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International relations in the Arctic: an alternative approach to conceptualization?

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Abstract

The article is generally a set of reflections on the philosophical and metatheoretical backgrounds of approaches to analysis of international relations in regard to their applicability in the present-day Arctic region. The recent changes in the Arctic cooperation and increased political tensions in the region substantiate the question whether conventional concepts of foreign policy analysis and international relations practices are still relevant and applicable to the transformed political reality in the northernmost area of the globe. Thus, a number of most common approaches to the analysis of the Arctic cooperation are scrutinized in order to recognize their relevance to the problem field and define the remaining research capacity. Among the research modes under consideration are the discourse analysis, the constructivist perspective, and the systems theory. Based on the contemporary revisions in the Arctic governance, the contrasting approach of the rhizomatic stance is put forward. Additionally, the different perspective on foreign policy formulation process (based on the new research attitude) is suggested and debated. The article concludes that there is a wider range of research and philosophical implications that arise due to the rhizome-based perception of international processes, structures and institutions in the Arctic. However, even such initial step to reconsideration of the field of international relations in the Arctic exposes the vector for advancement of political theory, as well as the potential for making more pragmatic decisions for the Arctic actors.

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Keywords

Arctic cooperation, philosophy of international relations, systemic approach, political discourse analysis, political constructivism, rhizome.

Introduction

Over the past several months, we have witnessed several cases of setting limitations in various configurations of the Arctic cooperation introduced by the majority of the involved state and supranational actors. Initially, in March 2022, the joint statement of the "Arctic eight" states, except for Russia, declared the pause of their participation in the Arctic Council activities¹. Furthermore, this restricting endeavor of the newly formed "Arctic seven" was extended by the freeze of Russia's participation in the Barents cooperation² and the "Northern Dimension"³. Such limiting aspirations keep unfolding, as in August 2022 the US Senate started to consider the bill of the Arctic Commitment Act, whose most ambitious goal is to restrict the "Russian monopoly on shipping in the Arctic region"⁴.

It seems obvious that the above-stated attempts to minimize the presence of Russian officials, organizations and individuals in the Arctic cooperation are highly likely to face several considerable obstacles from both perspectives of political ideology and practice. Firstly, the longest Arctic coastline is owned and regulated by Russia, which is a substantial determinant for the Arctic governance. Secondly, extensive economic activities are carried out in the Russian Arctic. It is largely represented by extraction and processing of natural resources (including bioresources), which causes related environmental and social effects in this area, and thus, evokes international inspecting. Thirdly, there is a promising transport corridor for intercontinental transit shipping that is located in the Russian national jurisdiction, and so, it requires Russia's regulatory participation. Lastly, Russian educational and research institutions have a great deal of scientific data on the Arctic's natural dimension. So, there is a high potential for conducting integral Arctic-related research by international teams of scientists. Thus, based on at least these reasons, we can draw the inference that the exclusion or partial isolation of Russia from the international Arctic dialogue actually does not seem to be fully achievable.

At the same time, it is beyond any doubt that there are shared threats in the Arctic that demand regional actors to cooperate in the face of greater impending concerns. The climate change, environmental protection and indigenous peoples in the region are the crucial topics that constitute the need for the joint response of all actors. These issues drive political pragmatists to consider the Arctic as some sort of a trap for rivals necessitated to cooperate [Pezard et al., 2017, 4].

In such complicated and troublesome situations like this, it is especially important to subject the prevailing political paradigm to critical analysis in order to identify the flaws that have led to the current crisis state. To carry out these cognitive operations, we need to employ high-level abstractions, which a combination of social theories and political philosophy can provide. Therefore, new ways of problem solving in the Arctic can emerge, and a more effective and sustainable framework for interactions between the regional actors can be envisioned.

Further, it is proposed to examine the field of international relations in the Arctic region through

¹ See: *Joint statement on Arctic Council cooperation following Russia's invasion of Ukraine*. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine> [Accessed 14/08/22].

² See: *Statements regarding Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation*. Available at: <https://www.barents-council.org/news/joint-statement-of-finland-denmark-iceland-norway-sweden-and-the-european-union-regarding-barents-euro-arctic-cooperation> [Accessed 14/08/22].

³ See: *Northern dimension policy: joint statement by the European Union, Iceland and Norway on suspending activities with Russia and Belarus*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/northern-dimension-policy-joint-statement-european-union-iceland-and-norway-suspending_en [Accessed 14/08/22].

