

The European Union and the Arctic

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The Arctic is a region in transformation. Facing multiple challenges driven by climate change, global resource demand, and shifting power relations, the circumpolar North also draws the attention of an international actor that has not necessarily always been perceived as an Arctic one: the European Union (EU). Contrary to such perceptions, the EU has proven to be an active participant to Arctic affairs. Over the past fifteen years, EU policymakers have developed a comprehensive approach to the complex Arctic social, economic, political and environmental landscape of the 21st century.

The EU is undoubtedly an actor in the Arctic, and has multiple good reasons for being present in the region and pursuing its interests. First of all, the EU has a tangible presence in the region in terms of geography, legal competence, and contribution to Arctic science. It also exercises influence due to policies and regulations both determining access to its single market as well as shaping its environmental footprint in the region. For decades, the EU has participated in different regional forums, such as the Arctic Council or the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. Three EU Member States are Arctic states: Denmark (on behalf of Greenland and Faroe Islands, which are themselves outside of the Union), Finland and Sweden. The northernmost regions of Finland and Sweden are subject to the EU's legislation, policies and benefit from EU funding programs. This influence further extends to Iceland and Norway (with the exception of Svalbard) through the European Economic Area Agreement, which applies the majority of the EU norms to these two Arctic states. EU programmes on research and innovation as well as regional development and cooperation formats (e.g., the Northern Dimension) further extend to the Barents region and North Atlantic basin. The European Investment Bank (EIB) is an important source of financing for Arctic projects. While Greenland is not part of the EU, the Union also maintains close relations with this self-governing territory, cooperating in areas such as education, health or fisheries, and is about to open an office in its capital, Nuuk. Additionally, the EU cooperates on Arctic issues with Canada and the United States. Since the 1990s, there had been vibrant cross-border cooperation with the regions in northwest Russia.

However, the EU's cooperation with Russia is on pause due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

As a major global economy, the EU also influences the Arctic via its shared responsibility for climate change, through pollution reaching the Arctic from Europe, as well as owing to the EU's demand for Arctic resources. Additionally, the EU influences the development of international norms that are of relevance for the Arctic. For instance, EU competences as regards maritime transport, environmental protection, or fisheries have made the Union an important actor in international negotiations and party to agreements and organizations on Arctic maritime navigation, marine biodiversity, or the future governance of the Central Arctic Ocean.

The EU and its various institutional actors – the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council – have slowly but steadily developed a dedicated EU Arctic policy, set common positions and stressed the Union's Arctic credentials. Starting in 2008 with a first Communication on *the European Union and the Arctic region*, the main priorities have included: climate change, supporting Arctic cooperation, dialogue with Arctic Indigenous Peoples, and Arctic science. Over time, there had been increasing emphasis on sustainable economic development and Arctic innovation, especially the European Arctic. In the most recent policy statement from 2021, three broad thematic areas for the EU's Arctic engagement have been defined: 1) contributing to peaceful and constructive dialogue and cooperation, 2) addressing challenges related to climate change and environmental degradation, including the EU's climate action via the European Green Deal, and 3) supporting regional sustainable development and Indigenous Peoples' issues, particularly via the involvement of Arctic actors, rights- and stakeholders in EU policy-making.

The Arctic policy statements have relatively minor influence on general EU policies and initiatives that actually impact the situation in the Arctic (e.g. the EU's climate and energy policy, global biodiversity actions, transport and industrial policies, trade negotiations or EU-Russia or EU-Canada relations). However, these Arctic-focused statements are a clear sign of the EU's interest in being part of Arctic debates, cooperation and governance. Among the consequences of the EU's interest in the region are the ongoing efforts to better engage Arctic actors, rightsholders and stakeholders in EU policymaking.

Currently, one platform for such engagement are the annually organized EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples Dialogue meetings. The EU has been also trying to better coordinate its Arctic activities, facilitating collaboration among its different funding programmes, as well as encouraging research projects supported by EU funding to work together and exchange information. EU policymakers have at times been accused of not understanding regional sensitivities, especially in the early years of the EU-Arctic policy-making, and following the adoption of a ban on placing seal products on the EU market in 2009. The so-called “seal ban” led to the EU being denied a formal observer status in the Arctic Council mainly due to Canadian opposition (although the EU acts within this forum as an observer in principle, based on the interim decision taken in Kiruna in 2013). There has also been concern among some Arctic residents that the EU is primarily interested in accessing Arctic resources – in the 2000s, hydrocarbons; and in the 2020s, critical minerals and renewable energy. However, while some of these concerns remain, the position of the EU as an Arctic actor currently appears unambiguous and broadly accepted.

For more on this, read...

Koivurova T and Others, *Overview of EU actions in the Arctic and their impact* (EPRD for the European Commission (FPI) 2021) <https://eprd.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EU-Policy-Arctic-Impact-Overview-Final-Report.pdf>

