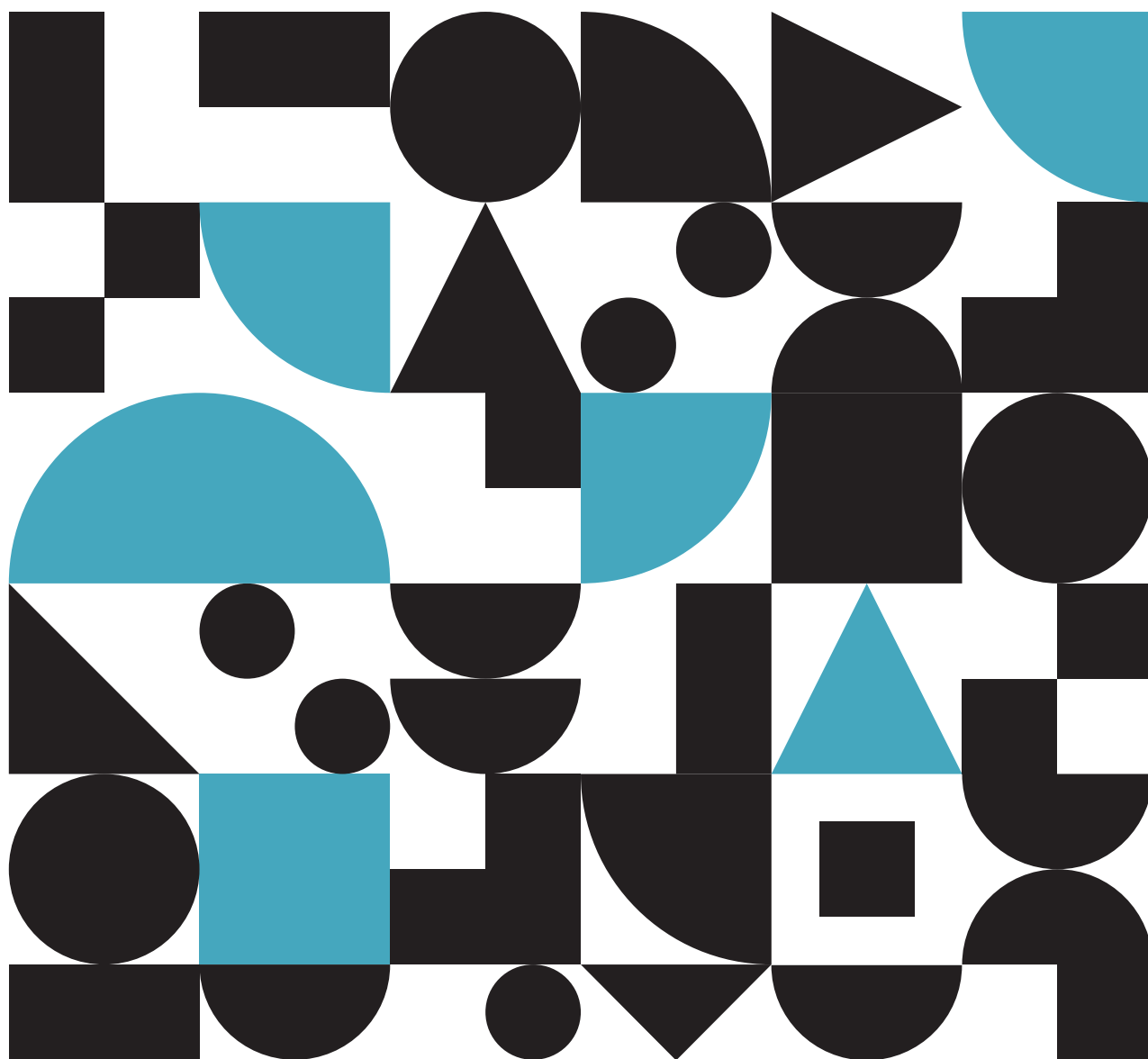


The Union's New Arctic Policy: Towards an Increasingly Geopolitical Approach?