⁴ See: Arctic Commitment Act. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/4736/text?r=2&s=1> [Accessed 14/08/22].

the lens of the discourse analysis of political constructs, the systems theory, and the postmodernist perspective⁵.

A political construct of the Arctic

It seems clear that over the past 30+ years, the notion of the "Arctic" has been substantially modified from a geographic region of the planet (with the emphasis on its physical characteristics) into a territory of consistent political interactions, in other words, a political construct. This transformation began with the politicization of international dialogue on environmental protection in the Arctic in the late 1980s. Afterward, this course was progressed with the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996, which turned out to be the fundamental brick in the creation of the regional political construct. In addition, the political dimension of the Arctic was diversified by the formation of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (1993), the "Northern Dimension" (1999), the "Kolarctic" program (2007), as well as other phenomena of partnership between the Arctic actors. Hence, this complex and continual process of politicization of the Arctic geographical region and actors' interactions in it seems to parallel with the basic stages of habitualization, institutionalization, historization, objectification, legitimation, and internalization that were introduced in the theory of social construction of reality by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann [Berger, Luckmann, 1966]. Indeed, the international political construct of the Arctic is the central analysis framework in the works of some recognized scholars specialized in the Arctic issues⁶.

Another key point to keep in mind is that the complication of the Arctic political construct was also caused by the matters of rivalry between the Arctic states. These issues can be categorized into several groups: (1) the interests in economic activities (including the resources and transport prospects of the region), (2) the disputes over underwater territories, and (3) the matters of diverse security dimensions [Romanczuk, Jedrzejewski, 2021, 218]. Articulated examples of rivalry against the background of the general political paradigm of cooperation in the region not only complicates the political construct of the Arctic, but as well diversifies the related discourse.

Being a product of the socially constructed political reality, the Arctic (in its political notion) has become an arrangement of objectified practices and knowledge, which in turn constitute the particular field of the discourse related to the Arctic. It looks reasonable to consider several methods of political discourse analysis in the Arctic region. The first one is the discourse analysis proposed by Michel Foucault. Understood in the broad sense of the term, Foucault's discourse is the source of power relations between participants of communication. The essence of power relations is constituted through

⁵ Prior to this deliberation, we need to make a reservation that some analysts follow a different kind of classification of international studies on the Arctic. For example, Ø. Østerud and G. Hønneland suggest considering literature in international relations, including the Arctic region, through the prism of realism, institutionalism, and constructivism (see: Østerud Ø., Hønneland G. (2014) Geopolitics and international governance in the Arctic. *Arctic review on law and politics*, 5 (2), pp. 156-176).

⁶ For profound instances of the constructivist outlook in the Arctic's international relations, see: Knecht S. (2017) The politics of Arctic international cooperation: introducing a dataset on stakeholder participation in Arctic Council meetings, 1998-2015. *Cooperation and conflict*, 52 (2), pp. 203-223. DOI: 10.1177/0010836716652431; Young O.R. (2019) Constructing the "new" Arctic: the future of the circumpolar North in a changing global order. *Kontury global'nykh transformatsii: politika, ekonomika, pravo* [Outlines of global transformations: politics, economics, law], 12 (5), pp. 6-24. A more localized constructivist approach to the region of Northern Europe is displayed in: Browning C.S. (2003) The region-building approach revisited: the continued othering of Russia in discourses of region-building in the European North. *Geopolitics*, 8 (1), pp. 45-71. DOI: 10.1080/714001005; Neumann I.B. (1994) A region-building approach to Northern Europe. *International studies*, 20 (1), pp. 53-74.

accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding, and "truth" [Olsson, 2010, 67-68]. In Foucault's theory, the discourse is defined as a collection of statements belonging to the same system of discursive formations [Savel'eva, 2015, 93]. Therefore, the totality of interactions between stakeholders in international relations in the region comprise the autonomous Arctic's international political discourse. Hence, it is the commonly accepted framework of the Arctic-related political statements and their replications that arranges the order of interactions between the actors in the region. Since the current crisis has been generated by the existing common political discourse, the solution to this situation can be found only by the recognition of the current framework boundaries and the introduction of new rules of discourse relations.

Another dimension of the Arctic discourse analysis is the focus on its intelligibility. Jurgen Habermas introduced the critical theory of communicative rationality and proposed the concept of purposive rational action [Habermas, 1984, vol. 1]. On the basis of such actions expressed by means of discourse, mutually inferred interactions are conducted [McCandless, Vogler, 2020, 446]. Of course, the communicative situation above is an ideal model. So, the application of Habermas's approach to governance discourse raises the issues whether political actors are able to fully understand each other's messages and how communication distortions can be downplayed. Therefore, the Arctic's political space can be determined as the area of partial mutuality and conflicts of misunderstanding.

