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THE EUROPEAN UNION'S 2021 ARCTIC POLICY UPDATE



THE ARCTIC INSTITUTE
CENTER FOR CIRCUMPOLAR SECURITY STUDIES

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ABOUT THE REPORT

On 13 October 2021, the European Union's Arctic policy was updated with the publication of the Joint Communication on A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic.

In this analysis, we offer some thoughts on this recent development. The EU presents itself as a more self-confident actor in the Arctic, taking stock of its economic and environment impacts, while retaining the previous definition of the scope of its Arctic engagement. This includes climate and environment, developmental issues in the European Arctic, as well as international cooperation within and relevant for the region. At the same time, however, one of the key objectives of the new policy statement is to position the EU's Arctic engagement within the landscape of the European Green Deal (EDG) and the newly found self-portrayal of the EU as a geopolitical actor.

As the Arctic policy is primarily a compilation and manifestation of the EU's larger policy agendas, it is them that largely determine the content of EU Arctic documents, including the 2021 communication. The influence of Arctic concerns on these larger frameworks is minor at best. Among the consequences of the EU's new overall policy setting is a strong focus on Arctic resource developments, discouraging those that contradict global climate objectives (opening new hydrocarbons exploitation) and encouraging those that support the transition (critical minerals). Especially the new proposal for a moratorium on hydrocarbons exploration is a controversial one, already resulting in negative reactions among many Arctic states, actors and stakeholders.

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About the Report and About the Authors Page: A European Union map composed entirely of Lego bricks. Photo by Pietro Naj-Oleari, European Parliament: https://www.flickr.com/photos/european_parliament/6721087473/; (Creative Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)).

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ABOUT THE ARCTIC INSTITUTE

Established in 2011, The Arctic Institute is an independent, nonprofit 501(c)3 tax-exempt organisation headquartered in Washington, D.C with a network of researchers across the world. We envision a world in which the diverse and complex issues facing Arctic security are identified, understood, and resolved. Rigorous, qualitative, and comprehensive research is the Institute's core for developing solutions to challenges and injustices in the circumpolar north.



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By Adam Stępień & Andreas Raspotnik

On 13 October 2021, the European Union's Arctic policy was updated with the publication of the Joint Communication on *A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic*,^[1] issued by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. In this analysis, we offer some thoughts on this recent development. The EU presents itself as a more self-confident actor in the Arctic, taking stock of its economic and environment impacts, while retaining the previous definition of the scope of its Arctic engagement. This includes climate and environment, developmental issues in the European Arctic, and international cooperation within and relevant for the region. At the same time, however, one of the key objectives of the new policy statement is to position the EU's Arctic engagement within the landscape of the European Green Deal (EDG) and the newly found self-portrayal of the EU as a geopolitical actor (e.g. von der Leyen's Commission being declared a "geopolitical Commission"). Among the consequences of this new setting is a strong focus on Arctic resource developments, discouraging those that contradict global climate objectives (opening new hydrocarbons exploitation) and encouraging those that support the transition (critical minerals). The new proposal for a moratorium on hydrocarbons exploration especially is discussed below in greater detail. We also consider whether the Arctic policy could be seen as a testing ground for the EU's future foreign policy in general.

Globally, within Europe and in the Arctic region, much has changed since the EU's last policy document was issued in 2016.^[2] Globally, the United States has substituted their commander-in-chief. China – clearly the main concern of both the former and current U.S. president – has intensified its Belt and Road Initiative.

[1] European Commission and High Representative, "A Stronger EU Engagement for a Peaceful, Sustainable and Prosperous Arctic (JOIN(2021) 27 Final), Brussels, 13.10.2021," 2021.

[2] European Commission and High Representative, "An Integrated European Union Policy for the Arctic (JOIN(2016) 21 Final), Brussels, 27.4.2016," 2016.

Russia has tested new frontiers of hybrid and cyber warfare. A new submicroscopic infectious agent has spread all over the world and the Fridays for Future movement has marched the streets. Likely unrelated to the latter, Russian and Chinese governments adopted a belief that they can become carbon neutral by 2060, while the U.S. aims to make it a decade earlier. In *EUrope*, and also in the 2050 no-net-GHG-emissions category, we have experienced Brexit, heard about “illiberal democracies” in Hungary and Poland, and are about to say goodbye to the first female chancellor of Germany, while her former colleague continues to be the first woman to lead the European Commission. The European Union has developed the European Green Deal, following a well-beloved continuity to borrow U.S. owned terms and names. However, in contrast to the United States, the EU actually adopted a new plan for the total overhaul of its economic system and has been busy adopting all sorts of regulatory instruments over the past two years. These include ideas of how the EU could influence developments outside of its borders and address climate and environmental impacts of activities outside of the EU which result in products and resources consumed within the Union. One such idea has been the carbon border adjustment mechanism.[3] In the *Arctic*, we have witnessed more and more (sea) ice disappearing, seen the taiga burning, and Mike Pompeo warning his Western Arctic partners not to get too cozy with China. Still no economic boom or Arctic conflict have materialised, although Russia keeps exporting more and more of her Arctic natural gas and modernises her Arctic military structures.

Overall, life is more or less the same – everything has changed, and nothing has changed in a profound manner.

Yet EU policymakers felt that enough had changed that a new iteration of their Arctic policy was in order and, in December 2019, the Council of the European Union invited the Commission and the High Representative to initiate a process to update the Union’s Arctic policy.[4] The result of 18 months of work is a mix of a *dominant same old* and a *surprising and not-surprising* new. The publication of the new Joint Communication traditionally followed an intervention by the European Parliament on 7 October 2021[5] – a resolution which equally traditionally was all over the place, representing the beauty of the various voices and concerns coming together in the European Parliament.