WORKING PAPER - NOVEMBER 2021



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ARTHUR AMELOT, EMILIE CANOVA, ALEKSIS ORESCHNIKOFF,
THE UNION'S NEW ARCTIC POLICY: TOWARDS AN INCREASINGLY
GEOPOLITICAL APPROACH?, GROUPE D'ÉTUDES GÉOPOLITIQUES,
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The Union's New Arctic Policy: Towards an Increasingly Geopolitical Approach?

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The new Joint Communication, titled “A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic”, is the EU’s fourth Joint Communication on the Arctic published by the European Commission since 2008. The EU’s approach towards the Arctic and its narrative regarding engagement in the region’s affairs have evolved over time. This has often, however, been accompanied by criticism and controversy either regarding inconsistency in policy or inability to comprehend region-specific demands. Lack of a clear strategy within an appropriately delimited geographical and political space has been a central challenge to the EU’s Arctic approach. Although the new Joint Communication is a credible improvement in developing a whole-of-EU Arctic strategy, further policy adjustments should concentrate on the need to streamline the Union’s purported Arctic-ness (ie. Arctic actorness and identity) across institutions and member states; to create an Arctic mission - a sense of Arctic purpose - for the entire European Union. This article discusses the key elements and new instruments of the updated policy, and examines its geoeconomic and geopolitical dimensions. It concludes by recommending a better articulation of the four key dimensions of strategic actorness in the Arctic: geography, legal competence, institutional capacity, and levels of governance.

The words of Finland’s former prime minister Antti Rinne “there should be more EU in the Arctic and more Arctic in the EU”¹ still echo in conversations about the EU’s role and actorness in Arctic politics. As international affairs continue to be increasingly defined through paradigms of strategic competition, the EU is seeking to improve its challenging and, at times, controversial

1 — See, Prime Minister Rinne’s opening speech at the 2019 Arctic Circle Assembly (Valtioneuvosto, 2019).

engagement in the Arctic by updating its last policy document, dating back to 2016. The new Joint Communication, published on October 13th, builds on past experiences, a changed geopolitical landscape, and the green (and blue) transition to reframe the Union's direction in Arctic affairs. Although the cornerstones of the EU's engagement² can be seen to remain largely unchanged, the new Joint Communication provides a more detailed view of the dimensions in which stronger strategic actorness in Arctic matters is pursued. It is an initial projection of an enhanced approach in distinct policy space – the European Arctic. While continued interest in circumpolar matters is not forgotten, the new document paves the way for more focused engagement in the EU's direct vicinity and in accordance with available institutional abilities and capacities, ranging from internal regulatory competence to partner agreements.

Three EU member states – Finland, Sweden, Denmark – sit as members on the Arctic Council, the primary forum for cooperation across the region, while six other EU member states have an Observer status that allows participation and limited contribution to the council's work. Moreover, the EU has a special relationship with Greenland – an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark – as an associated partner through the Overseas Countries and Territories agreement. Whereas Denmark is currently renewing its Arctic policy, Finland and Sweden have already published their updated national Arctic strategies, both of which highlight the relevance of the EU in Arctic affairs and the countries' support for the development of an enhanced EU Arctic policy³. The Finnish strategy specifically emphasizes efforts to raise Arctic interest in Brussels – to make Arctic policy into a priority – while Sweden “wants to see broad engagement from all of the EU's membership”⁴. Genuine interest in promoting Arctic issues in EU institutions has been the most significant barrier to European involvement to date and the Arctic has remained “a geographic and strategic blindspot” for Brussels⁵.

A key element in the EU's revised Arctic approach, as the new Joint Communication aims to underline, is in recognizing the European part of the circumpolar Arctic as a specific geographical area where the EU can have a distinct influence. It is worth noting, however, that while the Nordic region and relevant frameworks of Nordic cooperation are valuable elements for developing stronger EU engagement with – and presence in – the European Arctic specifically⁶, reference to them in the new policy document is less present than in previous ones. To date, in addition to institutional challenges, geographical ambiguity regarding “the Arctic” – an inability to agree on a geographical definition of what is meant by an Arctic policy – has, in part, kept the EU from

2 – Addressing climate change, promoting science, and enhancing capacities for sustainable development.

