually, Arctic 'access' extensively depends on how successfully the region's frames and representations are used by an actor and tied in with existing relations of Arctic power. As argued by Wilson Rowe, successful frames or representations of the Arctic lay the ground and set the parameters for related policy action: 'In other words, a robust policy frame will address what the problems is and its causes, who can do something and who should do something' (2018, 38). Examples of such representations are, for instance, the (narrated) image of the Arctic as a zone of peace in a cold geopolitical world, highlighting of how the Ukraine crisis of 2014 had no negative impact on cooperation within the AC (Author B), or the global vs. regional Arctic frame, underlining the global nature and significance of the region and lending logic to Arctic outsider's reasoning to secure a position within the AC (Byers 2017; Wilson Rowe 2018, 39–52). Experienced actors in Arctic governance seem to be highly aware of anchoring their regional preferences in 'richly weighty narratives about [Arctic] space' in order to realise their preferred political outcomes (Wilson Rowe 2018, 57). This brings us to a relatively callow Arctic actor that has struggled to become an experienced one: The EU.

4. A NORTHERN GEOPOLITICAL SPACE?

4.1. THE EU AND ITS NORTHERN DIMENSION

The EU's Wider Europe initiative, formally announced in 2003, and the subsequently launched ENP and Eastern Partnership Policy were 'about drawing a line between chaos [= the neighbourhood] and cosmos [= the EU]' (Joenniemi 2007, 144) with the enlargement process as an essential organizing part of the 'chaos' to make it part of the 'cosmos' (Pardo 2004, 735). As a result the ENP can be perceived as the 'most explicit form of geopolitical integration between the EU and its immediate region' (Scott 2011, 156). It was the creation of a distinct geopolitical space and a principal mechanism of the EU to project both its interests and identity in its immediate neighbourhood (Kuus 2011a, 1140). From a political geography perspective, it shows that the EU is a fundamentally geopolitical actor whose policies are impregnated by geopolitical visions (Browning 2018, 108).[11]

[11] The EU's geopolitical ordering processes have been sufficiently scrutinized with regard to the ENP and its two concerned spaces of perceived EU influence, the eastern and southern neighbourhood, *see* for example (Bialasiewicz 2008, 2011; Browning 2018; Browning and Joenniemi 2003, 2008; Ferguson 2018; Ikani 2019; Kuus 2014).

In 2007, Joenniemi concluded that the discourses that underpinned the ENP in the east and south were not that different from each other (2007, 152). However, the EU's third neighbourhood – the north – has always been excluded from a common neighbourhood policy approach. The concept of EUropean neighbourhoods has been developed with an 'exclusive southern and eastern focus, as the northern and north-western 'neighbourhoods' were significantly less controversial and less populated'.[12] Based on the north's distinct features, it was inferred that the broader European north would rather suffer than benefit from the ENP (Joenniemi 2007, 152). As a matter of fact, the 'northern neighbourhood' does not even exist in EUropean parlance (AuthorA, 21).[13]

The political and conceptual formulation of a European north as a distinct EUropean political space only evolved in the mid/late 1990s and was directly linked to the northern enlargement process and consequent accession of Finland and Sweden in 1995 (Heininen 1998, 33; Moisio 2003, 74). In September 1997, then Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen publicly launched the 'Northern Dimension Initiative' (NDI). The NDI was a political attempt not only to institutionally embody the European north in the EU's policy structure but also essentially to raise awareness of this new, geographical 'centre of gravity' of potential EUropean action with a new border of more than 1,300 km between the EU and Russia (Aalto, Dalby, and Harle 2003, 7; Lipponen 1997). With Finland's and Sweden's EU membership (and Norway and Iceland being linked to the EU via the European Economic Area, EEA), the EU had acquired a 'natural northern dimension', a broad geographical concept in need of a related policy (Lipponen 1997, 29).

With both the east and the south literally considered as 'neighbourhood', the north was rather characterized by a 'partnership approach' (Heikkilä 2006, 68). The later established Northern Dimension (ND) became a common policy of joint ownership between four equal partners – the EU, Iceland, Norway and Russia – with a rather flexible policy framework that aims to promote dialogue and cooperation especially in the sectors of environment, public health and social well-being, transport and logistics, and culture (European Union et al. 2006).

