

Arctic Europe and its Future

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Abstract

Since Russia started its aggression against Ukraine, the framework for international cooperation in the Arctic region has changed profoundly. Russia has now withdrawn from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Arctic Council activities have more or less stalled. There is no meaningful circumpolar co-operation left, military preparations are ongoing and the talk of Arctic exceptionalism have ceased. For Arctic Europe, especially the northernmost parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway, this means adapting to a new situation. Cross-border contacts in European North are growing in importance but that is not currently happening under context of Nordic co-operation. Arctic security talk and actions have heavily increased but there have been no new political initiatives or strategies to guide the developments. The Arctic Europe is adjusting to the new realities step by step without coherent plans yet in place.

Key words: Arctic, Arctic Council, Barents, Russia, Nordic, Lapland, security, NATO

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1. Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation: end of the road?

The purpose of this article is to map out what are the current developments when it comes to international cooperation in Arctic Europe and what future options there might be. "Arctic Europe" is seen here as a flexible concept, referring mainly to processes that touch the Northern parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway, but in some cases also to wider Arctic cooperation.

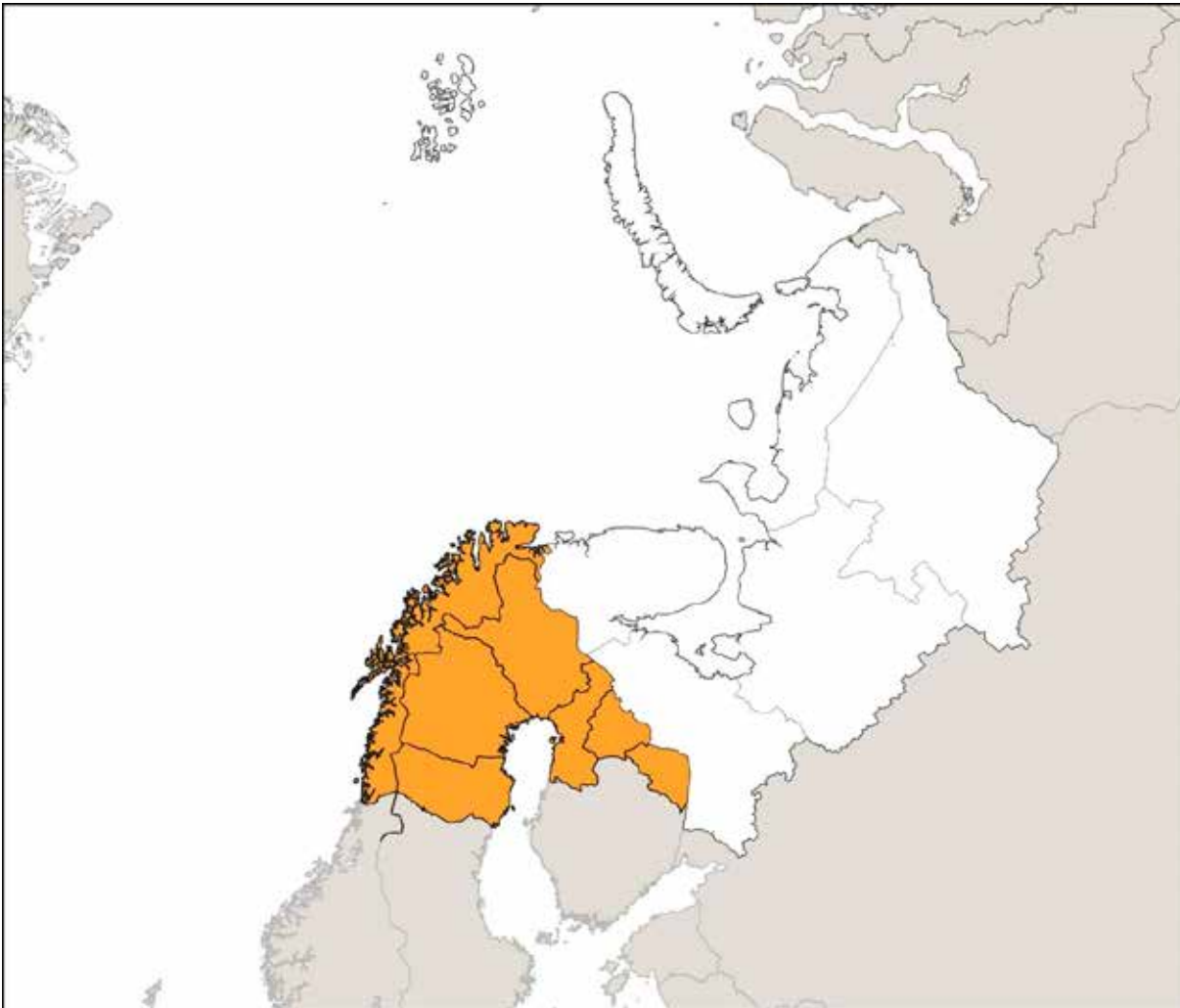
A topical case in this context is Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation, a structure built originally to promote contacts between northern regions of Europe, including North-West Russia.