3 – Valtioneuvosto. (2019). Opening speech by Prime Minister Antti Rinne at the Arctic Circle Assembly.

4 – Government Offices of Sweden. (2020). Sweden's strategy for the Arctic region.

5 – Raspotnik, A. (2020). The Great Illusion Revisited: The Future of the European Union's Arctic Engagement. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 6.

6 – Stepień, A., & Koivurova, T. (2017, February). Arctic Europe: Bringing together the EU Arctic Policy and Nordic cooperation. Prime Minister's Office.

advancing a longer-term strategic impact or ambition⁷, and from developing geopolitical actorness in the region⁸. The complexity of Arctic governance, including the necessity to acknowledge the multiple sectors, regions and societies of the circumpolar North – either on land or offshore – will render vague declarations of engagement useless unless coupled with specific policies in appropriate and well-defined spaces.

The new Joint Communication is a visible improvement in terms of outlining the instruments and actions for reaching desired objectives. So far, the EU's Arctic engagement and the level of legitimate interest in Brussels have been seen relatively limited, defined by an incohesive approach and inconsistent narrative⁹. The EU's Arctic approach has suffered from a lack of well-defined targets reached by specific policies in clearly demarcated spaces¹⁰. In part, this can be regarded as a consequence of the overall institutional arrangement, either regarding the Arctic governance system or the structures of EU policy-making, where different legislative, sectoral, and geographic priorities are at play. The Arctic is not a single region, nor is the EU a single state-like actor. The EU is a hybrid – a “complicated beast” – partly intergovernmental and partly communautaire, as stated by Ambassador Michael Mann, EU Special Envoy for Arctic Matters¹¹.

Statements on the EU's inclusion or Arctic-ness – whether or not the EU is in the Arctic or is an Arctic actor – therefore risk being futile without adequate examination of the extent to which the EU's regulatory capacities and abilities can influence Arctic developments. In other words, an inadequate understanding of the EU's internal processes and institutional architecture – what the EU is and what it is not – can result in misplaced analyses on its agency in Arctic policy-making and governance. It is crucial to note that the EU's impact in the Arctic should not be viewed only through its internal (eg. domestic supranational policy) and external (eg. foreign and security policy) dimensions, but also through the association agreements it has with partner countries; through the three dimensions of the EU's legal presence^{12,13}. Therefore, the key to analysing EU Arctic policy is in viewing the EU both as a unified political actor and a sum of its institutional parts.

EU policy is often built around programs and thematic packages with some

7 — Stępień, A. (2015, December 9). The EU needs a Two-Tier Approach towards the Arctic. The Arctic Institute.

8 — Canova, E. (2020) 'Pour une prise en compte de la géographie dans la politique arctique de l'Union européenne', *Études internationales*, 51(1), pp. 89–116. doi:10.7202/1079413ar.

9 — Stępień, A., & Raspotnik, A. (2019, August). The EU's Arctic Policy: Between Vision and Reality | College of Europe. CEPOB - College of Europe Policy Brief Series, #5.19.

10 — Stępień, A. (2015, December 9). The EU needs a Two-Tier Approach towards the Arctic. The Arctic Institute.

11 — Mann, M. (2021, January 18). Exclusive interview with Michael Mann, EU's Ambassador at large for the Arctic/Special envoy for Arctic matters (E. Canova, A. Oreschnikoff, & M. Strouk, Interviewers) [Interview].

12 — Koivurova, T., Kokko, K., Duyck, S., Sellheim, N., & Stępień, A. (2010, October). EU Competencies Affecting the Arctic. European Parliament.