In retrospect, the focus has primarily been on the Baltic Sea Region and the relationship with Russia. Whereas other political initiatives have floundered, the ND was seen as 'low-political and technical' (Haukkala, 2010, p. 9), a region where divergence in world views and commonalities between the EU and Russia, but also internal disagreement between Member States on how to approach Russia, had less of an impact; contrary to the eastern

[12] Stated in a 2013 internal EP briefing paper that is on file with the authors.

[13] As both Iceland and Norway belong to the European Economic Area and with the Faroe Islands and Greenland being part of the Danish Realm, the 'northern neighbourhood' differs significantly from the eastern and southern neighbourhoods and the related relationship between the EU and its neighbouring countries. Moreover, Russia in the 'north' cannot be put on an equal footing with Russia in the 'east'. For more a systematic discussion on the term 'north' and 'east' as part of European meso-regions, *see* (Mishkova and Trencsényi 2017).

neighbourhood as observed during the Georgia crisis in 2008 and the Ukraine crisis of 2014 (Cadier 2018; Ferguson 2018; Nitoiu 2016).[14]

In EUropean geopolitical terms, the ND as a geopolitical concept can be summarized as 'a culmination of Nordic efforts to introduce a specific regional security perspective within the wider European context' (Scott 2005, 441). Yet a particularly positively connoted 'open north' also depicts a clear geopolitical marker between 'in' and 'out'. As Russia remained the driving force of the ND, this broad framework was 'as much eastern as it is northern' (Moisio 2003, 95). Nevertheless, from a more southern perspective, the ND has been at times perceived as a one-sided tool to guide Russia closer to EUropean norms or as a policy expression to assert the EU's dominant position over the Barents Euro Arctic Council (BEAC) and other regional networks (Browning and Joenniemi 2008, 541–42). Even Russia's rejection of the ENP in 2004 did not position the country as a 'northern' threat provider to EU security, potentially hampering cooperation efforts in the European north. Instead, a greater willingness on the part of the EU to compromise was observed, especially when compared to the eastern and southern neighbourhood, with more space for mutual dialogue and partnership without cooperation efforts being premised on Russia's acceptance of key EUropean norms and value (Browning and Joenniemi 2008, 545–46).

Thus, ever since 1997, the 'northern neighbourhood' has been somewhat different compared to its eastern and southern counterparts. Simultaneously, the ND was a relatively limited and low-level policy tool launched in order to serve predominantly Finland and Sweden's interests (and subsequently the Baltic Member States) vis-à-vis Russia. From a geographical perspective, it is, however the *north* of the north that has been neglected or which came off badly in that particular EUropean regional perception. A neighbouring space that has globally surfaced over the last decade: The Arctic region.

4.2. GOING FURTHER NORTH? DEVELOPING A POLICY FOR THE ARCTIC

Moving beyond the specifics of the ND, the growing concern with the Arctic from 2006-2007 onwards also raised regional awareness in the hallways of EUropean power. On 14 March

[14] Over the last three decades, EU–Russia relations have fluctuated wildly and can be roughly divided in three phases (Haukkala 2015, 26). First was a formative phase in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, characterized by optimism and joint efforts. A second, more troublesome, phase took place between 1994 and 2000, influenced by the Russian economic crash of 1997, NATO's engagement in the wars on the Balkan Peninsula and the EU's negative response to Russian behaviour in the Chechen wars (Nitoiu 2016). And then the third phase, from 2000 onwards: the Putin era. Most recently complicated by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, in spite of ongoing tensions, and the economic sanctions that were put in place after 2014, Russia still remains the largest supplier of natural gas and petroleum oil to the EU, ahead of Norway (Eurostat 2018). Moreover, the EU-28 constitute the single most important export and import market for Russia, at 38,1% and 44,7%, respectively (European Commission 2018). Accordingly, Siddi concluded that despite tensions related the EU's regulatory power, market forces as well as the Ukraine crisis, the 'EU–Russia [post-Cold War] energy relationship has not experienced major disruptions' (2018, 1568).