According to the non-published list of planned events during the Finnish Presidency in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (2021-2023), the prime ministers of Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden were supposed to gather in Kemi, Finland, in February 2023 to celebrate 30 years of Barents cooperation.

However, they did not come. Nobody was invited and no event was ever held. There was nothing left to celebrate. One year earlier, in February 2022, Russia had started a war against Ukraine and all cooperation with Russia had stalled in the Barents Euro-Arctic council as well as in wider Arctic cooperation. This finally broke the structures, when it comes to the Barents cooperation.

In September 2023, Russian Federation officially announced its withdrawal from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, blaming the Western members for what happened (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian federation, 2023). The Western members (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the European Union) announced immediately that they will continue without Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2023). In practice, this was exactly what they had done since the war started: in March 2022 they announced that they have no other choice than to suspend activities involving Russia in the Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation (Joint Statement, 2022). As Russia withdrew, this arrangement became permanent.

Only Nordic regions are left in Barents regional co-operation.



Map: Arto Vitikka / Arctic Centre

At the point of Russian withdrawal, the Finnish presidency was coming to the end and as the chairmanship is rotating, next in line would have been Russia. It was obvious that this would not have been acceptable for the Western members. Instead, in Joensuu meeting – originally planned as a ministerial meeting but later held on a lower level - in October 2023, an interim Trio Presidency of Finland, Sweden and Norway was created for a one-year period “unless otherwise decided” (Joensuu statement, 2023).

Since then, not much has been publicly heard from the Barents cooperation. At the time of this writing there seems to be no published documents explaining how the interim Trio presidency functions and what would be the proceedings to decide on its future.

Some things are still planned to happen. In their statement (Barents Regional Council, 2023) the remaining Nordic members, chaired by eastern Finnish region of North Karelia, listed the thematic priorities (green transition, transport and logistics, people-to-people cooperation) and cross-cutting themes (youth, Sami people, climate and nature) during North Karelian chairmanship. While the thematic priorities are broad, the actions are however only a shadow of what the visions once were.

What we have witnessed after Russia’s aggression began is perhaps not the end of Barents cooperation. Nevertheless, one might question the purpose of continuing at this point. One answer might be that keeping the structures still there would one day allow Russia to return, if such a day would come in any meaningful time. The original idea of the cooperation was to promote connections across the Russia-Nordic border in the North. Such connections had not existed in practice for decades due to the Cold War and in fact, never in the modern world, not after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. Before the withdrawal of Russia, the Barents Regional Council had 13 members from the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.

If one looks at the founding document of the Barents cooperation, the Kirkenes Declaration from January 1993, one can feel how things were back then. Two citations from the declaration are worth to be quoted here as they illustrate how the world looked like when these new cooperation structures were created (Declaration, 1993):

“The Participants expressed their conviction that expanded cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region will contribute substantially to stability and progress in the area and in Europe as a whole, where partnership is now replacing the confrontation and division of the past. The Participants felt that such cooperation will contribute to international peace and security.”

And:

“The Participants expressed their desire to support the long-standing aspirations of the peoples in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region for friendship and cooperation, and stressed the fundamental significance of the historical changes caused by the end of ideological and military confrontation in Europe.”

These are words that now sound like coming from some distant past. In the real world, almost a direct opposite to the original visions has happened. In the end, there was no Arctic exceptionalism, at least not in the Barents Euro-Arctic region. The wider Arctic cooperation is still somehow a different story, as all the eight members of the Arctic Council are still there, at least at the time of this writing, even if the functions of the council are currently heavily limited.

2. Goodbye to Arctic exceptionalism?

Arctic exceptionalism is an often-used term, referring to the Arctic region as a place for peaceful and scientific cooperation despite other disagreements and political tensions existing globally and among the Arctic countries (DGAP 2023).

