

The EU talks big on protecting the Arctic under the guise of 'sustainable development'



Half a millennium ago, the myth of a lost city of gold drove scores of Europeans to the Americas in search of wealth. Today, images of a new 'El Dorado' with fathomless (energy) resources are attracting players from all over the world to a very different place: the Arctic. Driven by the prospect of economic, primarily energy-related opportunities, a myriad of national governments – from Arctic (Canada) to non-Arctic (China) states – and companies are trying to establish a foothold in an extremely fragile region that is key to the Earth's environmental and climatic system.

Further exploitation of the region will unavoidably reinforce the so-called '[Arctic paradox](#)', which captures the idea that the very extraction of hydrocarbons in the region – and one of its consequences, climate change – will facilitate access to further oil and gas resources, which in turn will aggravate the harmful regional and global effects of climate change.

The positions on the Arctic paradox of major players like Canada, China, Russia and the US revolve to differing degrees around the notion of 'sustainable development', that is, the idea that economic opportunities in the Arctic can be exploited while still protecting the environment.

One key actor that – at least in its declared policies – gives the impression of wishing to prioritise the protection of the fragile Arctic environment is the European Union (EU). True to its Treaties stipulating the promotion of "a high level of protection of the quality of the environment", the EU has formulated an '[integrated policy for the Arctic](#)' that – with priorities on "Climate Change and Safeguarding the Arctic Environment", "Sustainable Development in and around the Arctic" and "International Cooperation on Arctic Issues" – seems to tilt the balance towards the side of environmental protection instead of economic exploitation in the Arctic region.

A [closer look](#) at the Arctic strategies and actions of the EU and its member states, however, does not confirm this impression. While the EU's Arctic policy may come across as 'green', it is subjected to an ongoing discussion in which various players, especially the EU's Arctic members, but also some of the non-Arctic countries like France, Germany and Italy, continue to hope to be able to balance out economic opportunities and environmental protection needs in line with the notion of 'sustainable growth' that is at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy.

As a consequence, the economic weight of activities like shipping, fishing and tourism is expected to soar in the Arctic countries in the near future. This, and the fact that almost [70% of natural gas and 41% of oil imports](#) into the EU-28 stem from Russia and Norway and a significant share thereof is [extracted in the Arctic](#), are all strong indicators that at this point the EU and its members de facto privilege the pursuit of economic interests over environmental protection in the region.

Under the guise of sustainable growth and development, the EU's 'integrated policy for the Arctic' thus embodies a highly ambiguous position, which touches upon the Arctic paradox only by shying away from explicitly addressing contentious issues such as energy extraction. In the context of a quickly degrading Arctic environment, where the pursuit of economic and environmental objectives appears to be mutually exclusive, the usefulness of the notion of 'sustainable development' as a guideline for (EU) policies therefore needs to be called into question.

If continued ambiguity between environmental protection needs and the desire to exploit economic opportunities is no longer an option, the EU should – rather than settle for a broad and unworkable Arctic policy – more strongly align its policies with its reputation as a global 'green leader'. To do so, it would be well-advised to organise a broad societal debate aimed at providing a political answer to the dilemma posed by the Arctic paradox: does Europe want to exploit Arctic opportunities – and take the risk of accelerating environmental degradation processes, possibly to the point of no return – or not?

For this debate to be effective and legitimate, a wider range of actors than those with a direct economic interest need to participate in it, including non-Arctic EU member states and their citizens, as well as civil society. While emphasis must be placed on the fact the Arctic is crucial for protecting the atmosphere, the EU should also go local and seek the views of the Arctic's last indigenous peoples, the Saami. The way they understand 'green' is diametrically opposed to the notion of sustainable development: in its 2017 [Tråante Declaration](#), the Saami Council criticised the 'green colonialism' exercised by Nordic countries when 'steal[ing] land' and water traditionally 'owned and possessed' by the Saami to exploit its resources.

Manifold opportunities to initiate such a much-needed, inclusive and EU-wide debate on sustainable development in the Arctic region exist. In particular, the topic will have to be taken up by EU institutions such as the Environment Council. In the [conclusions to its October 2018 meeting](#), the Council noted "with concern that the Arctic is warming at more than twice the global average rate resulting in serious global consequences". One would think that it is only a small step from making this observation to initiating a debate aimed at reconsidering sustainable development in one of the world's most environmentally fragile regions.



Notes:

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