2008, the EU's High Representative (HR) and the Commission issued a joint policy document stating:

> The rapid melting of the polar ice caps, in particular, the Arctic, is opening up new waterways and international trade routes. In addition, the increased accessibility of the enormous hydrocarbon resources in the Arctic region is changing the geo-strategic dynamics of the region with potential consequences for international stability and European security interests. (2008, 8)

This awareness can be seen as both an extension of, but also distinct from, the ND. Already back in 2008, European Arctic areas have been highlighted as a 'priority in the Northern Dimension policy', while simultaneously stressing the EU's strong relationships with its Arctic partners, Canada, Russia and the United States (Commission of the European Communities 2008, 2). The Arctic appeared on the EU's 'neighbourhood radar' and the region's allegedly changing geostrategic dynamics were supposed to have consequences for EUropean security. And yet the region has not achieved a prominent place on the EU's policy table over the last decade. EU–Arctic deliberations lacked momentum, despite strengthened physical regional presence, for example through the establishment of the BEAC, the accession of Finland and Sweden and the related implementation of the ND, and continuing cooperation efforts with Russia (AuthorA, 87-89). However, before 2007, the Arctic remained 'a marginal note in EU policy – a periphery of the periphery' (AuthorA, 91).

In retrospect, this is surprising, not least because,– as is often stated – the EU is no stranger to the Arctic and has multiple links to the region, both on a geographical, legal, economic, environmental, research and regional development-related level (AuthorB, Author A, 65-84).[15] Referring to these ties as the 'EU's Arctic credentials', a Commission official then responsible for Arctic affairs identified the EU as part of the Arctic and linked to the Arctic. The EU affects and is affected by the Arctic.[16] As an expression of the EU's 'Arcticness', the EU's main institutions – the Commission, the Council of the European Union (hereinafter 'Council') and the EP – have slowly but steadily developed a dedicated EU Arctic policy toolkit and further been setting common positions since 2007/2008. By 2019, the three institutions have published ten Arctic policy documents: three (Joint) Communications by the Commission (and the HR); three related Conclusions by the Council; and four Resolutions by the EP, *see* **Feil! Fant ikke referansekilden.**.

However, despite these step-by-step advances in policymaking, positive developments in some of the EU's regional activities, the agreed compromise with Canada concerning the ban on seal products[17] and considerable input of EU representatives to the work of the AC

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[15] It is important to note that these multiple links also give an indication of the diverse meaning of both the 'EU in the Arctic', as well as 'the EU' as an international actor. Accordingly, 'the EU' can not only signify, *inter alia*, a strong market and economy community, a source of regulations, a combination of its three main institutional bodies, but also the grouping of its Member States.

[16] Interview with Policy officer, DG Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, European Commission, conducted in Brussels on 04/09/2012

[17] By adopting its Regulation 1007/2009, the EU banned seal products, imported for commercial purposes from its internal market. This lead to controversial legal and political debate in Arctic international circles, eventually

working groups, the EU has yet to elaborate a clear statement of its northern regional ambitions – a distinct EU–Arctic narrative or single organizing idea – nor has it achieved its anticipated 'goal' to become an 'endorsed' part of Arctic governance – an observer to the AC (AuthorA et al, 432-33). Eleven years after the 2008 Communication, the EU remains caught in a mix of internal, cross-border and external policies regarding the Arctic, blurring the line between what are perceived as domestic or foreign, internal or external, soft or hard politics.

For the first time in its immediate neighbourhood, the EU faces a region where it cannot per se act as a dominant actor vis-à-vis its neighbours (or externalize its internal setup and policies). It is instead bound in a distinct 'regional system' based on the national interests of strong state actors and built on a light regional structure using traditional instruments of intergovernmental relations that essentially favours regional inclusiveness (Aalto 2013, 117; Kobza 2015, 22). The Arctic of the early twenty-first century raises an interesting question about the extent of EUrope, how it is to gain 'Arctic access'; and legitimize related action (Bailes and Heininen 2012, 95; Powell 2011, 121).

5. THE EU AS A GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR IN THE ARCTIC?

EUropean geopolitical ideas refer to the EU as promoter and guarantor of certain rights and values (Bialasiewicz 2008, 76), and a model of civilian power (Bachmann 2013a; Bachmann and Sidaway 2009). Over the last decades, these EUropean foreign policy paradigms became manifest via the EU's constitutional bases and have been demonstrated in various (foreign) policy frameworks.

