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The EU and its Arctic spirit: Solving Arctic climate change from home?

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Abstract

Dealing with climate change and developing the Arctic sustainably are often seen as both binary and contradictory sets of challenges. The EU is in a unique position in Arctic affairs: unlike non-Arctic states, it is part of and linked to the region. However, the EU is at risk of missing the opportunity to be a leader in setting standards for a coherent and sustainable approach for the region. The Arctic is often used as a symbol for global climate change and, conversely, climate change is also used as a reason for more Arctic engagement. Yet, the roots of global heating—greenhouse gas emissions—mostly originate from outside the region. This article asks whether the path towards more EU–Arctic involvement should start closer to home.

Keywords

Arctic, EU, Environment, Security, Climate change

Introduction

In summer 2007, the Arctic resurfaced on the global agenda. Ever since, researchers, policymakers and the media alike have been making a range of different claims about the region's ongoing transformation and future—from Arctic boom to race and from regional cooperation to conflict (Østhagen 2019, 1). Although many of these stories have been proven wrong, another episode from that summer still causes severe concerns and only continues to increase international awareness of the Arctic: global climate change and its ramifications for the Arctic region. To be more precise, the issue is the record low average sea ice extent of the Arctic in 2007, a record which has been

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surpassed in almost every summer since. Currently, Arctic and sub-Arctic wildfires threaten the carbon sink of the boreal forests' soil, releasing greenhouse gases and provoking unprecedented atmospheric and landscape changes (Masrur et al. 2018; Walker et al. 2019). The continuous melting of the Arctic (sea) ice, thawing of the permafrost and coastal erosion not only endanger Arctic residents' fundamental security and well-being, but also have severe implications for Europe, essentially threatening cohesion and solidarity (Benzie et al. 2019, 770; IPCC 2019). Rising sea levels and coastal flooding are set to have cross-border effects and will affect European land use and agricultural policies as a whole. Rising temperatures and warmer waters are also set to impact the fisheries on which many EU member states rely.

Since 2007/2008, the EU has consistently expressed its interest in various Arctic issues and has developed a dedicated set of related documents and positions. Climate change mitigation, the sustainable development of the region and international cooperation regarding the Arctic are the three key pillars of the EU's regional policy. However, despite a rather coherent policy approach and dramatic environmental changes with both global and European ramifications, the Arctic remains a niche subject in Brussels and Europe's capitals—a marginal policy area that lacks a convincing narrative of why Europe should be engaged in it (Stępień and Raspotnik 2019, 4). And yet the EU is in a unique position in Arctic affairs: not only can it affect and be affected by the Arctic, it is essentially part of and linked to the region. If the EU does not come to recognise the dissonance between Arctic involvement and climate change, it risks missing the opportunity to be a true leader in setting regional standards that offer a coherent and sustainable approach for the region. This article asks whether the path towards more EU–Arctic involvement should start closer to home.

Is Arctic climate change a threat to Europe?

Global environmental challenges, such as rapid climate change, global heating, and the loss of sea ice and glaciers have prompted efforts to deal with and mitigate such challenges. The Arctic is warming at almost twice the global average (IPCC 2018). Rising sea levels, changing climate patterns and the thawing of permafrost are all new characteristics for the region, which is being deeply affected by global greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, Arctic feedback mechanisms (e.g. the increased absorption of solar radiation due to the lack of ice or the release of greenhouse gases caused by thawing permafrost) are accelerating these changes on a global scale (Young 2019).

Whether focusing on questions concerning its climate, biodiversity or ecosystems, the Arctic is generally characterised as a dynamic, complex and variable system intrinsically connected with the global climate system via its atmosphere, its ocean, and the surrounding seas and rivers (ACIA 2005; Kriwoken 2014, 44). Global climate change affects the Arctic, but changes in the Arctic matter globally. In many respects, the Arctic serves as the canary in the coal mine of global climate change as transformations within the Arctic occur earlier and the rate of warming there is faster than the global mean (ACIA 2005; Pachauri and Meyer 2014, SPM-8). The 'Arctic amplification' effect explains the

changes to the region that, due to feedback linkages, accelerate at a faster pace than in other regions (Strahlendorff et al. 2014, 21). The massive loss of Greenland's ice sheet and freshwater flows from river discharge, snow and melting glaciers in Canada and Russia are significantly contributing to the current global rise in sea levels and will remain dominant contributors to this rise, in addition to the melting Antarctic ice sheet, in the forthcoming decades (Rignot et al. 2011, 5).

The Arctic is ground zero for climate change on a global scale (Young 2019). These seismic Arctic changes have ripple effects on the EU as a whole, be it through rising sea levels, coastal flooding or changing weather patterns—all have a negative impact on agriculture and fisheries. In this respect, it is essential for the EU to not 'only' develop a distinct policy for the Arctic but also to fully comprehend that the ongoing changes on the EU's northern edges are the result of developments in the south. Greenhouse gas emissions, domestic climate policies and market mechanisms all have an effect on the Arctic's—but also on the EU's—(environmental) security.

Acting as an Arctic leader

Widespread international awareness of the 'Arctic melting' has arisen together with a growing concern about the future of the region. The EU is no stranger to this story. It is affected by and plays a role in Arctic climate change, but beyond this, the EU—unlike most other non-Arctic actors—is essentially part of and linked to the region (Raspotnik 2018, 65–85).

