CHAPTER 1

The Making of a Coherent Arctic Policy for the European Union: Anxieties, Contradictions and Possible Future Pathways

Adam Stępień and Timo Koivurova*

Abstract

This chapter investigates what a coherent, united, integrated and concretized EU Arctic policy may entail and how it relates to regional actors’ anxiety regarding the EU’s Arctic policy formulation. It is argued that this anxiety has had a critical influence on the EU Arctic policy and may be even seen as a “blessing in disguise”, contributing to the learning process taking place within the EU institutions. The question of what a coherent EU policy may entail is discussed against the background of the history of EU policy-making and examining the potential reasons for the Arctic actors’ concerns, including the rejection of EU’s environmental leadership, concern regarding the coordination role the European Commission may play in the Arctic Council, as well as the alleged lack of appropriate knowledge and sensitivity. The internal (consistence – lack of contradictory objectives), institutional (coherence between EU institutions) and vertical (between the EU and its member states) dimensions of coherence are discussed. The EU’s overarching policy towards the Arctic is seen as complementary to the actions of the EU member states. There is a tension between the emphasis on the circumpolar versus European Arctic issues, between maritime and terrestrial, internal and external dimensions. There is also a contradiction between the EU environmental values, developmental goals, as well as the eagerness to adjust to the narratives prevalent in the EU Arctic and the need to respond to internal pressures. The chapter concludes with the appreciation of both EU’s role in the region and the learning process taking place within the EU institutions regarding the Arctic. However, the authors also identify prevalent challenges that the EU policy-makers are likely to face also in the future. Among the possible ways forward are: an emphasis on the issues crucial for the European Arctic, the focus on supporting Arctic research, developing mechanisms for dialogue, as well as the ongoing assessment of the impact of EU policies in the region. EU policy makers should consider Arctic

* The authors would like to acknowledge Malgorzata Śmieszek and Paula Kankaanpää for valuable comments, suggestions and support. The revised version of this chapter has been submitted as an article to the Yearbook of Polar Law, Vol. 7 (Brill/Nijhoff).
policy-making institutional setting with a less dominant role of the European External Action Service and the DG Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

1 Introduction

In 2014, the European Parliament called for the formulation of a “united EU policy on the Arctic” and a “coherent strategy and concretized action plan on the EU’s engagement in the Arctic”, while the Council of the European Union requested the European Commission to work towards “further development of an integrated and coherent Arctic Policy”. This chapter investigates what such a coherent, united, integrated and concretized approach may entail and how it relates to the anxiety among many regional actors over the interest of the EU in the Arctic.

While the chapters that follow focus on specific thematic areas and examine a broad array of EU policies and actions that are of relevance for the Arctic, here the focus is on the overall EU Arctic policy-making. The analysis follows neither chronological nor sectoral approach but rather tackles four interrelated issues: the origins of EU institutions’ interest in the Arctic, the resistance of Arctic actors to the EU’s active presence in the region, the question of coherence of EU Arctic policy, and the contradictions that constitute a challenge in the formulation of the EU’s coherent overarching stance.

First, the manifold EU-Arctic interlinks are reiterated and the origins of the EU policy-making for the region discussed. Further, the policy-making and a learning process within the EU is juxtaposed with anxiety among Arctic actors regarding more serious and conscious engagement of the EU in Arctic affairs. It is argued that it was the resistance the EU encountered in the Arctic that was chiefly responsible for fuelling the learning process within the EU. Against such background, the need for and the possible shape of EU Arctic policy/strategy are discussed, with particular emphasis on the contradictions inherent to the EU Arctic policy-making. The chapter concludes with the appreciation of both EU’s role in the region and the learning process taking place within the EU institutions regarding the Arctic. However, the authors also reiterate the challenges that the EU policy-makers are bound to face in the future owing to the very nature of the EU-Arctic nexus.

---


2 Council of the European Union (12 May 2014), Council conclusions on developing a European Union Policy towards the Arctic Region, Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, para. 15.