For the Arctic region, the EU's ten policy documents serve as a related framework and the region is also cross-referenced in the IMP, EUMSS and the Global Strategy (Commission of the European Communities 2007; Council of the European Union 2014; High Representative 2016). These declaratory performances constitute the EU's somewhat routinized endeavours to demonstrate a) its self-identity and b) the ontological aim to guarantee its internal stability (Browning 2018, 109). Arctic-accordingly, and for example via the Global Strategy, the EU articulates its strategic interest in keeping the region a low-tension area, with a well-functioning legal framework and solid political and security forms of cooperation (High Representative 2016, 38–39). Moreover, climate change is labelled as an essential threat factor to EU security and it was assumed that only a global, multilateral-based order can ensure peace and sustainable development, with the EU aiming to act as agenda shaper, connector and facilitator in a network of global actors (High Representative 2016, 43).

Broadly speaking, the recurring line of geopolitical ideas stipulated in the ten Arctic policy documents fall within the nexus of 'security – responsibility – dialogue'; three intrinsic overlapping elements that essentially fall in step with the agreed common provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon of promoting the EU's values and interests and contributing to the protection

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also negatively affecting the EU's application for AC observer status (Sellheim 2015b, 2015a; Wegge 2013) (Author A, 91-92).

of its citizens. In the Arctic setting, Author A identified five key ideas: The EU as leader to tackle climate change; as a sustainability manager; as governance stabiliser and enhancer; as promoter of the rights of indigenous peoples; and as guardian of animal welfare (133-39). These visions were clearly not solely developed for the Arctic but have their basis in the EU's self-image and the 'duties' imposed on it by the Treaty of Lisbon. The EU's claim of being a world leader in the combat against global climate change, for instance, goes back to the 1990s and is based on the strong commitments given at the 1992 Climate Convention, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol or most recently the 2016 Paris Agreement (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 89–110; Oberthür and Groen 2017).

Initially, these five geopolitical ideas were considered as a means of governing an assumed undefined geopolitical space and basically to create a distinct EUropean configuration of social and material relationships in and for the Arctic. It has been commonly argued that the EU cannot operate if an external regulated space – an immediate neighbourhood for instance – is characterized by an environment of arbitrary and ad hoc interaction. EUropean geopolitical agency is therefore at its best if the international system or a regional level thereof is predictable, governed by a legal framework and routinized relations between different actors (Bachmann 2015, 698). Yet the Arctic of 2007 was assumed to be the very antithesis. A geopolitical mess, broadly (and to some extent falsely) identified as a space of exception, emergency and chaos, with climate change being an immediate security issue and where an anticipated 'Arctic Gold Rush' might lead to serious tensions among key players, within and without the circumpolar North (Dittmer et al. 2011; Knecht and Keil 2013).

Based on the EU's overall moral language and its self-perception as the main international advocate of regional cooperation and integration (Farrell 2009), the adopted approach for the Arctic region was in principle both conclusive and consequential: A global leader in fighting climate change needs to be politically present in the region most affected by climate change; a governance expert that brought peace and prosperity to Europe can have a positive impact on a region in alleged political flux.

In order to 'clean up' that regional mess, the EU – through its policy statements – has relied on a soft external policy approach to promote its visions and secure the area (Kobza 2015, 6–7). An important element of such a strategy was financial contributions to circumpolar research and regional development initiatives in the European Arctic, aimed to portray the EU as *unus inter pares* – one among equals (AuthorA, 80-81). Similarly, the notion of enhanced interdependence – from the political and economic to the environmental sphere – can itself be a positive means to promote stability and sustainable development in an allegedly undefined geopolitical space.

Accordingly, as part of its regional approach the EU strongly emphasized its ideational character, not only stressing its international economic weight but essentially its strengths as frontrunner with regard to regional integration, transnational governance, environmental protection and research (AuthorB). It was in particular the Commission that continuously

projected the idea of the EU having distinct leadership's skills in combatting climate change, following a distinct logic: As the Union is a world leader in fighting climate change, a successfully related policy would benefit the region and its inhabitants. This causal relation was supported by the Union having a regional impact via a variety of EUropean dimensions (Damanaki 2011, 3). Accordingly, an official described the 'EU as the best international actor to tackle the upcoming problems of climate change'.[18] In that regard, not only did the EU see itself as a past and present regional actor, but decisively as a relevant future actor in the region, or even the solution for its challenges (AuthorA, 172-173).

