

Arctic Euphoria and International High North Politics

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PREFACE

“Norway on a High in the North”—this is what my colleague and friend Leif Christian Jensen called his Ph.D. thesis on Norwegian High North politics in the years following the turn of the millennium. What a wonderful title! “Arctic Euphoria” is my modest attempt to pin down the slightly longer lines in Norwegian policies towards the country’s northern regions and areas at similar latitudes beyond its borders as well. Throughout my career of nearly 25 years, I’ve experienced “the Great Barents Awakening” of the early and mid-1990s, “the Great High North Enchantment” that followed a good decade later, and recent years’ “Arctic wave”. It’s tapered off, but it’s been a wild ride. What comes up must go down—this is one of the main lessons I’ve learnt. But equally important when we speak about Northern Norway and its place in the world: what goes down must invariably come up again. And every time it happens, it’s as if it happens for the first time.

“Let it be said”, one of the Oslo-based founding fathers of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region told me a few years ago, “if Sogn and Fjordane [the Norwegian county with the highest density of fishery millionaires, located on the western coast] had been on our border with Russia, and not Finnmark [which actually *is* on the border with Russia], there wouldn’t have been any Barents Region.” He wasn’t talking about the geographical Barents region, which is pretty stationary, but of the *political* Barents regional project, which is more open to manipulation. His message was that Norwegian High North politics cannot be understood as foreign policy alone. In this case, according to this particular

founding father, the Barents Region, a major priority in post-Cold War Norwegian foreign policy, wasn't much about foreign policy at all.

My own starting point had been the opposite. Naively, as it appears, I told a group of students in Norway's northernmost country Finnmark in the mid-2000s, just as the Great High North Enchantment was on its rise, that the newly appointed minister Jonas Gahr Støre's High North initiative was about foreign policy—he was minister of foreign affairs, after all. “What?” was the response from the auditorium, “are you saying we've been fooled? We thought it was about *us!*”

Every Arctic nation has its own reasons for “being Arctic”. Sometimes “Arctic politics” is smaller than Arctic politics itself, aimed, for instance, at domestic needs of a, strictly speaking, non-Arctic nature. Sometimes “Arctic politics” is larger than Arctic politics itself, furthering wider, non-Arctic foreign policy aims. These lines are written overlooking the Shanghai skyline—my days in the southern Chinese metropole are filled with Arctic events. At the conference on Polar Law and Politics that I'm here for, I'll meet “the usual suspects” from the Nordic countries—it's our third visit to China in just two months. Twenty years ago, we met in Kirkenes and Murmansk. Today, we meet in Tromsø, Reykjavik and Shanghai. Latitude notwithstanding: the Arctic is all around.

In Norway, High North politics is a delicate issue; so is the way we speak about it. The public debate has an obligatory fact-based veneer, but below the surface, strong emotions are at play. At times, the most important thing has been to show which side you're on—either you were with us or against us. Fake news was presented before “fake news” was invented—sometimes truth just couldn't stand in the way of a good cause. It's been a challenging landscape for a social scientist to navigate—that is, unless you decide to jump on the bandwagon. In the political endeavour to build a region, scientific justification is always in demand.

*

My writings are an organic matter—parts of this book build on things I've published before, but they appear now in revised form and in a new context. Early drafts of Chaps. 2–4 were originally written in Norwegian and translated into English by Chris Saunders. Elana Wilson Rowe provided the native English speaker's—and the experienced researcher's—eye on some of the central concepts of the book. Its substance matter has developed in continuous dialogue with colleagues and friends at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute. Thanks to Senior Commissioning Editor Sara

Crowley-Vigneau at Palgrave's Shanghai office, for her continued support and enthusiasm for the project, and to the anonymous peer reviewer for constructive comments that have indeed helped improve the final text.

Needless to say: this is *one* story about Norway on a high in the North, not *the* story. Now it's in your hands.

Shanghai, China

Geir Hønneland

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