Finally, we should address the origins of any discourse, which are intentions of communication parties. Carol Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be?" approach proposes the shift of the focus of political analysis from problem solving to problem representation [Bacchi, 2012]. Employing of Bacchi's methodology unveils such matters as presuppositions and assumptions that assemble the exact representation of the problem, as well as effects and "blind spots" produced by this representation [Goodwin, 2011, 170-171]. Thus, by using this approach, one can identify implicit intentions and conditions of political statements, including those expressed by the Arctic actors.

Therefore, assuming that we recognize the Arctic as a political construct, we can use the above-mentioned methodologies to perform deconstruction of political discourse. Hence, one can detect replicating epistemes and narratives that are "hidden" in the discourse to determine the real intentions of actors, namely, the political dimension of the Arctic as it is. Conducting the analysis of the Arctic political discourse through any of the listed approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. However, not touching upon this important research matter, we can pinpoint at least three discourse-linked interim conclusions. First of all, the foundation of the Arctic political construct is the discourse connected to the Arctic issues, especially involving state actors. In addition, effectiveness of the Arctic-related discourse practices largely depends on the extent how much engaged actors follow the principles of communicative rationality. Besides, motivations of actors to problematize particular issues in the Arctic in a certain way need to be taken into account when addressing any of the topics in the region.

The system of the Arctic

Following the advancement of the ideas of systematicity in social studies, the systems approach has also become widespread in political theories⁷, including the research in international relations⁸. The system approach to studying international relations is purported to be the one that highlights the holistic

⁷ Most theories of modern political systems seem to be greatly influenced by the concepts proposed by David Easton and Gabriel Almond, whose works have built the foundational approach to the definition of political systems.

⁸ Various scholars developed different setups of the system approach to studying international relations. Diverse system approaches are presented in the studies of Morton Kaplan, Robert Lieber, Kenneth Waltz, Immanuel Wallerstein and others.

essence of international relations and acknowledges the possibility of integration and interconnection of diverse elements within the setting of the system.

There is a lot of research devoted to the analysis of international relations in the Arctic using the system approach perspective⁹. Yet in addition to these studies, the perception of the Arctic region as a system imposed by the methodology indicated in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory leads to some interrogative reflections on the current global affairs in the region.

The core of Luhmann's systems theory is a depicting of the design of multi-level elements of the system and their interrelations. In addition, the focal point of the theory is the problem of interactions between the system and its environment, which mainly resides in the processes of adaptation and reciprocal transactions [Albert, 2019, www]. With this in mind, a noteworthy aspect of the systems theory is the implication on the dependence of the system's sustainability on the degree of its complexity. According to Luhmann's definition of systems, the more functionally complicated the system's internal structure is, the less sustainable the system becomes [Albert, 1999, 248-249]. The complication of the system intensifies mainly due to establishment and diversifying of its internal substructures, whose interconnectedness produces mutual functional dependence between the elements of the system.

In the system of the Arctic dialogue, the Arctic Council acts as the main structure¹⁰. In turn, the Council is functionally divided into multiple levels of actors' interactions and thematic areas. The functional structuring of the Council correlates to the levels of its working groups, the committee of Senior Arctic Officials, and ministerial meetings. Likewise, a summit of the "Arctic eight" leaders was also considered to become the uppermost level of this decision-making architecture. The thematic specialization of the Council is determined by the competence of the Council's working groups and task forces. Additional structures within the system of the Arctic dialogue are rendered by the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, the Nordic cooperation, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Northern Forum, and various branch associations, such as the Arctic Economic Council, the International Arctic Science Committee, the University of the Arctic, etc. Then again, these structures have their own internal