13 — The Arctic Institute. (2020). Levels of Law: Understanding the complexity of the European Union's legal Arctic presence.

degree of strategic character as they can embody objectives beyond their immediate scope. Further integration among member states is a prime example, as this is often sought through incremental policy measures and instruments across sectors. In strategic terms, the central challenge for the EU's Arctic policy has been in effectively communicating which objective, beyond the immediate scope of relevant policy measures, is sought. What is the purpose of the EU looking towards the Arctic? What does the Commission, as an executive organ, seek with enhanced engagement in Arctic matters? What is the expected outcome of the EU's Arctic-related policymaking? While such mission-oriented statements are yet to be explicitly voiced, the new Joint Communication can be seen as laying the foundation for such efforts. Clues can be found in the new document's normative statements¹⁴ or new operational elements¹⁵, and a more concentrated view on the Nordic, Barents and North-East Atlantic regions. Strategic engagement in Arctic affairs, however, still remains a subtext at best.

Key takeaways: instruments for a stronger engagement

The new Joint Communication is an action-oriented policy document that outlines the tools for reaching desired objectives. Although not explicitly a strategy document, the Joint Communication ties Arctic objectives and actions into a broader framework of global agency and ambitions. The European Green Deal (EGD) and the new approach for a sustainable blue economy form the core of the EU's updated Arctic approach. This serves as a foundation from which objectives set in the 2016 Global Strategy can be pursued. The EU's Arctic approach is perhaps best defined as a policy of policies, and as such remains a fragmented and, at times, controversial statement of Arctic-related actions across sectors. The new Joint Communication shows that particular attention has been paid to the significance of 1) research and innovation, 2) emissions reduction measures, 3) infrastructure, 4) social commitments, and 5) multilateral negotiations as thematic contexts for enhanced engagement. Moreover, the actions and initiatives presented in the document reflect a clearer perspective on issues relating to strategic autonomy, such as reducing import dependency on critical raw materials¹⁶, and the interdependency of global and regional governance processes, particularly in terms of ocean governance and maritime affairs¹⁷.

The new Joint Communication brings forth several critical instruments and actions for enhanced engagement, some of which distinguish the updated policy from previous Arctic declarations:

- developing strategic foresight and contextualizing science diplomacy
- establishing a representation of the Commission in Nuuk and increasing

14 — Keeping hydrocarbons in the ground or, promoting gender equality and youth engagement, and recognizing the ILO Convention 169 despite Sweden and Finland not having yet ratified the clause to date.

15 — Eg., foresight capabilities, science diplomacy or resilient value-chains.

16 — Brzozowski, A. (2021, October 17). [We don't want to see any flash points in the Arctic, EU envoy says](#). Euractiv.

17 — Eg., the relevance of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), or the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) specifically in regards to the implementing agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (p. 6-7).

focus on Western Nordic countries (Iceland, Faroe Islands, and Greenland) and the North-East Atlantic

- establishing mechanisms and developing existing ones for enhanced civil protection and safety (incl. maritime safety and permafrost monitoring)
- resisting further development of hydrocarbon extraction (incl. the ambition to refuse the purchase of hydrocarbons)
- support for a strong agreement on protecting marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), and exercising exclusive competence on the conservation of marine biological resources regarding the Svalbard Treaty
- broader acknowledgment of Indigenous rights with gender and youth dimensions included.

Some commentators have already pointed out that the new document is not a strategy or a definitive policy, and that, despite normative calls-to-action, the EU fails to define the geographical scope of its ambitions¹⁸. However, when examined in light of previous key Arctic documents from the Commission, the new Communication builds a clearer position on the European part of the Arctic, including the maritime space between the North-Eastern Atlantic and the Central Arctic Ocean areas, reflecting a strategic decision on the EU's perspective towards circumpolar matters. Moreover, by tying Arctic policy to global goals, the EU is assigning particular strategic value to Arctic matters as part of a broader global political agenda. While the EU's previous Arctic policies or Arctic-related policy declarations have never presented any tangible strategy on how the European Union will practice its Arctic-ness, the new document reflects a strategic change in the overall policy discourse. It makes it evident that practicing Arctic-ness is an important element in the execution of the European Green Deal as well as in the development of the EU's agency in international relations.