The latest expression of the EU's own 'Arcticness'—the 2016 Joint Communication—is divided into three 'priority areas': (1) climate change and the environment, (2) Arctic sustainable development and (3) international cooperation on Arctic issues (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2016). It is clear from these three priority areas that the EU's Arctic policy covers a vast spectrum of domains—of both an internal and an external nature.[1] The main recurring theme across all EU policy documents since 2008 is tackling the issue of regional climate change and its subsequent security threat. Accordingly, all Arctic-related policy statements stress the EU's global leadership skills, following a distinct argumentation logic: as the Union is a world leader in fighting climate change, its Arctic policy can only benefit the region and its inhabitants (Raspotnik 2018, 134).

Thus, one might think that climate change and the EU's self-proclaimed leadership in climate change mitigation might constitute a convincing (Arctic) narrative that would attract broader European attention. Even more so in the current political context: after a decade of being outperformed by economic, financial and migration-related crises, climate change appears to be gradually returning to the focus of public attention. However, the root causes of this transformation—greenhouse gas emissions—originate from outside the Arctic. Little mitigation can specifically be achieved via a distinct Arctic policy that aims to 'mitigate climate change'. At the same time, some Arctic stakeholders, including regional authorities, business representatives and even some indigenous

politicians, are concerned that economic development in the region may be unjustly hindered—as compared to other regions—due to the symbolism of the Arctic in global climate debates (Stępień and Raspotnik 2019, 2). Thus, if mitigating regional climate change is somehow trapped in the Arctic paradox of both protecting the Arctic environment and fostering regional sustainable development, one wonders about the EU's leadership skills. How can the EU perform as a regional leader that supports regional economic development, while simultaneously living up to its own expectations of being *the* global leader in tackling climate change?

. . . from home

While the EU has produced 10 Arctic-related policy documents since 2008, a more productive way to look at EU–Arctic engagement and impact might be through the lenses of both global multilateral agreements and domestic policy integration. There is a causal relationship between EU domestic actions and policies and what happens in the Arctic. Currently, mitigation actions are inadequate and more EU–Arctic engagement might not be the solution.

The EU is already taking various routes to act as a global leader in the Arctic using non-Arctic-specific tools and frameworks.[2] Working towards achieving sustainable development through realising UN Sustainable Development Goals and building a more comprehensive framework to target net carbon dioxide emissions is one option. Developing multilateral mechanisms to mitigate the effects of southern developments on the Arctic while enforcing current legally binding agreements (e.g. the Paris Agreement or the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution) and encouraging the adoption of soft-law documents (e.g. the Arctic Council Black Carbon and Methane Framework) (Shapovalova 2016) is another area where the EU could further its Arctic engagement outside the Arctic. However, more intra-EU changes might also be needed.

Twenty per cent of the EU budget is dedicated to climate action in the current Multiannual Financial Framework (2014–20), and this percentage is set to increase after 2020. Furthermore, the EU is working towards the transformation of its energy production and is trying to change how its economy functions to achieve a low-carbon and high energy-efficiency economy. This includes, for instance, the EU's emissions trading system and the EU Adaptation Strategy. In this context, climate change has played a central role in policy integration as well as in internal and external EU policies (Kulovesi et al. 2011, 830).

However, the EU still relies on hydrocarbon activity in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. In 2010, nearly 50% of oil imports and 60% of natural gas imports came from either Norway or Russia (Østhagen 2013, 75). At present an EU-led moratorium on Arctic hydrocarbon exploitation and consumption is far from being a realistic scenario and would antagonise partners (e.g. Norway) and non-partners (e.g. Russia) alike (Churchill 2018, 31; Østhagen and Raspotnik 2017, 110–12). However, the EU cannot be serious about reducing its impact on the Arctic and climate change without focused policies and directives that will ease the transition towards other sources of energy. The introduction of stronger regulations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as methane and black carbon, and

land-use-related CO_2 emissions, which have an impact on the Arctic, is a necessary step to reduce the EU's impact on the Arctic. At the regulatory level, such reductions and adaptations would also need to include combining integrated frameworks and funding and developing a multilevel governance system of adaptation that includes decentralisation and institutionalised environmental policy at different levels (Keskitalo 2010).

Conclusion

Consequently, the EU's Arctic involvement is not only clarified by its Arctic policy documents and the acquis communautaire, which covers an extensive area of the geographical European Arctic, but essentially also by the EU's (direct and indirect) involvement in Arctic governance structures. When it comes to climate change, protecting the Arctic environment and making the region economically viable for both its residents and the EU as a whole are often seen as binary challenges.

One key element in achieving more sustainable EU involvement is thus not only more engagement at the Arctic regional level but also devoting more resources and attention to domestic policy frameworks (e.g. energy transition, climate mitigation). The other key element is to look at the Arctic from an international perspective. As a party to international legally binding instruments with Arctic relevance such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and several multilateral environmental agreements, the EU can influence regional governance, standard setting and cooperation outside of the Arctic realm of governance by committing to investing in stronger, more efficient climate policy at home. To truly act as a leader in mitigating Arctic climate change, the EU might have to step back from the Arctic and strengthen its own climate governance framework under both global (UN Sustainable Development Goals, emissions targets) and regional umbrellas (climate mitigation and energy transition policies). Walking the creative path to sustainably investing in Arctic economic development while protecting the environment might lead policymakers closer to the streets of Brussels than to the melting Arctic ice.

Notes

1. These range from the EU's climate change mitigation actions to protecting the regional environment, from sustainably exploiting the region's resources to fostering economic growth in the European Arctic, and from participating in international Arctic cooperation to engagement with the Arctic's indigenous peoples.
2. As both a multilateral player and a bilateral actor, the EU is party to several multilateral environmental agreements, as well as to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, all of which have a certain relevance in the Arctic. As such, the EU can also play a role in Arctic governance from a more global perspective.

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