[3] European Commission, “Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (COM(2021) 564 Final), Brussels, 14.7.2021,” 2021.

[4] Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions on the EU Arctic Policy, 9 December 2019,” 2019.

[5] European Parliament, “Report on the Arctic: Opportunities, Concerns and Security Challenges (2020/2112(INI)),” 2021.

The publication was also conveniently and purposely placed just before this year's Arctic Circle conference in Reykjavík, so that EU leaders and officials could be publicly criticised right away.[6]

In 2019, we pondered whether the EU should revisit its policy towards the Arctic, contemplating options and non-options.[7] One question we considered was whether the EU's Arctic policy – a domain where internal and external aspects are closely intertwined – could become a testing ground for the development of the EU's future foreign policy, particularly from the perspective of EU climate action in the global context and an encompassing green shift in Europe, particularly among the younger generation.[8]

The 2021 Arctic Policy Update in a Nutshell

Many commentators and also researchers alike tend to overstate or misunderstand the role and significance of the EU's Arctic policy statements, so perhaps it is important to give better context to our later comments.

Five years ago, the European Commission announced that it had adopted an integrated approach to the Arctic, presumably bringing together various strands of EU influence and activity in a coherent manner. As we already discussed in a previous commentary, this was a largely empty declaration.[9] As in 2016, and also in 2021, the Arctic policy remains primarily the Commission's and European External Action Service's exercise in reflecting on which activities and policies are Arctic-relevant and how they resonate with the current situation and challenges across the region. Only a few new actions have been announced in the latest document, and those present are mostly of secondary importance. Generally, such communications have limited – although certainly not zero – influence on major EU policy priorities that are Arctic-relevant, such as the EU's overall climate action, energy policy or the Union's general research priorities.

[6] Arne O. Holm, "The Arctic Is Still One, Big Happy Family – but Three of the Children Are Put to Shame," High North News, October 15, 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-still-one-big-happy-family-three-children-are-put-shame>.

[7] Adam Stępień and Andreas Raspotnik, "The EU's Arctic Policy: Between Vision and Reality," CEPOB #5.19 (Bruges: College of Europe, 2019), https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/research-paper/stepien_raspotnik_cepob_5-19_0_0.pdf.

[8] Cassie Flynn et al., "The G20 Peoples' Climate Vote" (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021), <https://www.undp.org/publications/g20-peoples-climate-vote-2021>.

[9] Adam Stępień and Andreas Raspotnik, "The EU's New Arctic Communication: Not-so-Integrated, Not-so-Disappointing?," ArCticles 1/2016 (Rovaniemi: Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, 2016), <https://lauda.ulapland.fi/handle/10024/62370>.

Listing various actions in one document and consolidating those under *one* geographic umbrella is not the same as making them coherent or creating an integrated approach; a task that is essentially beyond the role of an Arctic policy within an overall rather complex polity. Thus, it should be appreciated that the authors of the current document decided to avoid misleading their readers and abandoned the pretense of an integrated and coherent policy. The continuous use of vague wording, particularly under the sustainability pretext, is a different kettle of fish though. One might want to ask if anyone can explain the very meaning of developing “sustainable relationships”.

However, this is not to say that the EU’s Arctic policy is irrelevant. As a matter of fact, it is of vital importance that this complex supranational polity continues to regularly reflect of how it influences the various Arctics,[10] identifies the regional status-quo, puts those developments in an EU policy context and communicates its own regional role to both Arctic and international partners, as well as its own citizens (and probably particularly those). These specifics of the EU’s Arctic engagement are too technical and boring for IR scholars or journalists hunting for the next clickbait-article, but it is of immense significance for Arctic realities as EU internal standards *do* have an external effect and as such influence the Union’s northern neighbourhood and backyard as well.[11] The EU’s Arctic documents have always been strong in showcasing EU-funded Arctic research (and thus supporting regional research cooperation), satellite programmes and regional development credentials. In this year’s update, those showcase projects are strongly accompanied by a variety of data and monitoring services and systems – for instance for forest fires – where the Union creates solutions that can be and are already used across the circumpolar North. Highlighting these contributions in the Joint Communication, or any other Arctic document or related speech, should make it less likely that various activities will become under-resourced in the years ahead. Eventually, such a policy statement also fulfils the task to give the Arctic more prominence within the Union’s institutional set-up, drawing regional attention to those officials that do not *directly* deal with Arctic affairs but who’s day-to-day work has Arctic relevance.

[10] Timo Koivurova et al., “Overview of EU Actions in the Arctic and Their Impact (Final Report - June 2021)” (EPRD Office for Economic Policy and Regional Development Ltd., June 2021),

https://ec.europa.eu/environment/international_issues/pdf/EUpolicyArcticImpactOverview-FinalReport.pdf.

[11] Romain Chuffart, Andreas Raspotnik, and Adam Stępień, “Our Common Arctic? A More Sustainable EU-Arctic Nexus in Light of the European Green Deal Light of the European Green Deal,” *The Polar Journal*, 2021, 1–19,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2021.1978757>.

Overall, the 2021 Joint Communication appears to be a document that has become increasingly a regular element of the EU's policy turnover, rather than a major new opening. An observation that can also be made with the policies issued by the Arctic states, which receive much less public interest than a decade ago.

Same Old...

