Briefing: the new EU Communication on the Integrated EU Policy for the Arctic

The European Commission and the High Representative launched a new Communication on the “Integrated EU Policy for the Arctic” on 27 April 2016.¹ The Communication had been prepared following a request from the Council in May 2014. The Council is likely to endorse the new document on 20 June 2016.

The new Communication:

- continues to be a loose statement, mainly describing ongoing EU actions;
- its relevance depends on how it is reflected in the future EU policy-making processes;
- focuses on the EU climate change action, sustainable economic development of the European Arctic, and the EU’s contribution for international cooperation in the Arctic;
- confirms increased focus on the European Arctic and its sustainable economic development, and suggests shift from the focus on utilization of Arctic resources towards sustainable development of the region;
- introduces a number of consultation and dialogue mechanisms examining the possibilities for coordinating various channels of EU investment and research funding, primarily via a new European Arctic Stakeholder Forum;
- highlights the challenges of accessibility and connectivity in the Europe’s northernmost regions;
- is a manifestation of a gradual change in the EU’s regional and cohesion policy towards providing increasing more funding via investment loans as compared to regional programmes;
- fails to make a clearer distinction between statements referring to the European Arctic and the Circumpolar or High Arctic, which at times causes confusion among commentators;
- largely avoids problematic issues: oil and gas extraction, raw materials mining, EU ban on seal products, and difficult relations with Russia outside of the Arctic;
- mentions dialogue with indigenous peoples, but does not refer specifically to the Saami, the EU’s (and the European Economic Area’s) only Arctic indigenous group;²
- does not mention anymore the idea of establishing the EU Arctic Information Centre.

² Note that the Inuit of Greenland are also an indigenous people in Europe (since Greenland remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark). Yet, Greenland is not part of the EU or the EEA agreement. Nonetheless, the EU has special relationship with Greenland as one of the EU’s Overseas Countries and Territories and through the Greenland-EU Partnership Agreement.
The Arctic Communication from April 2016 is more focused than policy statements from 2008 and 2012. However, the Communication certainly does not present an “integrated” policy approach. The EU’s Arctic policy encompasses too many diverse issues – both internal and external – and it is too marginal within the EU policy system in order to realistically aim for linking up different Arctic-relevant sectoral policies and actions. The document remains primarily a listing of ongoing actions.

The EU Arctic policy is clearly evolving towards a greater focus on the challenges specific for the European Arctic. The vision of the Arctic’s economic future moved now away from the earlier expectations of rapidly expanding maritime shipping and hydrocarbon extraction. Therefore, the emphasis in the new EU document shifts to northern innovation, entrepreneurship, circular economy, e-services, bioeconomy, cold climate technologies and renewables.

Enhanced North-South transport connections are to support these economic developments, although clear commitments of EU financing are not made. Many actors in the Finnish North would like to see northern infrastructure projects – such as the railway linking Rovaniemi and Kirkenes – to be included into the EU’s core transport network (central feature of the Trans-European Network - Transport). However, it must be noted that some stakeholders in northern Lapland are concerned with the impact of such projects on the environment and reindeer husbandry. The document does not highlight east-west connections, even though not only North-South connections, but also intra-regional connectivity is considered by some experts to be crucial for creating critical mass for entrepreneurship and innovation in the North.

The new Communication reflects the general shift in the EU support for regional development towards financing investment and loans. This may be problematic for the EU’s northernmost regions, which benefited in the last decades from cohesion and cross-border programmes. However, at present, the special allocation within cohesion policy for the Europe’s northernmost regions – related to peripherality, sparse population and challenging climate conditions – appears likely to be maintained.

The most tangible outputs of the 2016 EU Communication are new dialogue processes aiming at enhancing the effectiveness of the EU Arctic-relevant funding. The European Arctic Stakeholder Forum will attempt to draw overarching European Arctic investment and research priorities. This goal will be supported by a new network of the EU programmes’ managers and followed up by annual stakeholder conferences. The new Forum is to be composed primarily of the regional and national authorities, and open to Greenlandic, Icelandic and Norwegian participation. The invitation to participate is to be also extended to indigenous representatives and, possibly, other actors such as private sector and universities. The participation of the European Investment Bank would be also crucial, considering the new Communication’s emphasis on investments and loans. The work of the Forum is likely to commence in the Fall 2016 and its work is foreseen to be completed by the end of 2017.

Arctic research occupies a key position in the EU Arctic policy. Central pillars of the Arctic science policy are the North Atlantic science cooperation with the USA and Canada in the framework of 2013 Galway Statement and the EU-Polarnet project (2015-2020, with participation of the University of Oulu). The latter develops the European Polar Research Programme and facilitates the coordination of research...
infrastructures. The relationship between the EU-Polarnet and the European Arctic Stakeholder Forum is unclear, as both processes are to contribute to the identification of the EU’s research priorities and the EU-Polarnet similarly builds on the interaction with Arctic stakeholders. Representatives of the EU-Polarnet are to be invited to participate in the Forum’s work. After 2020, the legacy of the EU-Polarnet is to be carried on by the European Polar Board, members of which are the Academy of Finland and the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland.

The idea of establishing the EU Arctic Information Centre (EUAIC) is not mentioned, in contrast to previous EU Communications and other EU policy documents. A preparatory action carried out in 2013-2014 considered the feasibility of the EUAIC as a network of European Arctic research and information institutions, coordinated from the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland. Many ideas proposed during that process are currently implemented by the EU as separate actions, such as the ongoing EU Arctic Policy Dialogue and Outreach tender. However, many of these actions will end by 2020.

The EU is now drawing its new Global Strategy and the North/Arctic is generally considered one of few positive directions in the EU’s ever more precarious international environment. The Union’s main contribution will be via soft security measures, such as delivering on science and infrastructure.

The EU remains committed to contributing to the Arctic Council’s work as an observer de facto, despite ongoing lack of the implementation of the EU’s formal observer status. The EU also takes part in the discussions – started in December 2015 – on the future fisheries in the Arctic Ocean. This follows up on the Arctic Ocean coastal states’ Declaration from July 2015. EU officials hope that a binding agreement could be negotiated as soon as the end of 2016. The EU is also supportive of enhanced protection of marine environment of the central Arctic Ocean, notwithstanding the international legal mechanism employed to achieve that goal.

The European Commission and the High Representative propose cooperation between the European Coast Guard Functions Forum and the newly established Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF). While this would, inter alia, allow EU agencies (FRONTEX and the European Maritime Safety Agency) to link up to the ACGF, both coast guard forums are at present in the stage of early organizational development, and the character and outcome of the envisaged cooperation is unclear.

The Communication proposes establishing a working party on Arctic Matters and Northern Cooperation in the Council and the European Parliament’s delegation dedicated to Arctic issues. The former appears to be unlikely as such a working party would not have a sufficient number of issues to work on.

The relevance of the new Communication depends on the inclusion of Arctic-specific concerns in the sectoral, specific decision-making processes – both of internal and external character. In the near future that includes: the EU’s Global Strategy, the EU’s position on the International Ocean Governance, climate and energy regulations, EU transport policy, and policies such as the Clean Air Package. The northernmost regions and Arctic stakeholders would like to see the EU’s Arctic focus to be reflected in the post-2020 budget framework, with hopes for at least maintaining the current levels of EU funding.


8 http://www.europeanpolarboard.org/
11 http://www.ecgff.eu/
http://lauda.ulapland.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/62370/ArCticles-1-2016-EU-Arctic-Policy-Stepien-Raspotnik.pdf?sequence=5