Geoeconomic perspectives

The explicit push for halting the exploitation of hydrocarbons (namely, oil, coal, and gas) in the circumpolar North has received the most public attention since the publication of the updated Joint Communication. The document refers to it three times with the same wording (p. 2, 10, and 11), calling for “oil, coal and gas to stay in the ground”. This position statement has been criticised mainly by countries depending on hydrocarbon exploitation to sustain their economy, but also by participants during the 2021 Arctic Circle Assembly, where the new EU Arctic policy was publicly presented. The European Union claims, and is considered by many, to be the leader in the transition towards the ‘Green Economy’, which the European Green Deal embodies.

The EU does not intend to start from scratch with respect to limiting further hydrocarbon exploitation in the Arctic. Indeed, the new policy document explicitly refers to the existence of partial moratoria, currently in place in the US, Canada, and Greenland – which the Union could build on and thus reinforce its position as a global leader in the green transition. Norway and Russia, who

18 — Buchanan, E. (2021, October 20). [On Thin Ice: Does the EU Know What It Wants in the Arctic?. The National Interest.](#)

have not implemented any kind of moratorium or similar restrictions, are not mentioned. The call to end hydrocarbon extraction has clear geoeconomic dimensions, not least due to the EU's ability and capacity to use market mechanisms for restricting import, but also because such restrictions impact specific areas or sub-regions of the broader circumpolar Arctic. As some areas of EU energy policy are matters of shared competence¹⁹, the call can also be expected to impact Finnish, Swedish, and Danish views on future Arctic energy development. Moreover, developing a multilateral legal obligation for ending further extraction, if based on existing US, Canadian, or Greenlandic initiatives, might reflect particular strategic preferences regarding Arctic engagement.

The Commission's plans to open its first representation in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, leads to further geoeconomic interpretations. The foreign representations in Greenland currently consist of three consulates from Canada, Belgium, and the US. The US consulate reopened in 2020 after 67 years of closure. The opening of a Commission office in Nuuk is justified by diplomatic reasons "to further consolidate and enhance the longstanding cooperation between the European Commission and Greenland" (p. 4), but also effectively by the potential role of Greenland in the EU's green transition: "[t]he EU is seeking to deepen and broaden its partnership with Greenland, including possible cooperation on issues related to green growth" (p. 5). Consolidating relations with Greenland is also a matter of aiming for enhanced autonomy in global affairs²⁰. The green transition primarily means the transition from non-renewable energies (oil, coal, gas) to renewable ones (hydro-power, wind turbines, solar panels, biomass, etc.). However, these new types of energy production are extremely dependent on specific raw materials (notably rare earth metals and minerals) currently provided largely by China, which, according to the new Joint Communication, produces "98% of Rare Earth Elements and 93% of magnesium" globally. This presents a considerable risk regarding the supply and therefore energy security for the EU. The diversification of critical raw material imports is a key element to answering this challenge. Although the current political context in Greenland is not favorable to extensive operations, particularly relating to extracting uranium²¹, future mining potential might later prove critical to the EU's economic resilience.

Cross-border cooperation programmes (such as the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme), as well as sustainable development in parts of the European Arctic can reflect a certain degree of Europeanization, i.e. creating closer political, economic, and even cultural links between the EU and neighboring territories and integrating them into an EU space²². Indeed, the EU places particular emphasis on the benefits that better access to the Single Market and to the new Digital Single Market could bring to Northern SMEs and other companies. This could be notably achieved through the use of European digital tools and space technology (such as the Galileo satellite service). This would thus imply

19 — Art. 194 (TFEU).

20 — Brzozowski, A. (2021, October 17). [We don't want to see any flash points in the Arctic, EU envoy says](#). Euractiv.

21 — McGwin, K. (2021, July 14). [Greenland government ready to outlaw uranium mining](#). Arctic Today.

22 — Bialasiewicz, L. (2011) *Europe in the World: EU Geopolitics and the Making of European Space*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (Critical geopolitics). doi:10.4324/9781315580838.

further integration within the European digital space, which could lead to a stronger European market. In broad terms, an increase of users of the Galileo system in the European Arctic - including non-EU partners, such as Greenland or the Faroe Islands - and, to a larger extent, from the Circumpolar Arctic could contribute to the Europeanization of Arctic territories.