In terms of general prioritisation not much has changed since 2016. The key themes of climate change and environment, sustainable development and international cooperation remain the same. These are abstract and vague enough that any aspect or issue can be comfortably fitted. As such, the new document presents many familiar themes: a strong focus on Arctic research, the importance of innovation and low-carbon development or the matter of black carbon emissions reductions. The commitment to close cooperation with Arctic Indigenous Peoples continues to be one of the features of the EU's Arctic engagement – this continuation is so clear that the new document has in fact not added anything to the previous EU statements while certainly using all the right keywords including traditional knowledge, climate change impacts, involvement in decision making and underlining the commitment to the international indigenous rights framework.

The EU obviously values and supports international cooperation in the Arctic and the fact that this cooperation keeps avoiding being swamped by political tensions coming from outside the region. Also, it is of no surprise that the new Joint Communication focuses on ocean governance and the establishment of marine protected areas. The EU is party to the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, which has recently entered into force,[12] is a strong proponent of the possible UNCLOS implementing agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), and has been traditionally very active in the environmental management of the North Atlantic region.[13] Other pet topics such as underlining the need for respecting the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, as well as the applicability of the Svalbard Treaty *also* to the waters around the archipelago have been duly mentioned. We can probably expect these themes to be present in future EU policy statements and actions as well.

[12] European Commission, "Arctic: Agreement to Prevent Unregulated Fishing Enters into Force," June 25, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/news/arctic-agreement-prevent-unregulated-fishing-enters-force-2021-06-25_en.

[13] European Commission, "Our Oceans, Seas and Coasts," 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/environment/marine/international-cooperation/regional-sea-conventions/ospar/index_en.htm.

Finally, the narrative on the EU's role in the regional development of the European Arctic has also been reproduced from previous Arctic policy iterations, mentioning connectivity, smart specialisation, innovation, investment and green energy. Interestingly, however, and compared with the 2016 Joint Communication, the 2021 edition seems to put much less emphasis on this European Arctic dimension of the EU's Arctic policy.

This is surprising as it is this broad geographic space where the EU invests most of its Arctic-specific funding, where it has the strongest legal influence, and where it is one of the key policy actors. Moreover, one could have highlighted that it is in the European Arctic where the EU could showcase the options, alternatives and possibilities for peripheral regions to benefit from the transition to carbon neutrality, as stipulated in the EDG and the Fit for 55 legislative package. This opportunity, while mentioned in an abstract manner, has not been fully utilised in the new policy statement.

... with Some New Nuances

While many things appear constant, there are indeed new emphasis in the 2021 Joint Communication: adopting a (new) geopolitical lens, clearly acknowledging the EU's role in managing its Arctic economic and environmental footprint, advocating an effective ban on new Arctic hydrocarbon projects, as well as a stronger than ever emphasis on critical minerals.

Defining Geopolitics

Overall, the new policy iteration surprises with a rather confident, almost perky tone. Not only is current Arctic change conceptualised in geopolitical terms, referring to geopolitical competition and a changing geopolitical landscape/environment that calls for the EU's full engagement in Arctic matters as a geopolitical necessity. Also – and for the very first time – the EU characterises itself as a geopolitical power with a strategic and day-to-day interest in the region. We will not go down the academic road to unravel the very meaning of geopolitics or the question if the European Union is a geopolitical power or not.[14] However, Arctic relations are fracturing and we have seen the Arctic increasingly becoming an arena to take the temperature on international politics and relations between great powers – old and new.[15]

[14] Andreas Raspotnik, *The European Union and the Geopolitics of the Arctic* (Cheltenham & Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2018).

[15] Andreas Raspotnik and Andreas Østhagen, "A Global Arctic Order Under Threat? An Agenda for American Leadership in the North" (Wilson Center, March 10, 2021), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/no-3-global-arctic-order-under-threat-agenda-american-leadership-north>.

The European Union has increasingly paid attention to the region's changing geopolitical dynamics and the need to address them in light of those shifting regional and global security considerations.[16]

As a matter of fact, the geopolitical banner under which Commission President von der Leyen initially organised her Commission's work is the very recognition of a melting international order, a more multipolar and less multilateral world.[17] A banner that has been very much defined by the self-image of the world's trading superpower to lead the fight against the existential threat of climate change.[18] Or in the words of the current Joint Communication: "This is the make or break decade in the fight against the climate and biodiversity crises." The key tool to pair the economy with the environment is the European Green Deal. As such, the EDG is not only the EU's future economic instrument, it is essentially also the Union's future foreign policy device with profound geopolitical repercussions on the EU's strategic partners and neighbours in the short-, medium- and long-run.[19] In today's Arctic setting, climate change and its ever-eroding effects on the region serve (again, similar to 2008) as the EU's articulated access point of regional legitimization: "Climate change and melting ice are leading to greater geopolitical interest with a high potential for increased strategic competition".

As environmental issues and climate change are increasingly perceived as affecting security and defence considerations, possible tensions in the Arctic might also threaten the EU's very own regional interests and overall security considerations. As such, the EU aims to not only enhance its strategic foresight on Arctic security risks but also strengthens its visibility in the Arctic, e.g. by the establishment of a Commission office in Greenland. While the overall tone inspires with confidence, some questions remain: How does the EU actually aim to reach foresight capabilities if the Arctic *does not* play a role in the current development of the Strategic Compass? And what does it mean to mainstream Arctic matters in its external diplomacy? Will one person – the Special Envoy for Arctic Matters – and his team be sufficient to make *the entirety of the Arctic* mainstream in all matters of EU global diplomacy?