This concept has faced criticism from scholars who argue that in its efforts to limit the Western defense posture in the Arctic, Russia has successfully exploited the “High North, low tension” mantra and the notion of the Arctic as an exceptional region of peace and cooperation. With that, Russia has managed to build its position of relative strength in the Arctic through systematically developing its military capabilities (Mikkola et al, 2023).

The argument however fails to explain how these two fields are actually connected: how in practice did the existence of Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation and Arctic cooperation allow Russia to build military capabilities in the Arctic that otherwise would not have been built and how did environmental cooperation contribute to giving Russia relative strength in the Arctic?

What is obvious in any case is that the Arctic has been and still is a key part in the Russian national story and in its identity building (see for instance Breum, 2019). This may explain for its part why the attitude of Russia in the Arctic Council has been different from the one in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council.

In this article, the focus is mainly on Arctic Europe, meaning the northernmost parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway, which could also be referred as Northern Fennoscandia. In this context, it is relevant to see what happened in the Arctic Council and how it is different from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. Arctic is the only direction where Russia feels it can operate freely, whether in economy or in military terms.

The militarization of the Russian Arctic is a fact (Mikkola et al, 2023) but the purpose of this article is not to discuss the developments inside Russia. What matters is that there is no perspective left for relevant Arctic cooperation with Russia in any foreseeable future.

2.1 The Arctic Council, still alive but not doing well

Russia started its war against Ukraine in February 2022. Some months later, Finnish Prime Minister's Office asked a group of experts to analyze what consequences it brings to the Arctic cooperation and to Finland's 2021 Strategy for Arctic policy. The report was published in autumn 2022 (Koivurova et al, 2022).

The report reminds that the suspension of Arctic Council cooperation was near already in 2014 due to the occupation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. Canada, as the Chair at the time, proposed banning Russia from the Council, but other member states considered that shutting Russia out would call into question the expediency of the Arctic cooperation.

When the aggression against Ukraine started, Russia was chairing the Arctic Council and the seven Western member states suspended their activities in the Council chaired by Russia. However, Russia still officially continued as the chair. In May 2023, the Arctic Council managed to transform the chairmanship from Russia to Norway. This was done by avoiding any political level meetings and referring to work plans accepted together in Reykjavik ministerial meeting before the war, in 2021 (Arctic Council, 2023). The Arctic Council work has continued since in working groups in some capacity and in a low political level, keeping some contact channels open with Russia but without working with Russian partners and avoiding institutional contacts with Russia.

One needs to underline that Russia has not, at least at the time of this writing, officially left the Arctic Council or officially blocked the work in the Council, which still has had all eight member states left and the principle of decision-making basing through consensus. The Council has not in practice fulfilled its original purpose of high-level pan-Arctic cooperation anymore, but nevertheless it still exists. Another question open to interpretations is, how useful it has been in these circumstances. In private talks, it is easy to hear frustration among those who are or who are supposed to be active in working groups.

Officially, the tone is different, and the focus is stressing the fact that the Council is still there. "We feel that we have the mandate to maintain the Arctic Council as the premiere forum for collaboration and cooperation in the Arctic. All the Arctic States have stated that they want to sustain and strengthen the Council, and since we are the Chair, we are leading this joint effort", said Norway's Senior Arctic Official Solveig Rossebø in an Arctic Council webpage interview in October 2023 (Arctic Council interview, 2023).

In early 2024, Russia suspended its annual contributions to Arctic Council's budget and warned about possible full withdrawal. At the same time, Norwegian prime minister Jonas Gahr Støre wanted to keep the Arctic Council still running: "We should not close those doors and throw the keys away. One day they may be opened again we will all be again around that Arctic table". Also, Norway's Foreign Minister, Espen Barth Eide, spoke about the need to keep the forum relevant and at some level of contact (Nilsen, 2024).

As a practical step forward, in February, the eight Arctic States, in consultation with the Indigenous Permanent Participant organizations, reached consensus to gradually resume official Working Group

meetings in a virtual format. Prior to this update, Working Groups advanced project work and decision-making only via written procedures after consensus was reached in August 2023 (Arctic Council news, 2024). Diplomatic-level meetings on the Senior Arctic Official level remained on pause.