⁹ For examples of applying the system approach in the research on international relations in the Arctic, see: Byers M. (2017) Crises and international cooperation: an Arctic case study. *International relations*, 31 (4), pp. 375-402. DOI: 10.1177/0047117817735680; Heininen L., Exner-Pirot H., Plouffe J. (2015) Governance and governing in the Arctic. In: Heininen L., Exner-Pirot H., Plouffe J. (eds.) *Arctic yearbook 2015*. Akureyri: Northern Research Forum, pp. 13-25; Østhagen A. (2020) The good, the bad and the ugly: three levels of Arctic geopolitics. *Balsillie papers*, 3 (4). DOI: 10.51644/bap34; Wehrmann D. (2017) Non-state actors in Arctic Council governance. In: Stephen K., Knecht S. (eds.) *Governing Arctic change: global perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 187-206. It is also worth emphasizing that in the literature on the Arctic cooperation there is a particular approximation between the system approach and the institutionalist perspective. The proponents of the latter methodological viewpoint tend to credit the Arctic Council as the major system-forming institute in the Arctic cooperation system. For examples of such research, see: Knecht S. (2017) The politics of Arctic international cooperation: introducing a dataset on stakeholder participation in Arctic Council meetings, 1998-2015. *Cooperation and conflict*, 52 (2), pp. 203-223. DOI: 10.1177/0010836716652431; Molenaar E.J. (2012) Current and prospective roles of the Arctic Council system within the context of the law of the sea. *International journal of marine and coastal law*, 27 (3), pp. 553-595.

¹⁰ To a great extent, this approach is advocated not only by many researchers, but also is generally practiced by all state actors of the international relations in the Arctic region that employ the Arctic Council as the basic platform for international cooperation in the region, including the outer-region issues that place the Arctic into the global agenda. Likewise, these state actors use other Arctic regional cooperation institutions, such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, and the "Northern Dimension", etc., as substructures within the wider system of the international Arctic dialogue.

functional substructures, which complicates the system inside.

Nevertheless, even though the Arctic Council is ordinarily positioned as the universal intergovernmental organization, in fact, some of the concerns that subsequently had become significant for the Arctic have remained outside the agenda of the Council. These issues are presented with such topics as hard security and active militarization of the region in the last decade, as well as the growing interest of non-Arctic actors of various types galvanized due to the prospects of the region's environment, research, resources, and transport. Having said that, we can deduce that the Arctic Council (recognized as the key regional cooperation institution) has not managed to ensure the formation of a consolidated position and an adequate response of all Arctic actors to the mentioned challenges to the system.

Being primarily a part of the region's geopolitical dimension, the issue of militarization and hard security is in the interior side of the system of the Arctic interactions. Yet the analysis of the political practices of regional actors shows that these concerns had been continuously excluded from the Arctic discussion agenda, to say nothing of the halt of the meetings of the Arctic states' defense ministers after 2014. Some unsuccessful efforts were later made to resume these meetings¹¹. So, the issues of militarization and hard security of the region were pushed to the environment of the Arctic system by almost all its actors. In addition, the decisions of Finland and Sweden to apply to join NATO exacerbate the military dimension of international relations in the Arctic, which hugely expands the potential for geopolitical changes in the region.

Moreover, due to the current suspension of the Arctic Council's work, the problem of the engagement of non-Arctic actors in the region seems to be a very urgent threat to the "Arctic eight", the group of states that are normally rather conservative to the conceptual changes in the Arctic governance. So, since this issue has not received a proportionate response within the Arctic Council, this problem may result in the fact that the influence of other actors (primarily China) in the Arctic may increase significantly due to its special role in supporting Russia in the current confrontation with Western countries.

Of course, now it is impossible to claim that the system of the Arctic dialogue, which has been being constructed for over the last 30 years, has collapsed or been destroyed. However, it seems obvious that today it is under a considerable threat. This is largely due to the unsustainability generated by the internal structure of the system and the corresponding way of its functioning. In this case, the following question sounds logical: do we need to reconceptualize the approach to analyzing international relations in the Arctic and then consider the interactions of actors from the standpoint of a different research perspective?

An alternative approach to investigating interactions in the Arctic

Changing of the paradigm of knowledge building and social development is one of the main goals of the postmodernists' philosophical project. The search for alternative ways of examining the field of international relations leads us to the concept of rhizome proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

The idea of rhizome was invented as a counterbalance to the tree-oriented conservative structural-

¹¹ More details on this proposal are provided in the following publication: Danilov P.B. *Russia wants to resume meetings between Arctic defense chiefs*. Available at: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-wants-resume-meetings-between-arctic-defense-chiefs> [Accessed 14/08/22].

functional theories that had popularized the wide-spread demand for hierarchies. The rhizome establishes the non-linear disposition of the advancement of processes. That is why directions of the development of structures are hypothetical and do not obey any rules or determinations. In addition, the rhizome is decentered, and so, there is no section of the rhizome from which its other parts begin. This property ensures the feature of interconnectedness of all parts of the rhizome [Allar, 2019; Douglas-Jones, Sariola, 2009, [www](#)].