[16] Andreas Raspotnik, "A Quantum of Possibilities: The Strategic Spectrum of the EU's Arctic Policy," Centre for European Policy Studies, December 17, 2020, <https://www.ceps.eu/a-quantum-of-possibilities/>.

[17] Steven Blockmans, "Why the EU Needs a Geopolitical Commission," Centre for European Policy Studies, September 15, 2020, <https://www.ceps.eu/why-the-eu-needs-a-geopolitical-commission/>.

[18] Ursula Von Der Leyen, "Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session: Ursula von Der Leyen, President-Elect of the European Commission (Strasbourg, 27 November 2019)," 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_6408.

[19] Mark Leonard et al., "The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal" (European Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2021), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-geopolitics-of-the-european-green-deal/>.

Acknowledging Responsibility

The new Joint Communication strongly acknowledges the EU's responsibility for environmental and economic changes taking place in the region. This aspect is not new, as it has been an essential part of the EU Arctic policy discourse at least from 2010, when the Commission funded the first study that attempted to measure the extent of the EU's economy and population's impact on the Arctic.[20] However, the 2021 update takes this discussion further, as it shows the measures the EU has been taking that have or will have resulted in decreasing the EU's footprint. This is understandable as it is here that the European Green Deal proves in principle transformative both for the EU's interactions with the Arctic and for the EU's influence on Arctic-relevant international processes. As the EDG is to reshape the Union's economy,[21] the EU-Arctic relationship is to follow. The issues mentioned in the Arctic-context include chemical pollution, black carbon, plastic and microplastics, and environmental impacts of EU-related Arctic maritime shipping.

In 2020, the Commission had funded another study on the role of EU policies in shaping the EU's environmental and economic footprint – co-authored by the authors of this analysis – where the EU's role as a market and polluter was presented as one of the most important elements of the EU's role in the Arctic.[22] It therefore appears that the emphasis on the EU's footprint had been a central element of the Joint Communication drafting process, rather than an afterthought or a side-note. This is rather unique in the Arctic setting and definitely not the case for most of the Arctic states' strategic statements.

No New Arctic Hydrocarbons?

In the light of taking stock of the EU's Arctic footprint, the Joint Communication establishes that the effects of its policies on the demand for Arctic resources constitute an important component of the EU's Arctic engagement. The EU seems to be increasingly bolder in using the EU's market power in the Arctic context, hoping to discourage some developments (hydrocarbons), while encouraging others (critical minerals extraction, renewables, innovation).

[20] Sandra Cavalieri et al., "EU Arctic Footprint and Policy Assessment: Final Report" (Berlin: Ecologic Institute, December 21, 2010), http://arctic-footprint.eu/sites/default/files/AFPA_Final_Report.pdf.

[21] Ursula Von Der Leyen, "Speech by President von Der Leyen in the Plenary of the European Parliament at the Debate on the European Green Deal (Brussels, 11 December 2019)," 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_6751.

[22] Koivurova et al., "Overview of EU Actions in the Arctic and Their Impact (Final Report - June 2021).

As such, the proposal for banning new Arctic hydrocarbon projects has quickly become the most discussed aspect of the new policy.[23] The forceful manner in which this new position has been verbalised is in fact among the most surprising elements of the policy statement.[24] In the past, the Union's Arctic documents stressed the need to mitigate climate change and acknowledged that hydrocarbon extraction is the problem. Concerns were also raised with regard to the environmental impact of extractive activities taking place in the vulnerable Arctic environment. However, those statements also mentioned that Arctic resources are important for the Union's very own energy mix. EU officials were also careful to always stress that Arctic states and communities need to decide themselves on the regional development pathways, particularly taking into account Norwegian sensitivities. This was partly related to the idea that the Arctic, and especially the marine Arctic, should not be picked on as an area where development based on hydrocarbons is prohibited, while no such limitations on resources are place in other parts of the world.

The 2021 Joint Communication, however, breaks with attempting to find such diplomatic balance. It calls for keeping as much oil, coal and gas in the ground as possible and making a commitment – both in the EU and possibly multilaterally – to agree on not purchasing new Arctic hydrocarbons. Likely, this stance is directed to a younger and greener European audience, properly taking into account the 'green wave' and growing success of green ideas that permeates Europe.

[23] Holm, "The Arctic Is Still One, Big Happy Family – but Three of the Children Are Put to Shame"; Trine Jonassen, "The AEC on the EU Arctic Policy: 'Leave Arctic Business to the People Who Live Here,'" High North News, October 15, 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/aec-eu-arctic-policy-leave-arctic-business-people-who-live-here>; Elena Chernenko, Tatiana Dyatel, and Dmitry Kozlov, "Евросоюз Ставит Руки На Полюс (The EU Puts Its Hands on the Pole)," Kommersant, October 15, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5031023>; "Путин Призвал Не Переводить в Политику Решения ЕС, Касающиеся Бурения в Арктике (Putin Urged Not to Translate into Politics EU Decisions Related to Drilling in the Arctic)," TASS, October 13, 2021, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/12653287>; "В Совфеде Назвали Планы Евросоюза в Арктике Вмешательством в Дела России (The Federation Council Called the Plans of the European Union in the Arctic Interference in the Affairs of Russia)," RIA Novosti, October 15, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20211015/arktika-1754749962.html>; "Европа Заявила о Своем Праве Диктовать Новые Условия Для Арктики (Europe Claims Its Right to Dictate New Conditions for the Arctic)," Lenta.Ru, October 15, 2021, https://lenta.ru/news/2021/10/15/arc_brus/; "ЕС Будет Настаивать На Прекращении Эксплуатации Арктического Газа, Нефти и Угля (EU to Push for Halt to the Exploitation of Arctic Gas, Oil and Coal)," ProArctic, October 13, 2021, <https://pro-arctic.ru/13/10/2021/news/44731>.