However, the eventual implementation of these ideas ran up against several problems since the actual geographical space in question was neither as empty nor as undefined or in flux as initially assumed. The EU's abilities were moreover inherently limited given their often-negative reception by the Arctic states – states that themselves can rival the EU in geopolitical outreach (Russia and the US) or levels of development and economic prosperity (Iceland and Norway). Indeed, the EU's very self-perception as an epitome of what is right and safe, premised on the exemplified geopolitical ideas, was not necessarily well-perceived by some of the region's dominant actors (AuthorB). The infamous ban on seal products may be the most shining example of such an Arctic–EU divide (Sellheim 2015b), followed by attempts of the EP and some of its Members, respectively, to ban petroleum extraction in waters beyond EU-jurisdiction and calls for an Arctic Treaty similar to that of uninhabited Antarctica (Author B and A). Especially in the early stages of its Arctic endeavour, it seems the EU ignored the (successful) lessons of the northern regional partnership approach as implemented by the ND.

This emerges as particularly striking after reading the EU's ten Arctic policy documents and looking for references to Russia, the largest Arctic state and the EU's primary adversary *and* partner to the north-east. The EU's Arctic relationship with Russia has – correctly – been referred to as an 'Arctic exception' in an otherwise highly institutionalized strategic partnership, especially in the context of Northern regimes such as BEAC and the ND (Aalto 2013, 101). The ND thus seems almost completely out of step with the larger Arctic initiative, although both are naturally linked geographically and politically. The reasons for this may lie in the eastern neighbourhood, where the EU (and its Member States) and Russia disagree – to put it mildly – over Russia's aggressively perceived push westwards and related disputes in Ukraine (2006, 2009, 2014-) and Georgia (2009). This is why the 2016 Global Strategy highlights the Arctic as a positive case for selective engagement between the EU and Russia in an otherwise rather tense landscape (High Representative 2016, 33).

The implementation issue becomes even clearer when opening the black box of Arctic territoriality – the process whereby territory (in this case: access to the Arctic Ocean) is claimed by individuals or groups – or often referred to as Arctic 'sovereignty'. Although, for example, both the Commission and EP have continuously underlined the Law of the Sea Convention as key to the determination of the Arctic coastal states' regional rights and duties

[18] Stated at an internal EP-Arctic meeting arranged by the EU Arctic Forum in Brussels in May 2012.

in their Arctic policy documents, they misinterpreted the significance of regional sovereignty for the states involved, especially in the domestic context of Canada and Russia; the two Arctic states that openly slowed down and objected to the EU's application to become an AC observer (Lackenbauer 2010). The publicly advocated key to regional stewardship is Arctic territoriality – the possession of an Arctic Ocean coastline or territorial presence (AuthorA, 58). The EU does not hold such a key, even though it does possess a keychain thanks to its Arctic Member States.[19] Thus, the EU's early proposal to enhance Arctic governance revealed a latent ambiguity in its regional approach, given its dual descriptive as well as normative/moral nature. Although the EU clearly acknowledged the region's existing governance regimes and the related rights and duties of the Arctic states (the descriptive part), it simultaneously questioned their effectiveness, which can only be guaranteed by being upgraded by a EUropean booster (the normative/moral side) (AuthorA, 150-151).

Another example of the EU's challenging move further north is the striking lack of a clear delineation of 'Arctic space' (AuthorB). Over the last ten years, EUropean policymakers did simply not concern themselves with delineating Arctic space in various policy documents. With both the Commission's DG MARE (with its IMP background) and the EEAS (and its predecessor, the DG for External Relations, RELEX) being the predominant authors of the EU's Arctic story, the regional focus has primarily remained a circumpolar one that largely sees the Arctic as a maritime and external policy field only. And yet the Arctic region cannot be reduced to these two policy areas; it also entails a broad variety of EU-internal components and regional development efforts. For the EU, the Arctic region is not simply a matter of foreign policy, it is an unconventional policy mix of internal, cross-border and external policies (Kobza 2015, 4). (AuthorA et al)

Thus, four 'physical' dimensions can be said to characterize the EU's aspirations to act in the Arctic: 1) a core region (the northern parts of Finland and Sweden); 2) an EEA region (Iceland and mainland Norway); 3) a partnership/cooperation region in the European Arctic (Greenland and Russia, BEAC and the ND); and 4) an international region (with the EU's international regulatory powers being relevant and cooperation efforts taken at AC level) (Koivurova, Stępień, and Kankaanpää 2014, 76). This highlights the EU's 'geographical' dilemma of being stuck between a (maritime) circumpolar and (terrestrial) EUropean Arctic. On the one hand, an important partner for the Arctic states as a co-shaper of international rules, with a strong environmental and economic footprint and a substantial funder of Arctic climate, marine and environmental research. On the other hand, a key player as regulator in the core and EEA region, essential source of development funding and bilateral partner for Greenland and (north-west) Russia.[20]

[19] Furthermore, the EU is, by virtue of its Member States and EEA relations, represented at the AC, either via the AC's Member States, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, or its observers, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands and Spain (and the UK) (Stępień and Koivurova 2016, 22–23).