The question of market integration of the European Arctic underscores the need to take into account the EU's claim of being a "geopolitical power" in its Arctic policy. There is a new imperative toward understanding the geopolitical implications of the (re)making of European spaces and neighbourhoods²³. Examining the transformation of the EU's geopolitical thought in its Arctic policy is revealing in that regard.

Geopolitical imaginaries

The new policy, titled "A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic", denotes a clear change of tone compared to the 2016 Joint Communication on "An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic". By comparing the titles of the two documents one can directly identify a change in the EU's general positioning towards the Arctic. Whilst the 2016 document aimed at advancing a more coherent policy, partly in reaction to commentators deploring the lack of unified and clear narrative from EU institutions, the new EU policy document asserts Arctic ambitions and goals more clearly.

In its previous policy documents, the EU referred to symbolic facts to justify its commitment (dramatic effects of global warming, militarisation of the area) which, while genuine, were not in themselves sufficient to legitimise its commitment. Another key critique of the EU Arctic policy has been that the EU's Arctic policy statements have essentially been aggregations of existing actions, wrapped in high-level rhetoric²⁴. As a result, the EU had not yet developed a convincing narrative on the Arctic in order to broadly involve the European public in the region's issues or to convince Arctic actors as well as EU officials of the relevance of EU involvement in the area. Moreover, the EU's multiple spatial and political positions vis-à-vis the Arctic in its various documents also hindered the EU from asserting a clear and controlled geopolitical actorness in the region²⁵. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the new geopolitical narrative and to further explore the rationale behind the new Arctic policy.

The new Communication from the Commission and the HR/VP can be considered a turning point regarding the EU's Arctic imaginaries and how it envisions its role in the Arctic. Although the shift towards a more assertive stance has been observed by attentive EU-Arctic watchers²⁶, the new Joint Communication constitutes a step further towards affirming Arctic involvement. It starts with

23 — Ibid.

24 — Stepień, A., & Raspotnik, A. (2019, August). *The EU's Arctic Policy: Between Vision and Reality* | College of Europe. CEPOB - College of Europe Policy Brief Series, #5.19.

25 — Canova, E. (2020) 'Pour une prise en compte de la géographie dans la politique arctique de l'Union européenne', *Études internationales*, 51(1), pp. 89–116. doi:10.7202/1079413ar.

26 — Raspotnik, A. (2020). *The Great Illusion Revisited: The Future of the European Union's Arctic Engagement*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 6.

two rather provocative sentences. “The European Union (EU) is in the Arctic. As a geopolitical power, the EU has strategic and day-to-day interests, both in the European Arctic and the broader Arctic region” (emphasis added). However, self-proclamations of geopolitical power are not sufficient if no consistent actions follow, nor if such power is not recognized by other (Arctic) stakeholders. The new Arctic policy is consistent with Ursula Von der Leyen’s “geopolitical Commission”²⁷ and displays a clear will to be regarded as such. While the 2016 Joint Communication barely mentioned “wider geopolitical dynamics” and made no mention of geopolitical issues (which was denounced by the European Parliament’s 2017 resolution), the word “geopolitics” or “geopolitical” appears 9 times in new the document along with mentioning the EU’s “interest” and many references to “strategic” issues. The document not only builds on the 2016 Joint Communication but also on the 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy. Moreover, whilst the three priorities broadly remain the same²⁸, international cooperation now figures more prominently.