As stated above, the system approach to international relations in the Arctic sustains the vulnerability of the system's complicated structure. Therefore, it is assumed that simplification of structures within the system makes it possible to contribute greater stability to the Arctic dialogue. This model points to the inefficiency of bringing all international processes in the Arctic into the framework of the only universal institution, even if the "Arctic Council ver. 2.0" of a different kind is originated.

The application of the rhizome concept to understanding and visualizing the intentions and interactions of actors puts forward a new formation of the world order for the theory of international relations. In particular, the rhizome can be used to reconceptualize the understanding of international processes in the Arctic region. It is the hypothetical and non-hierarchical character of the rhizome that advocates for the need to use bilateral interactions and temporary task forces as most beneficial and sustainable instruments of international interactions in the Arctic. Such models of cooperation least of all others depend on the existence of a prevalent legal or institutional framework. Having that in mind, the disclosed arrangement of the rhizome does not limit the number and variety of actors involved in the Arctic processes, both from the inside and the outside the region. Moreover, the rhizome ensures that no Arctic problem is underestimated or taken off the table. Therefore, these tools seem to be a very efficient, immediate and rational way to respond to the urgent and acute Arctic problems.

Setting the rhizome as a starting point in understanding international relations in the Arctic may seem like a radical philosophical project that undermines the foundations of the theory and practice of international relations in the region. However, comparing the global importance of problem solving in the Arctic and the deprivation of the Arctic Council as the basic institution of the Arctic cooperation, we can conclude that the benefits seem to outweigh the drawbacks. Of course, the Arctic is not the best choice on the planet to carry out new experiments. However, there are some arguments to do so (at least, as an imaginary experiment for research purposes). Firstly, leaving the particular institution of the Arctic Council in the past as a space currently used for the isolation of Russia would let the "Arctic seven" (as a political construct generated through the refusal) manage to stick to its political decision. Secondly, if such an approach to the Arctic issues works, then this model can become exemplary on the global scale. In this case, the Arctic turns from the experiment field into a basic model for the global actors' interplay, which is a completely different positioning in socio-political discourse. This prospect is of high importance due to the current crisis of the global dimension of international relations, that in turn has been generated by the universalization of interactions between actors through such structures as the UN. Thirdly, the creation of task forces and bringing new points of agenda to bilateral interactions is an approach that properly complies with modern democratic theories. The demand for pluralism of points of view in the policymaking is better reached through the listed variable instruments, rather than by the single-window format represented by the Arctic Council or its successor. Besides, accomplishments of the mentioned approach seem especially important against the background of the growing skepticism towards the global democracy project.

Conclusion

All things considered, it seems reasonable to assume that being a part of a broad philosophical perspective, the political interpretation of the rhizome does not limit analysts to address any other social or political theory. In fact, the concept of the rhizome admits that some segments of the rhizome can be organized in a way that some steady structures and principles of their functioning can emerge. That is why the synthesis of theories (with the rhizome as its part or core principle) seems to be a promising research solution to the current state of confrontation in international relations in the Arctic.

To bring the paper to a close, we need to acknowledge that there is a wider range of research and philosophical implications that arise due to the rhizome-based perception of international processes, structures and institutions in the Arctic. However, even such initial step to reconsideration of the field of international relations in the Arctic exposes the vector for advancement of political theory, as well as the potential for making more pragmatic decisions for the Arctic actors. Further studies that are focused on the applicability of the rhizome concept to the real Arctic policymaking are anticipated, including analyses of both interior and foreign policies.

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Международные отношения в Арктике: альтернативный подход к концептуализации?

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Аннотация

В статье представлен ряд рассуждений о философских и метатеоретических основаниях научных подходов к анализу международных отношений с точки зрения их применимости к Арктическому региону на современном этапе. Возникшие недавно изменения в арктическом сотрудничестве и повышение политической напряженности в регионе актуализируют вопрос о том, насколько релевантны и применимы традиционные концепции анализа внешней политики и других практик международных отношений в условиях изменившейся политической реальности в Арктике. Таким образом, в статье анализируется ряд наиболее распространенных подходов к анализу арктического сотрудничества, отмечается их релевантность по отношению к исследуемому объекту и фиксируется их потенциал для развития научного знания в этой сфере. Среди рассматриваемых исследовательских подходов – анализ дискурса, конструктивистский подход и теория систем. На фоне актуальных изменений в международной арктической политике выдвигается иной исследовательский подход – анализ международных отношений с помощью концепции ризомы. Рассматривается альтернативный подход к процессу формирования внешней политики, основанный на предложенной концепции ризомы.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Арктическое сотрудничество, философия международных отношений, системный подход, анализ политического дискурса, политический конструктивизм, ризома.

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