[20] Presented by Adam Stępień during the EU-Circumpolar Arctic Dialogue Seminar in Brussels on 29 November 2018.

This spatial aspect characterises the EU's quest for a northern role. From the start of the Arctic 'hype' in 2007-2008, the EU has been trapped in the distinction between two notions: The geographically bounded European-Arctic-focus versus the EU as a global actor engaging in issues ranging from animal protection to CO_2 emissions' reduction in the Arctic. Returning to notions of the EU as a geopolitical actor, a few points stand out. As highlighted by Kuus (2014), the *agency* of the Brussels-based officials can help explain certain policy-dynamics that defines the EU's 'geopolitical' approach. This has become clear in its various Arctic-policy-engagements where some have been tailored to specific regional concerns in North-Sweden and North-Finland (European Commission and High Representative 2016, 8–13), whereas some have taken a top-down approach to larger political questions – such as an 'Arctic Treaty' (European Parliament 2008) – that in turn have been met with indignation and rejection by the central Arctic actors (littoral states).

Nor did the EU appear and act as a coherent, collective actor (Stępień 2015). In general, a tendency seems to exist in Arctic literature and official documents to portray the EU as one coherent actor. The complexity of the multiple interests among (then) 28 Member States and numerous political factions and parties are rather neglected. Particularly when scrutinising the EU institutional policy output, it is necessary to distinguish between the different voices of the Commission, Council, EEAS and EP, respectively, and their actual impact on the policy process (Author A and B). The regional set of policies are a result of explicit demands from regional actors in the EUropean Arctic but also other branches of the Commission dealing with these, namely the DGs for Regional and Urban Policy (REGIO), Research and Innovation, and Mobility and Transport (MOVE). In contrast, the larger set of strategic policy-notions of governance structures, climate change initiatives and/or efforts to limit activity that the 'EU' deems unwanted – such as seal hunting or Arctic oil and gas drilling – originate from either officials in the EEAS (and formerly DG RELEX) or from singular Members of the EP with a specific Arctic-agenda. Thus, the EU's geopolitical approach to the north is truly produced in the office halls of Berlaymont and Luxembourg and through bureaucratic practices.

As put by Kuus (2014, 38–39), geopolitics in the instance of the EU is more concerned with practices at different locations (physical as well as competence-related) than necessarily a set of universal principles and traditional anchored power politics. The EU's northern approach has in many ways been marked as that of a 'geopolitical' actor – pursuing certain policy-interests in a geographically defined space of growing relevance. However, the EU's *sui generis* policy-making system has in many ways produced an intra-institutional Arctic policy perhaps coined more for internal than external purposes. The practices vis-à-vis the Arctic region as described throughout this article has been shown to be a contradictory mix of intra-institutional interests and agendas (ranging from climate concerns to regional development and foreign policy objectives), as well as reacting to external events in the Arctic. In contrast to traditional state-structures, the EU's multi-voice-, multi-actor-approach towards a geographic region where both supranational and intergovernmental competencies are in play has led to the fragmented Arctic approach, as described above. This becomes particular

obvious when also opening the black-box of institutional expertise and regional awareness/knowledge. Expertise – knowledge claims – is not a naturally given thing, it is rather a lengthy process (Kuus 2014, 40); a process of knowledge acquisition, discussions, arguments, and intra-institutional rivalries about competences and knowledge supremacy.

However, in some ways this is the exact *nature* of the beast. The EU – and especially parts of system like the Commission and the EEAS – undoubtedly have geopolitical aspirations, and act accordingly when a new policy for the near-abroad is formulated, whether it is the Arctic or the Mediterranean. But it is in the clash of interests *within* the system in tandem with the EU-normative-value-based language that emerges as a result, that we find the markers of these geopolitical and even great-power political aspirations. Wrapped in the discourse of governing climate change and solving the region's problems, the EU – as underscored by previous and current work (Authors, et. al) as well as the interviews conducted – undoubtedly has real interests in the north that at times clash with those of the other Arctic actors.