One important aspect of the EU’s rationale in its Arctic policy is its new way of using geography to assert its legitimacy as an Arctic actor. This new geography argument raises many questions. To date, the EU has been envisaged as an idea, an ideal, limitless project across Europe²⁹. Therefore, it has long focused on values and norms or the dissemination of ideas beyond its borders, avoiding to define any limits to such practices. Geography was thus also a forgotten aspect of the EU’s policy in the Arctic. However, faced with difficulties of being recognised as legitimate in the Arctic as a unitary actor, the EU has recently been developing a more assertive stance based on geographical legitimacy and multiple linkages³⁰. The first sentence of the new Joint Communication expresses this simply: “[t]he EU is in the Arctic”. While Finland, Sweden, and Denmark have territory north of the Arctic Circle, the EU often supplements geographical arguments with arguments related to the market and climate: the EU has an Arctic identity, because Europeans consume Arctic products (such as fish or energy) or due to the EU’s relation to climate change, either as being impacted by it or as a polluter. However, because no clear geographical limits have ever been formally assigned to the EU and because no single definition of the Arctic prevails, the EU faces challenges as a geopolitical actor in the Arctic. Indeed, in the Arctic, the EU is encountering for the first time a specific «regional system» in its neighbourhood, which makes it different from the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. The lack of an articulated representation of the Arctic regions, and thus of its own policy towards the region, has been problematic for the EU’s Arctic policy and made it difficult to understand the EU’s position with regard to the Arctic as a region³¹.

The absence of a well-defined geographical scope for the EU’s actions in the Arctic and interactions with various Arctic actors has contributed to the lack of coherence between high-level discourse and concrete actions. So far, the EU’s discourse has highlighted ambition in becoming a circum-Arctic actor. As the EU has faced criticism from some Arctic actors, and in view of its regulatory presence in the European Arctic, the new policy

27 — European Commission (2019) *The von der Leyen Commission*, European Commission.

28 — Addressing climate change, promoting science and enhancing capacities for sustainable development.

29 — Foucher, M. (2018) ‘Penser l’Union européenne à l’échelle mondiale, une conversation avec Michel Foucher’. [Interview].

30 — Mann, M. (2021, January 18). *Exclusive interview with Michael Mann, EU’s Ambassador at large for the Arctic/ Special envoy for Arctic matters* (E. Canova, A. Oreschnikoff, & M. Strouk, Interviewers) [Interview].

31 — Canova, E. (2020) ‘Pour une prise en compte de la géographie dans la politique arctique de l’Union européenne’, *Études internationales*, 51(1), pp. 89–116. doi:10.7202/1079413ar.

reflects a refocusing on this specific geographical area. This corresponds to the EU's internal areas (territory of Sweden and Finland) and areas of close cooperation (Norway and Iceland as EEA members) where its legal basis for action is the strongest. Moreover, in view of its exclusive competence for the protection of living marine resources, the EU, as a signatory to the Central Arctic Ocean fisheries ban, has been legitimately recognized as a global ocean governance actor.

The new Communication better distinguishes between the internal and external aspects of the EU's Arctic policy. The EU is therefore able to assume a distinct foreign policy position with third-party states, while continuing to have clear internal policy. Two particular points are worth noting in more detail. Firstly, the document highlights the EU's "role as legislator for part of the European Arctic" in its introduction; some EU legislation and policies are directly implemented in the territories of its member states and close associates (EEA members Iceland and Norway). In other parts of the document, a differentiation is made between its internal role as regulator and policymaker, and how as such, the EU can have an impact in/for the Arctic, for instance by implementing the Green Deal, and areas of external action and multilateral cooperation. However, despite this distinction, the reactions from Russia – and also representatives of the Arctic Economic Council³², – regarding the proposition to keep oil and gas in the ground, reveal that a perception of the EU interfering in the national affairs of Arctic states is still present. Such fears could be traced back to the 2008 European parliament's proposition to create an Arctic Treaty similar to the Antarctic Treaty. Indeed, in the early years of its engagement, the EU viewed the Arctic through its own spatial imaginaries (pristine nature, wilderness to be protected). This, in turn, gave rise to an image among local actors of the European bubble being disconnected from reality and the EU deemed as a non-legitimate actor in the Arctic. This challenges the self proclaimed moral authority in the fight against climate change and defence of multilateralism that the EU relies upon to justify its role in Arctic governance.