Whatever happens, the Council is highly unlikely to go back to where it was. Photos of Rovaniemi ministerial meeting in May 2019 are now visual documents from a distant past: a sporting hall crowded with Arctic Council officials and participants, all eight foreign ministers in place. In Arctic cooperation, this was the last event of that kind. The Reykjavik ministerial meeting of 2021 was shadowed by the pandemic, and the next gathering with all ministers in place is currently nowhere in sight.

Arctic Council Rovaniemi ministerial meeting 2019.



Photo: Jouni Porsanger / UM

Rovaniemi ministerial meeting is also a reminder of something else. In the group photo, one of the ministers was Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State. Thanks to him, and thanks to the US policy during the Donald Trump presidency (2017-2021), references to climate change were wiped off from the official statements. When looking at the Rovaniemi meeting documents, the statement signed by the ministers is a vague one-pager and the real substance, including references to climate change in the Arctic, is placed in a statement by chair, using only the name of the Finnish foreign minister (Arctic Council, 2019).

What would the US Arctic policy be like during the possible second presidency of Donald Trump? Of course, it remains to be seen how things will unfold, as does everything else related to that, but committing to climate change actions would not most likely be on the table keeping in mind that the first Trump administration took the USA away from the Paris climate agreement. That would leave the Arctic Council paralyzed at the same time both by the Russian aggression and by the changed US policy in the Arctic. A reminder of the political reality in the US is that a new Arctic ambassador was nominated by the administration of Joe Biden already in February 2023 but a year after that, it had not yet been confirmed at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The dissolving of the Arctic Council by one or even more members leaving it, would create an existential problem for Arctic cooperation. After that, nothing could be pan-Arctic or circumpolar anymore on that level, even if in practice any circumpolar activities have already ceased. Countries like China and India would need to take stands on how they position themselves when the Arctic would be divided into two – China is, obviously, already active in the Russian Arctic and its vessels are using the Northern sea route over Siberia, including the one, New New Polar Bear, suspected of cutting the gas pipeline between Estonia and Finland (Staalesen, 2023). In the actual Arctic region, geopolitics and military security would easily

become topics that shadow everything else, just as they did during the first Cold War. The difference is that during the era of the first Cold War, climate change was now yet an issue in the Arctic. These days, it should be the main concern.

3. A new era without new strategies

As one could imagine, all this would call for new strategic thinking for the Arctic. This is evident in the security discussions, which now include considerations of an increasingly aggressive Russia, as well as Finland and Sweden joining NATO. On the political side, there have not been many significant new movements – which is understandable as the international political environment is changing at a pace that easily leaves any new strategies behind.

In the Finnish context, it is still not easy to find out what the current right-wing government, in office since June 2023, aims for in the Arctic cooperation. Contrary to a line of previous governments, the Arctic is not visible in the government program. It is mentioned only in connection with NATO, but no political goals related to the Arctic are to be seen anywhere in the program (Finnish Government, 2023). At the time of this writing, there have not been either any political statements published about the Arctic. In February 2024, the latest updates on Arctic cooperation on the website of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs were from the year 2022.

Some of these gaps may have something to do with the ongoing structural reform inside the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The new structures and how they may affect the management and steering of Finland's Arctic activities had not yet been announced before this article was written.

There has usually been an Arctic advisory board in Finland under Prime minister's office to advise the government in its Arctic policy. The mandate of the previous board ended in October 2023. Also, a cross-sectoral Arctic working group in Finnish ministries had not been nominated. The government program does however call, in the national context, for a new program for Northern Finland. In February 2024, the advisory board nominations started, combined with a program to develop Eastern Finland in the new geopolitical situation. The content of the work would include promoting economic growth in the region and enhancing the security of supplies (Laukka, 2024). One should note that "Arctic" is not a word that is in use in this context.

All this opens a question about the future of Arctic Europe. If a national Arctic policy is currently hard to identify in Finland, what about the regional and local levels?

The Barents Regional Council does not seem to be a tool that the member regions in Finland, Norway and Sweden would be actively using. The truth is far from that: for instance, the international strategy 2023 – 2027 of the Regional council of Lapland does not even mention it (*Lapin liitto* 2022).

Interestingly, the strategy clearly states that Lapland will now look to the West. Nordic and transatlantic relations will grow in importance and the strategy even asks if "Arctic" is any more a relevant term for Lapland. In practical terms, the strategy highlights the contacts with the northern regions of Sweden and Norway, together with the EU contacts. It also opens a discussion of representing the North Calotte together with Swedish and Norwegian regions when talking with European partners and institutions.

