CHAPTER 5

Partners or Rivals? Norway and the European Union in the High North

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1 Introduction

Ever since the European Union (EU) became actively engaged in Arctic affairs, its related relationship with Norway—as its immediate Arctic/northern neighbour—can be characterised as paradoxical. Although Norway has pro-actively worked to get the EU more involved in Arctic (governance) issues, it has, from the European Commission’s (the Commission) first Communication on Arctic issues in 2008,1 been sceptical of various policy and legal steps taken by the EU. As a matter of fact, this apparent “enthusiasm and scepticism”, illustrates much of Norway’s relationship with the EU; not only in the Arctic, but also in the overarching relationship between these two international actors.

Norway’s liaison with the EU can generally be characterised as not ‘in’ but neither really ‘out’ of the EU. Although Norway is not a EU Member State, it is politically and economically closely connected to the Union via a broad range of agreements and other forms of cooperation.2 A member of the European Economic Area (EEA) since 1994—when the bid for EU membership failed for a second time—Norway adheres to the majority of European legislative acts. Accordingly, Norway can be characterised as the “most integrated outsider” to the Union.3 And yet, in Norway, the EU is often portrayed as something far removed from its political processes, separated in the domain of foreign policy.

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The Arctic, however, is closely linked to Norwegian national identity. As the region saw a surge in global attention almost a decade ago, Norway found itself faced with the EU pursuing a more active role in what constitute 'core' interests for Norway in a wide range of policy areas. Ever since this particular regional activeness by the Union, the Norway-EU relationship has been challenging. Norway is grappling with the desire to get European engagement in Arctic affairs, while simultaneously safeguarding its sovereign rights and interests.

This Chapter investigates the complex and ambiguous relationship between Norway and the EU. It asks: Why does the Arctic relationship between Norway and the EU take on these paradoxical traits? Which conditional elements can explain Norway's ambivalence towards the EU in Arctic/northern affairs?

We will in turn argue that it is somewhat futile to separate the Arctic domain from the overarching Norway-EU relationship. Although useful for policymakers in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), such separation is a symbolic action that does not help explain the larger trends in the relationship between the Scandinavian country and the politico-economic union of (currently) 28 Member States. At the same time, only discussing Norway-EU relations omits an essential and often neglected domestic actor in Norway, namely the Norwegian Arctic itself. Hence, we need to recognise how the EU’s Arctic quest relates not only to Norway and the Arctic as a foreign policy domain, but also to the northern parts of Norway and the Arctic as a domain linked to regional and economic development.

We examine these relationships in the light of three examples: (1) the discussions embedded in the broader Arctic governance theme, (2) the EU’s impact on, and efforts to regulate, industrial policies of relevance to the Norwegian Arctic, and finally (3) regional development and the indigenous peoples' aspects of the Union's Arctic engagement. In sum, studying these domains will help to answer the questions laid out above. However, before scrutinising how the Arctic has figured in this ambiguous relationship, we first need to briefly conceptualise the larger context of Norway's liaison with the EU. Afterwards, we will examine the EU’s Arctic relationship with Norway, through each of the illustrations described, before returning to the questions posed above.

2 Norway and the EU: It’s Complicated

Norway’s relationship with the EU can—at best—be characterised as ambiguous. By 2017, the Norwegian government had twice initiated the process of negotiating membership terms, only for the prospect of membership to be rejected by national popular vote at the final stage. This section elaborates on