[24] "The EU is also an importer of oil and gas extracted in the Arctic. It is committed to achieving the targets under the Paris Agreement by implementing the European Green Deal. Building on the partial moratoriums on hydrocarbons exploration in the Arctic, the EU is committed to ensuring that oil, coal and gas stay in the ground, including in Arctic regions. An important consideration in this regard is the specific difficulty, due to the prevailing weather conditions, for response and clean-up, in case of industrial or maritime accidents. // To this end, the Commission shall work with partners towards a multilateral legal obligation not to allow any further hydrocarbon reserve development in the Arctic or contiguous regions, nor to purchase such hydrocarbons if they were to be produced."

Naturally, this proposal did not resonate well with many Arctic governments, businesses and stakeholders. While some – the Russian – reactions were to be expected in all its verbal hardship, some others – the Norwegians or those coming from the Arctic Economic Council – were diplomatically put measured negative reactions that eventually should not have raised too many eyebrows in the hallways of the Commission or the EEAS.

In general, EU policymakers can be applauded for making such a bold discursive step, in line with the EDG and the hope that neither the EU nor the global economy would need additional hydrocarbon resources in the medium and long-term future. However, such positioning on Arctic hydrocarbons is far from unproblematic and it is yet to be seen how the Council (the 27 Member States) relate to this issue and therefore whether this becomes the EU's official policy or remains the Commission's expression of ambition. However, some Member States are likely to support the Commission's spirit. For one, Finland in its Strategy for Arctic Policy published in June 2021 clearly states that “[i]n Finland's view, the opening up of new fossil reserves in Arctic conditions is incompatible with attaining the targets of the Paris Agreement and associated with economic uncertainties and risks.[25]

And yet, this bold proposal does come with some key problems. *First*, the global no-new-extraction scenario essentially depends on the various hopes for a European and global path towards carbon neutrality, which is far from certain. *Second*, the Joint Communication makes no distinction between offshore and onshore extraction. In the past, it was mostly the exploitation taking place in Arctic waters that was of concern. Now, all Arctic hydrocarbons are made problematic. Perhaps the very reason for such calculated vagueness is the acknowledgement that the EU mainly imports (Russian) resources produced onshore and the single focus on offshore exploitation could be seen as dishonest. *Third*, no differentiation has been made between oil and gas. Natural gas is seen by many – including the Commission's very own President just one week after publishing of the 2021 policy statement[26] – as a possible transitional fuel on the path towards carbon neutrality, as it is associated with generally lower carbon emissions and smaller environmental impacts during extraction.

[25] Finnish Government, “Finland's Strategy for Arctic Policy,” 2021, https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163247/VN_2021_55.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

[26] Ursula Von Der Leyen, “Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Preparation of the European Council Meeting of 21-22 October 2021 (Strasbourg, 20 October 2021),” https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_21_5381.

For instance, as part of the energy transition policy, the Commission emphasised the need for developing corridors for gas imports, which are to diversify and increase security of supply.[27] Furthermore, European companies continue to be involved in various natural gas extraction projects, even if Arctic oil/gas exploitation was declared as too problematic for investment. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed in September 2021 and currently awaiting final approvals, is set to deliver gas into the single market exactly from those areas where the new Joint Communication envisages no new extractive developments. Even if the project has not been strongly supported by the Commission, European citizens overall seem to experience a measure of cognitive dissonance on the question of Arctic natural gas. Interestingly, the aforementioned Finnish Arctic policy also made no distinction between coal, oil and natural gas, onshore and offshore resources. *Fourth*, and for the purpose of extracting hydrocarbons, the Arctic has not been well-defined and delineated; or better, the many Arctics of the Arctic have not been taken into account. For long, Norwegian actors have stressed that the Barents Sea cannot be defined as a ‘typical’ Arctic area, due to much milder climate conditions. Would such an argument also hold in the light of the new EU Arctic policy? *Finally*, the text of the Joint Communication does refer to not allowing any new hydrocarbon extraction globally, acknowledging the EU’s role as an importer of energy resources. However, it still appears that the Arctic is defined as exceptionally not being suitable for such an activity. While arguments on the vulnerable environment are clear, most Arctic states stress that they should be able to provide better regulatory and technological framework for extractive activities compared to many other regions and that the global environment and climate do not lose out when the extraction takes place in the Arctic. Should that argument be accepted, then the main reason for rendering the circumpolar North as an exceptional region is the area’s iconic status both as an environment and as the region impacted particularly visibly by climate change. Such an emotional and public relations argument is particularly loathsome for many Arctic states, regions, communities and stakeholders, and yet well-perceived by a European continental audience; a fact that should *not* be underestimated when analysing the 2021 Joint Communication.

It is extremely unlikely that the strong phrasing is the outcome of ignorance or lack of Arctic sensitivity among the handful Arctic experts in the Commission’s DG for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and the EEAS.

[26] Ursula Von Der Leyen, “Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Preparation of the European Council Meeting of 21-22 October 2021 (Strasbourg, 20 October 2021),”

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_21_5381.

[27] European Commission, “Clean Energy for All Europeans,” 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2833/9937>.