The North Calotte Council is a traditional forum, operating under the Nordic Council of Ministers, and representing the northernmost regions of Finland, Sweden and Norway. For a long time, the Council has had a low profile, and it has focused mainly on easing border practicalities.

However, in their meeting in January 2024 the North Calotte Council announced its willingness to start a process to discuss how the regional Northern cooperation between the Nordic countries could be organized in the future and what aims it could have. As a part of the process, one should focus on regions' experiences on the Barents cooperation, NSPA (Northern Sparsely Populated Regions) and Interreg programs (Pohjoiskalotin neuvosto 2024). It remains to be seen if this tells about the growing future role of the North Calotte Council.

The European Union Interreg Aurora program region is geographically equal to the Nordic member regions of the Barents regional council, added with some more southern regions in Finland, Sweden and Norway. The total financing for the program period 2021-2027 is over 200 million euros according to the program webpage. This makes it a powerful tool.

In the European North, one example of Interreg Aurora funded projects is New North – Transport, Logistics and Security of Supply. The project started in 2023 and as described on Regional Council of Lapland website, *“the approximately 2,000,000 euros in funding granted by the Interreg Aurora program strengthens collaboration in the northern region and enables smoother transport chains, security of supply, development of electric aviation, and the creation of green transport corridors. The project encompasses cooperation between the regions of Lapland, North Karelia, Kainuu, and North Ostrobothnia in Finland, the Kvarken Council and the Västerbotten and Norrbotten regions in Sweden, and the Troms, Nordland, and Finnmark regions in Norway.”* (New North, 2024)

While the public outcomes of the project are not visible yet, the project illustrates where the regional needs are in practice currently in Arctic Europe. Transport and logistics are growing in importance, not least because of security of supply issues in potential conflict situations when harbors on the Baltic Sea cannot be used. The regions of the three Nordic countries are increasingly working together.

Before this project, Visit Arctic Europe, funded by Interreg Nord, developed Finnish and Swedish Lapland and Northern Norway to be an all year round sustainable and high-quality destination. This was also a concrete example of promoting cooperation across the northern borders in Nordic countries.

4. Arctic Europe: A real concept or an abstraction?

Arctic Europe is a term that is currently widely used. However, it does not have any commonly agreed definition and it is used in very many different contexts.

I have argued in my article in the Finnish newspaper Lapin Kansa (Heikkilä 2022) that the concept of Arctic Europe, regional branding of Northern parts of Finland, Sweden, Norway as well as Iceland, could be introduced under the umbrella of Nordic co-operation.

Thanks to the Gulf Stream, this European Arctic region is essentially different in character from what the Arctic region is mostly like. Arctic Europe is a prosperous region with infrastructure, universities and industry. It only has not really been able to profile itself as a common region. There was an attempt to do so in 2016, when several northern cities, led by Oulu and Rovaniemi in particular, seriously considered starting the “Arctic Europe” cooperation.

According to a non-published background paper drawn up at the time, the cities and regions of “Arctic Europe” alone are peripheral and each other’s potential competitors, while at the same time they are small players on both the international and national scale. Together, however, they form a strong Arctic entity full of opportunities and strengths that range from high technology to fishing, from mining to tourism, from cities to the culture of indigenous peoples, and from maritime transport to Arctic design. All in all, the region could be considered one of Europe’s most promising areas for investment and growth.

At that time, the attempt to create a city-led Arctic Europe cooperation finally got nowhere as it turned out that it is not that easy to go forward. One should also note that the Arctic cities have created a well-functioning cooperation in Arctic Mayors’ Forum, which is currently an active network.

However, in a way triggered by the talks of Arctic Europe cooperation, Arctic Five cooperation between universities in these cities started, developing into a concrete and functional network. It includes the universities of Lapland, Oulu, Luleå, Umeå and Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway.

The Chamber of Lapland has estimated that the investment potential in “Northern regions” – northern Finland, Sweden and Norway – is up to 187 billion euros; most of that connected to green transition (Lapin kauppakamari, 2023). This also highlights the potential of cross-border co-operation.

While much of the previous Arctic cooperation is now paralyzed, the Arctic Europe idea might enable the continuation of cross-border cooperation in the northern regions of Europe.

However, a good question is how, by whom and with what structure such an activity could be achieved. If the goal is cooperation between different actors in the region, it is difficult to create it, for example, through a city or region or universities. In addition, one part of the Arctic European region (Finland, Sweden) belongs to the European Union and one part (Norway) does not, in which case the role of the EU in the region is not clear.