What both approaches – the European Arctic and the circumpolar Arctic one – have in common is a deliberate effort to promote EU-interests and the Union specifically in the north, normatively framed as efforts in favour of the region itself. Self-interest framed as altruism. It is in this way that we see a clear overlap with the Union's earlier geopolitical efforts in the south and the east. The core difference, however, is the power dynamics between the EU and the regional actors (= Arctic states) it attempts to influence and engage with in the Arctic.

6. CONCLUSION

The 'north' for the EU has consequently constituted different things since the 1990s. On the one hand, it has included the Member States (Denmark), Finland and Sweden. On the other, it is predominantly dominated by Russia, as the ever-present actor in EU spatial considerations. Iceland and Norway – as EEA states – fall somewhere in between on this spectrum, naturally closer to EU Member States than their antagonizing eastern neighbour. In comes the Arctic as a 'new' region in the north, albeit comprising the *same* actors. Canada and the United States add to the circumpolar region, but the European Arctic is nothing different – spatially – than the ND's 'north'.[21]

Here we have argued that while the EU's two northern initiatives over the last two decades – the ND and the general Arctic policy process – are inherently different in character, both have a geopolitical tinge. Similar to the ND, the broader circumpolar North is not a 'typical neighbourhood', but redolent rather of a 'partnership approach': A region where the EU is one of many partners and a region where the EU is challenged by strong actors that prefer regional inclusiveness with only limited access for the EU. A region though where the EU seems to be stuck in a 'geographical' dilemma between an 'old' terrestrial EUropean Arctic and a new maritime circumpolar one. With regard to the latter, the EU has not yet found a

[21] The two North American states are actually considered observer states to the ND.

convincing narrative in order to anchor its regional preference, both towards its internal structure but also its external partners, on why it should be engaged in the Arctic.

Despite significant efforts over the last decade the construction of regional legitimacy has not *yet* been fully achieved. Notwithstanding a step-by-step progress in the policymaking process, positive developments in some of the Union's regional activities, the agreed-on compromise with Canada concerning the seal issue and considerable input of EU representatives to the work of AC working groups, the Union has not yet elaborated a clear statement of its northern regional ambitions – a distinct EU–Arctic narrative or single organising idea – nor achieved its anticipated 'goal' to become an 'official' part of Arctic governance – an observer to the AC (Author A et al, 432-33). For the first time in its immediate neighbourhood policy, the Union faces a region where it cannot per se act as a dominant actor vis-à-vis its neighbours (or externalise its internal set-up and policies) but is rather bound in a distinct 'regional system' (Kobza 2015, 5).

The EU's approach was not crowned with Arctic success, despite the EU already being a *de facto* regional actor. Neither has the EU been fully accepted at the Arctic governance table and nor were its institutional representatives able to create enhanced Arctic legitimacy in EUrope in order to eventually place the region more prominently on the Union's agenda. Although both climate change and research efforts serve as Arctic access points, this nexus could not have materialised as the single organising idea to become an Arctic policy driving force. What *has* become clear, however, is that by accepting the EU as a geopolitical actor through bureaucratic practices and policies – produced in the hallways of Brussels and defined by internal institutional aspirations – the EU's northern aspirations can be better understood.

Referring to bordering crises in Libya, Syria or Ukraine, Bachmann concluded that the Union's preference to regulate the interaction of spaces is only implementable '[a]s long as actors have an interest in being regulated . . . [otherwise] EU agency quickly reaches its limits' (Bachmann 2015, 700–701). With the Arctic region being a 'cold' rather than a 'hot' geopolitical space (an already stable, regional politico-legal system), it remains debatable whether the EU truly aims to create a distinct EUropean space of interaction. Moreover, it remains doubtful if the Union actually has the means to impose its vision on a sui generis regional system of powerful actors, including self-reliant Member States. In the 2016 Global Strategy the Arctic is mentioned, although only as a marginal note in the broader foreign policy picture of the EU. With the Arctic status quo being identified as cooperative and beneficial to EUrope, the Union does not aim to 'upset the positive [regional] trends' already existent (Author A).

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