Those officials were perfectly aware of the expected reactions by the various Arctic audiences, particularly those coming from Norway and Russia. And yet, rather strong vocabulary made it into the final text. One may wonder if this language could have been made more balanced and acceptable for the various Arctic actors, perhaps by primarily highlighting the global need for keeping carbon in the ground – with the Arctic being simply one of the regions where new exploitation could occur, rather than picking on the Arctic specifically. And yet again, discussing the EU’s Arctic policy from a European perspective rather than an Arctic one and trying to understand the attempted balancing needed to be made in such policies also for the various audience it attempts to reach, e.g. a younger and greener in the Member States, such language should not come as surprise to a well-informed Arctic community. Also, it could very well be that this particular text does not originate in the Commission’s and EEAS’ knowledgeable Arctic circles but rather stems from different – greener – considerations and related DGs.

Mining your Way to Carbon Neutrality

In contrast with the approach to Arctic hydrocarbons, the EU appears to be eager to tap on other Arctic minerals, given the impressive amount of discursive space in the new Arctic statement. Both the proposed ban on hydrocarbons and the interest in extracting Arctic metallic minerals have the same source: the objective of transitioning to a low-carbon economy – the European Green Deal. As such, Arctic regions are seen as important areas for the future extraction of minerals critical for technologies necessary for carbon neutrality, including renewable energy, batteries, smart grids, energy efficient infrastructures and operations.[28] For some of these minerals a many-fold increase in demand is expected.[29] These resources include rare earth elements, nickel, cobalt, titanium, etc., many of which are already extracted, discovered or expected to be found around the circumpolar North.[30] Also, the EU has come to see the access to such resources as a key element of its economic strategic autonomy, while simultaneously also one of global *geopolitical necessity* in pushing back China, the world’s biggest producer of rare earth elements.[31]

[28] It should be noted that mining activities are themselves significant contributors to global climate change emissions, see International Resource Panel, “Global Resources Outlook 2019: Natural Resources for the Future We Want” (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2019), <https://www.resourcepanel.org/reports/global-resources-outlook>.

[29] European Commission, “Report on Critical Raw Materials and the Circular Economy,” 2018, https://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/d1be1b43-e18f-11e8-b690-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1.

[30] Koivurova et al., “Overview of EU Actions in the Arctic and Their Impact (Final Report - June 2021)”; Pasi Eilu et al., The Nordic Supply Potential of Critical Metals and Minerals for a Green Energy Transition (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021), <https://www.nordicinnovation.org/2021/nordic-supply-potential-critical-metals-and-mineralsgreen-%0Aenergy-transition>.

[31] European Commission, “Critical Raw Materials Resilience: Charting a Path towards Greater Security and Sustainability (COM (2020) 474 Final),” 2020.

Concrete New Actions or Policy Changes?

In the EU's institutional and legislative corpus, the Arctic resides within the realm of 'soft policy' – not written into the Treaties, with no distinct budget line, no set rule book on how to protect or develop the Arctic and as such always the expression of the prevalent political mindset of those drafting such policies and the public discourse they are exposed to. Also, the Union's Arctic policy statements are never to be characterised as strategy nor are those simple action plans for a well (or not so well) defined region. Also in 2021, the Arctic to-do-lists are primarily manifestations of general activities already taking place, with, however, some new actions also being announced. As described above, the Joint Communication puts a surprisingly strong, yet vague, emphasis on the need for strategic foresight related to the impact of climate change on the Arctic. An average consultant will see a prospect for studies to be conducted on how the Arctic is expected to change in the coming decades and what related implications it will bring for the European Union. The Commission's internal think-tank actually carried out such a study in 2019.[32] Apparently, both the Commission and the EEAS want to know more. Experts in scenario development and Delft methods should sharpen their pencils.

Another concrete output coming from the new statement is the aim of establishing an office in Greenland. Such an option had been discussed for many years and certainly makes a lot of sense. Greenland is the recipient of the biggest EU grant out of all the EU's overseas countries and territories. So far, the funding has been dedicated towards education and training, amounting to over EUR 200 m in 2014-2020 or 10% of Greenland's education budget. The Union also has a complex fisheries agreement with Greenland, giving EU fleets access to rich Greenlandic waters. The latest 2020 agreement required over a year of tedious negotiations, thus making sense that someone from the EU will sit in Nuuk to support the implementation and future negotiations, as these are unlikely to get easier over time. Greenland also has the potential for developing critical minerals. Most importantly perhaps, the Nuuk office would be a necessary sign of a continuous interest in Greenland and would match the enhanced U.S. involvement, following the reopening of the U.S. consulate in Nuuk in June 2020. It is easy for politicians and officials alike to make fancy declarations, but less so to put administrative and financial resources. Thus, the prospect of a Commission office in Nuuk is a clear message that Greenland is an important partner.

[31] European Commission, "Critical Raw Materials Resilience: Charting a Path towards Greater Security and Sustainability (COM (2020) 474 Final)," 2020.

[32] European Political Strategy Centre, "Walking on Thin Ice: A Balanced Arctic Strategy for the EU" (Brussels, July 2019).

In line with the overall approach across EU policies, the new Arctic policy reverberates emphasis on gender equality and youth issues. The Joint Communication envisages research and regional development funding to support better understanding and visibility of these perspectives, although there is a lack of more concrete ideas. The EU also identifies health as a related new Arctic focus area. That is understandable in the light of the global covid-19 pandemic as well as recent interest in Arctic health issues in forums such as the Arctic Council. Perhaps increased EU resources for research and cross-border programmes related to health issues in the Arctic can be expected. But concrete proposals are missing.