4.1 Nordic Arctic or European Arctic?

There is one platform though to which the entire region undoubtedly belongs: Nordic cooperation.

Talking about Arctic Europe under the Nordic umbrella would also clarify the roles of the involved actors. In Nordic cooperation, all actors can be involved. For example, the practical problem of the Barents cooperation has been rigid structures in which, to illustrate the case, the cities of the region have not played a role.

Nordic cooperation has included Arctic activities for a long time, among them is the North Calotte Council. Through the Nordic umbrella, different actors could also meet without institutional commitments, which are always difficult. To get started, it would be necessary for the Nordic Council to organize a series of events and meetings in the north through the Arctic Europe theme. Through them, we would see if the concept could really go ahead. It would be important to also invite Iceland to participate, so that there would not be a Nordic gap in the Arctic cooperation networks.

In Independent Barents Observer op-ed, I have also argued how Nordic countries could act to save Arctic co-operation (Heikkilä 2022 b). My argument in this article was that together the Nordic countries hold the keys to make the Arctic co-operation survive through this very turbulent period. Utilizing the Nordic co-operation in keeping Arctic cooperation spirit alive has also the benefit of being able to reach and engage not only ministries but also many kinds of regional and civil society actors. The Nordic Council of Ministers already has a number of Arctic activities, and it has a mandate to discuss the Arctic in its own context.

The problem is that achieving any of that would certainly require quite a lot of new thinking in Nordic co-operation together with real political will and good coordination. It is fair to say that at the moment there are no such signs which in turn makes these speculations about a stronger Nordic Arctic role quite distant and hypothetical. However, in a situation where something needs to be done, doing something would have benefits.

After all, there is a previous example: The Arctic parliamentary co-operation was originally planned and initiated in the Nordic Council context and supported by it in mid-nineties (Heikkilä 2019). At that time, the Nordic touch made Arctic things happen, thanks to some visionary people in parliamentary structures.

In this article, I have tried to map what and where could be the building stones for the future Arctic Europe. In this context, I have not mentioned much of the European Union as its role in the Arctic has been very moderate, when it comes to active policy work, despite a number of Arctic policy papers. When it comes to regional financing instruments and research, such as EU Horizon2020 programs, the picture is different. There are resources in play, but that does not transform into an active EU Arctic policy. Through the years, Arctic activities have been scattered to several DGs inside the Commission structure.

What then might happen in the near future? It is very much possible that there will be a number of parallel processes going on in Arctic Europe without any coherent common policy to guide them. After all, if the coherent policy is not coming from currently stalled Arctic cooperation structures, not from Nordic cooperation or not from some national state taking a leading role, where it could come from?

There are two possible answers to that. In both cases, it would be a kind of an organic development.

First, the Arctic regions of Nordic countries themselves could do it by taking some initiative into their own hands, as somehow demonstrated in the strategy paper of Lapland regional council. One should however remember that the powers of the regions are very limited in Finland. In Norway, the northernmost counties of Troms and Finnmark were merged in 2020 and the separated again in 2023, a process taking a lot of regional energy (Mæhlum, 2024).

Secondly, the increasing security and military cooperation, as coming from the NATO memberships together with security of supply concerns, may well start a process where more and more practical and logistical arrangements are being made in the European Arctic, thus binding the regions closer together.

How the latter relates to some other interests in the same region is another question. For instance, the Nordic Sami cooperation in the North Calotte region is well established. There has been surprisingly little discussion or research if the increasing military activity and related land use needs could create a possible conflict of interest with the land use needs of indigenous cultures and traditional indigenous practices.

5. Conclusions: Adapting takes time

If the history of Arctic cooperation can teach us anything, it can teach us about the essence of timing.

During the previous Cold War, there was no Arctic cooperation on governmental level and there were basically no international Arctic networks. The first ones to make concrete initiatives in that direction were actually those advocating scientific cooperation. That required contacts between governments but was soon left in the hands of research institutions. The process started in the late 80's and led to the establishment of IASC, International Arctic Science Committee. The process is well described in IASC 25 years history book (IASC, 2015).

For governmental level Arctic cooperation, a new mental attitude in the Soviet Union was needed. In late 1987, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev made a list of Arctic initiatives in his speech in Murmansk (Barentsinfo). Triggered by that, Finland seized the opportunity and made its own Arctic environmental initiative officially in 1989. The so-called Rovaniemi process created the Arctic Environment Protection Strategy and led to the first Arctic meeting on ministerial level in 1991. Parallel to this, Canada made for its own internal reasons an initiative to create an Arctic Council with a wider mandate and after several years of negotiations, the Council was founded in Ottawa in 1996 (English, 2013).