Secondly, the new communication is explicit about strategic challenges, especially regarding Russian military buildup, China's interests, and cooperation with NATO. This is a clear change in tone compared to the very consensual reference to "wider geopolitical dynamics [that] may add further complexity to the changes affecting the [Arctic] region" in the 2016 Joint Communication. In that regard, the new policy is closer to the 2008 Communication that surprised through its direct and bold character. Here, the influence of the European Parliament is evident. Since 2017, the Parliament has called for the Commission to take into account Arctic strategic issues, especially regarding relations with Russia. Moreover, with no maps in most EU Arctic policy documents³³, there has been a lack of a visual representation of what the EU means by "the Arctic" and what the Arctic strategically meant for the EU³⁴. In this regard, the official promotional video that accompanied the publication of the policy document³⁵ and reveals EU perception of the (European) Arctic as a strategic place is complementary to an enhanced geographical justification.

32 — Jonassen, T. (2021) 'The AEC on the EU Arctic Policy: "Leave Arctic Business to the People who Live Here"', High North news, 15 October. (Accessed: 27 October 2021).

33 — At the exception of the 2011 Explanatory statement of the report of the Committee of Foreign affairs of the European parliament.

34 — Raspochnik, A. (2018). The European Union and the Geopolitics of the Arctic. Edward Elgar.

35 — Video available on the EEAS youtube channel but also [tweeted](#) by Commissioner Sinkevicius for instance.

The geographical legitimacy argument aims at making a strong case for the necessity for the EU to be recognised as a legitimate Arctic actor. However it may also entail drawbacks. Arguing that the EU is in the Arctic (as opposed to China for instance which is only “near”) is problematic. Regarding the complexity of the current reality of Arctic governance and the EU’s institutional architecture, such simplification may not convince the EU’s southern member states or Arctic countries. The lingering debate in Arctic governance over which countries should be considered as Arctic – only Arctic Ocean coastal states (the A5) or all Arctic Council members including Finland, Iceland and Sweden – show that Arctic-ness is not so straightforward and is a construction over time. Developing the EU’s Arctic-ness thus requires internal, inter-institutional and member state coordination. Moreover, enhancing the EU’s engagement in the Arctic can challenge the current governance system where the Arctic Council, as the region’s primary forum for cooperation, is based on the distinction between Arctic actors (8 member states and 6 Permanent participants - Indigenous peoples) and non-Arctic actors that can apply for observer status.

The new Joint Communication is a more assertive take on the EU’s actions relating to Arctic matters and presents a visible boost to asserting the EU’s Arctic-ness through relevant tools of engagement. It has clearer high-level rhetoric with the EU seeming to act more as a “geopolitical power” gradually coming out of its “denial of geography”³⁶ and of its “inability to think geopolitically”³⁷. However, endorsing a “power” status and enhanced geopolitical reflection also entails risks. The stakes are high as the EU aims for such recognition, not only as a leader in environmental protection and in the fight against climate change, but also as a strong advocate for multilateral cooperation, all while promoting an Arctic identity. In that regard, the EU’s Arctic actions are now more strongly tied to broader concerns of global agency.

Despite improvements, new instruments, and a more concentrated view on the European Arctic, the document remains a rather fragmented policy of policies. Further development of strategic actorness would benefit from more concise, mission-oriented policy proposals in distinct institutional and sub-regional settings. Explicit acknowledgement of the differences between the various regions of the Circumpolar Arctic and their policy demands could bring needed geographical and strategic clarity to the EU’s efforts. Moreover, the EU should still make better use of its own institutional architecture in light of the three levels of regulatory power – the internal, external, and association agreements with partners. Acting strategically in terms of the Arctic requires the EU to reflect on its own advantages as a complex organization with institutionalized agency at different policy levels and in different political spaces. In other words, a better articulation of the four key dimensions of the EU’s Arctic actorness – geography, legal competence, institutional capacity, and level of governance – embedded in a clear political vision and coherent discourse is still needed to underpin EU’s will to exercise geopolitical power in Arctic affairs.

36 — Canova, E. (2020) ‘Pour une prise en compte de la géographie dans la politique arctique de l’Union européenne’, *Études internationales*, 51(1), pp. 89–116. doi:10.7202/1079413ar.

37 — Foucher, M. (2018) ‘Penser l’Union européenne à l’échelle mondiale, une conversation avec Michel Foucher’, *Le Grand Continent*, 27 June 2018.