Many more concrete actions that one could expect to be mentioned in the new policy statement have not found their way into the text. The 2016 Joint Communication introduced a cooperation framework for various EU programmes operating in the European Arctic so that they can interact, find synergies and avoid overlaps. This has been one of the precious few concrete new actions proposed in 2016 and apparently a major success, appreciated by most of those involved. The new document makes no mention of this process. There is also no reference to the Arctic as a food-producing region apart from the fisheries sector, even if the word “agriculture” is uttered at one instance. This is surprising considering how big of an element of the EGD the food production is to constitute.[33]

Another gap is related to the EU’s environmental and economic impacts in the Arctic. Concrete examples where Arctic impacts need to be considered are given in the new policy paper. However, the recognition and assessment of such footprint are not followed by creating mechanisms for taking account of impacts within EU policymaking. It is unlikely that an official involved in general policy development will be able to notice an Arctic impact of a regulatory proposal on which they are working.

Expressing in any way an encouragement for EU officials to at least reflect on how new policy proposals may influence the Arctic (in regulatory impact assessments) or whether there are any Arctic implications of policy implementation (in policy reviews) might have done the trick. In the aforementioned 2021 Resolution, also the European Parliament asked for “more Arctic in the EU”. For the sake of context, the Mediterranean Sea appears to be more visible in the Commission’s regulatory impact assessment. The new Joint Communication is a missed in the field opportunity in this regard.

[33] European Commission, “A Farm to Fork Strategy for a Fair, Healthy and Environmentally-Friendly Food System (COM (2020) 381 Final),” 2020.

Furthermore, no proposals are further made for enhancing the existing formats for dialogues with Arctic Indigenous Peoples and/or especially the Sámi, most of whom are EU/EEA citizens and are more affected by EU policies and actions than any other indigenous group globally. The EU has limited options for supporting Sámi representation, but it could at least suggest that dialogue with Arctic Member States and regions should continue, and state that for the EU itself more stable involvement of the Sámi would be of value. In the end, this is not only about the direct and indirect effects on specific Indigenous rights but also about bringing to the EU policy-making a distinct sensitivity and set of values represented by a group of EU citizens, as within the continental EU the Sámi are the only ones to clearly claim Indigenous status and identity. Furthermore, the challenges related to the low-carbon transition are not mentioned in the document. The increased mining for critical minerals and the expansion of renewables (primarily wind power but also hydropower projects experiencing a renaissance of sorts) create additional pressures on local environment and livelihoods even if they in principle contribute to global sustainability. Especially in the Arctic and indigenous context, these concerns need to be addressed head-on. The 2021 document, just as the previous statements, certainly does not fulfil that role.

Conclusion: Fragile Confidence

Compared to its 2016 predecessor, the new EU Arctic policy statement contains more novel aspects than expected, albeit much is a question of emphasis rather than content. The EU is clearer about its environmental and economic footprint in the Arctic and appears increasingly aware of being capable of addressing through internal actions at least some of these impacts. It remains to be seen if Arctic considerations play any role in future regulatory and policy developments. There seems to be less attention to the issues specific for the European Arctic, but perhaps the reason for this is that not much has changed since 2016. However, at the same time the EU confidently sets itself as a “legislator for part of the European Arctic”.

The increased self-confidence in the Arctic context seems to be one of the key themes of the 2021 policy statement, opening with a clear and concise declaration: “the EU is in the Arctic” – no space for discussion and disagreement allowed. The question of the EU’s formal observer status in the Arctic Council is barely mentioned. On one hand, the EU acts as an “observer in principle” in this high-level forum, notwithstanding the formal status. On the other hand, this formal observer status has been seen as a seal of approval by the Arctic states and Indigenous peoples of the Arctic credentials and justified interests of other states and entities.

Such a formal seal of approval is all but irrelevant for a polity that clearly considers itself an Arctic actor, and which affects the region primarily via its internal actions and policies.

The EU's Arctic self-confidence might be a result of finding the courage to use geopolitical vocabulary, not only but also in the Arctic context. This could arise from a better understanding of the EU's indirect and not always conscious impacts on the standards, regulations and activities taking place abroad or globally, including the often-self-praising discussion on the so-called Brussels effect. But equally, it might be a consequence of a strong belief – clear also from other statements – that the European Green Deal transforms the European Union into a global and Arctic actor – an actor that is strong enough to address the contradictions related to its involvement in Arctic affairs, *a geopolitical power*. In particular, the EU is more confident in highlighting its ability to affect developments in the Arctic by the exercise of its very own market power. The most visible aspect here is certainly the proposition of not opening any new fossil fuels extraction in the Arctic.

As such, the new Arctic policy could perhaps become an example or a model for a more confident European Union in international affairs. The basis for this EU image lies in identifying climate change mitigation as one of the key themes of global (geo)politics. Energy relations and the extraction of resources are to be tangibly shaped by climate concerns, affecting the strengths and weaknesses of international players. That could also create more space for a strange non-Westphalian supranational entity, which – in the long term – attempts to actively reshape which resources are strategic in European and global contexts, reshaping the geopolitical character of spaces where different resources are located. On the other hand, the Arctic is perhaps too much of a comfortable (conflict-poor) space for the EU, as it remains a part of the world with a relatively low level of tension and a well-functioning international cooperation framework (*but aren't Arctic relations fracturing?*). It is far from clear that the EU self-identified strengths in the Arctic can be equally visible in other areas of EU foreign policy. One could also speculate if the 'no-new-hydrocarbons' stance in the new Joint Communication has been seen by some EU officials as a testing ground or a first step towards undermining all new fossil fuel projects globally.