None of this would have been possible without the Cold War first thawing and then ending. Before Gorbachev's era these Arctic initiatives would have been undoable if the aim were to connect all Arctic countries.

The lessons for today seem to be pretty simple: new Arctic initiatives can be made only when the overall international situation allows it. The question is, when and how would the time come again and in which form? A common assumption is that as long as Putin or a Putin-like regime sits in Moscow, there is no returning to business-as-usual with Russia. There is though a scary alternative: a surge of political forces who do not condemn Russia's actions in a way we are now doing in Western countries. Whether that is at all plausible or not, it might be seen after the upcoming elections to the European Parliament and the presidential elections in the USA.

In all scenarios, the Nordic countries are most likely to stay as a region where the concept of cross-border cooperation in Arctic Europe can be developed further. As I have tried to describe above, there are many ways to do it and at the moment some sort of organic growth without new institutional arrangements may be most plausible.

A natural North American Arctic partner for Nordic countries is Canada. In June 2023, the prime ministers of Canada and Nordic countries met in Iceland. A joint statement noted that as like-minded transatlantic partners, Canada and the Nordic countries share interests in and beyond the North-Atlantic and the Arctic region. They also agreed to follow up the meeting via a Canada-Nordic Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue, the first of which will be hosted by Canada (Joint Statement, 2024). By February 2024, the time and place of the meeting had not yet been confirmed. According to a Nordic source, Iqaluit has been discussed, but logistics are a challenge. Canada is also heading for parliamentary elections this year or in 2025 and a change to a conservative government is possible.