The European Green Deal already outlines the need to eliminate all subsidies for fossil fuel,[34] the European Investment Bank has decided not to provide any financing for new hydrocarbon projects,[35] including those related to natural gas, and recently even the International Energy Agency reiterated that no investments in fossil fuel supply are to be envisaged anymore in its proposed net zero pathway.[36] The EU's updated Arctic policy should also be read and understood in this context.

In particular, we are yet to see how this new confidence influences the EU's relations with its Arctic partners. An over decade-old and largely successful attempt to shut down commercial seal hunting – due to moral concerns for animal welfare rather than environmental considerations – by introducing a ban on placing seal products on the EU market, resulted in much criticism of the EU's Arctic credentials. In the aftermath, EU officials were for many years careful not to highlight the EU's market influence or generally tip on any Arctic toes.

The 2021 document clearly ends this era of Arctic tiptoeing. This manifested in particular in the proposal for the ban of imports from new coal and hydrocarbon projects. The Arctic stakeholders' shot from the hip and rather angry comments are to be ignored, almost irrelevant as those either only served a national reflex, and thus had to be made, or underestimated the centrality of climate neutrality objectives in a new EDG-era. The real test will be whether the cooperation with Arctic partners in the coming years is adversely affected or whether it actually becomes more effective. From today's point of view though, the Union's close relationship with Norway has suffered especially from the statements made in the policy update, as well as from the Commission's strongly expressed legal position in the Svalbard maritime zones' question.

As such, it seems that limited (economic/legal) interests (from one DG and several Member States) continue to be detached from broader political and strategic European interests,[37] which are not only of particular concern in the special case of Svalbard but might also reveal a lack of strategic Arctic thinking by some involved.

[34] European Commission, "The European Green Deal COM(2019) 640 Final, Brussels, 11.12.2019," European Commission, 2019.

[35] Kira Taylor, "'Gas Is over', EU Bank Chief Says," EurActiv, January 21, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/gas-is-over-eu-bank-chief-says/>.

[36] EA, "Net Zero by 2050: A Roadmap for the Global Energy," 2021, <https://racetozero.unfccc.int/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NetZeroBy2050-ARoadmapfortheGlobalEnergySector.pdf>.

[37] Andreas Raspotnik and Andreas Østhagen, "How Much Is the Fish? When Foreign Policy Meets Fishing Interests in the EU's Arctic Endeavour," *International Relations* 35, no. 2 (2021): 256–76.

Eventually one needs to ask if the European Union is a more desirable Arctic partner or a more effective Arctic operator when it acts as a sort of “geeky technician” providing data and monitoring services or when it poses as a “geopolitical power” in the context of climate change (although the Commission probably wants to play both roles)? Some analysts are concerned though if the adoption of geopolitical narratives is the best choice for the EU to influence global developments.[38] Also, can we really rule out the circulation of even stronger statements, e.g. with regard to the proposed moratorium, in early drafts of the Joint Communication?

One aspect that shows the limitation of the Union’s self-confidence is actually not mentioned in the new policy paper. The tragedy of Brexit had dampened the spirits in Brussels for many years, even if the tedious divorce negotiations and the incompetence of British leadership eventually resulted in many Europeans appreciating the value of the EU, particularly the earlier publicly invisible laborious work it took to establish the regulatory and technical framework of and for the single market. The fact that the Joint Communication does not even mention Brexit as something that affects the EU’s role in the Arctic is certainly not a sign of EU confidence. Brexit is an issue for the EU’s Arctic role. The EU has lost major institutions that were an intrinsic part of its contribution to Arctic affairs, such as Arctic research capacities including the British Antarctic Survey, maritime insurance companies, military and search and rescue capabilities, as well as the UK’s exclusive economic zone. The latter added to the Commission’s weight in fisheries negotiations with North Atlantic partners. Most of all, Brexit is the sign of the constant existential threat to the EU and its basic pillars. Politicians negatively disposed towards the EU continue to be too close to taking power in some (most?) Member States for EU policymakers to feel comfortable. Indeed, it may yet be the case that the EU ceases to exist in its current form before all parties to the Svalbard Treaty agree on its applicability in the marine areas around the archipelago. (*which it does – or not?*)

One can – and actually should – criticise the European Union for a plethora of things. However, one can hardly slate the Union for not being open about its intentions and objectives based on the wealth of policy statements and strategies being published year after year. But one should be careful not to overstate the impact of many of these strategic statements, including the 2021 Arctic policy. The document is by nature primarily a compilation – an umbrella policy – of what the EU does and how some action items are relevant for the Arctic. The Joint Communication could be primarily read as a sign of the change that is already happening within the EU.

[38] Domenico Valenza, “The Trap of Geopolitics: Rethinking EU Strategic Communication,” CEPOB #3.22 (Bruges: College of Europe, 2021).

Perhaps it is the European Green Deal and the EU's overall objective of strategic autonomy that should be treated as the EU's actual "Arctic policy", with the 2021 Arctic policy statement being merely an explanatory note. John Wheeler famously summarised Einstein's theory of general relativity by saying that "matter tells spacetime how to curve, spacetime tells matter how to move". If we apply the same logic to the EU's Arctic policy, the EGD tells the EU's Arctic policy how to curve, the Arctic policy tells the EGD... well, not much really. The role of future Arctic policy documents will likely be more to inform us about the impacts of the European Green Deal and associated policies rather than to tangibly contribute to their realisation. However, much more Arctic ice will melt before we can evaluate the actual implementation and impact of the EU's ambitious plans.



On 13 October 2021, Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, gave a press conference on the new Arctic policy (*note, it is never a strategy!*). Photo by the European Commission: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/photo-details/P-052061~2F00-05>.

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