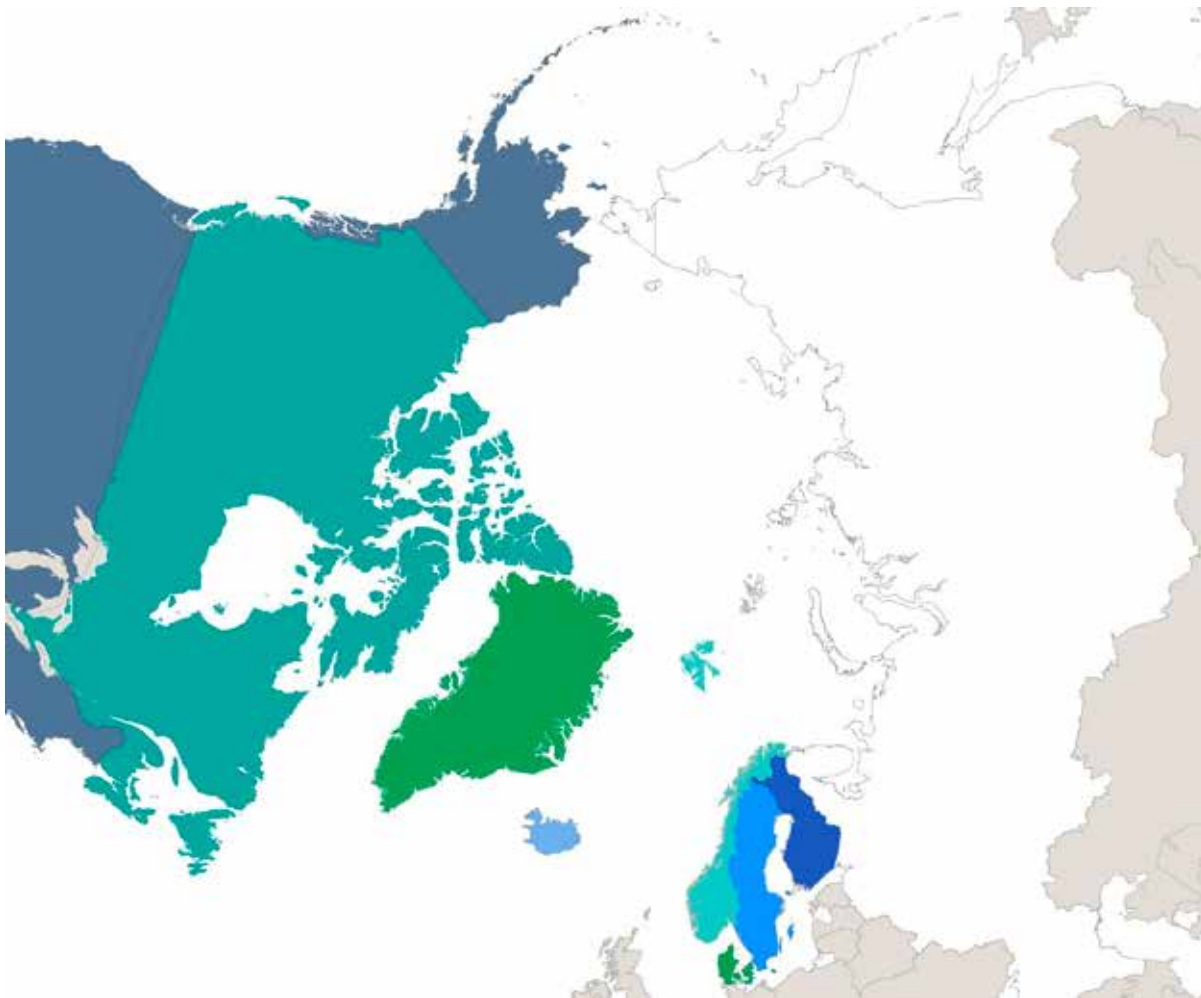
5.1 Fragmentation continues

Even with potential Nordic-Canada Arctic like-mindedness, the fragmentation of the Arctic seems to continue.

I have been following the Arctic issues and travelled in the region since the early 90's. Last September, I published a book *Arktisen maailman jäljillä* ("In Search of the Arctic World"), summarizing my quarter century in the Arctic (Heikkilä, 2023). The key idea of the book is to describe the region that has so much in common, no matter in which country you are in: Arctic nature. Arctic ways of living. Arctic cultures. Arctic light and darkness. Arctic conditions, Arctic joys and troubles. Arctic ways of moving from one place to another. Arctic stories, Arctic animals, Arctic history. There is much in common, but the circumpolar track can not be beaten any more, thanks to what Russia has become.

Back in time, there had been colonialism in the Arctic, as well as cultural genocides, prison camps, stolen children, cold war, hot wars, closed borders, nuclear threats, uncontrolled killing of wild animals, confrontations, you name it. Then, all of that was history. Arctic world seemed to have a cooperation period that lasted from 1987 (from Gorbachev's Murmansk speech) to February 2022.

The Arctic is in practice now divided in two parts.



Map: Arto Vitikka / Arctic Centre

Then again, history changed. The Arctic is again divided to East and West which is paradoxical to a region that used to be North only. Geographically, eastern and western halves are almost equal, and there is not that much difference in population either.

Now, connections between those halves have been lost. I have a lot of photos from various places in the Russian Arctic. Many of them I used when I was writing my book. At that time, they looked like personal travel memoirs. Now, they look like historical documents from an era that is not coming back any time soon. Nowadays there would be no way of getting back to take new photos. This also affects vice versa: no visitors from “the other side” of the Arctic can come in anymore. Russia is using asylum seekers and illegal border crossings as a hybrid weapon.

The Arctic is currently warming at a rate about four times faster than the global average (Rantanen et al, 2022). Does the current geopolitical situation help fighting the climate change? No. Besides affecting the politics in general, the flow of scientific information from Russia on climate data is now seriously harmed.

Does the current geopolitical situation then help contacts between indigenous peoples? Does it help efforts to preserve biodiversity? Does it help Arctic cross-border trade and logistics? No, no and no. Everyone is now on the losing side.

There is no change in sight, and as long as situation is what it is, what is left is adjusting. This is what is currently shaping the future of Arctic Europe; we are simply adjusting to the new reality without coherent new plans. Adapting takes time, as the geopolitical changes have been so fast and so dramatic and as there may be more coming.

In this case, adapting can also be called as organic development. There are no new political initiatives in place and only time can tell if the Arctic cooperation structures that existed before the Russian aggression really can adapt to the new era and remain relevant. If there is a need, there is a way.

The fundamental question however remains. Should we consider the new Arctic division as a generational fact and act accordingly? Or should we still see the Arctic, besides it being a military theatre, as a theater for possible small-scale openings and contacts that could lead the way one day to wider political thawing? In the history of Arctic co-operation, scientific and environmental contacts paved the way in the late 80's, at the time when nobody could yet see the Soviet Union collapsing. Can history repeat itself, in all its meanings?

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