



Winter landscape in Lofoten islands, Norway. Source: Chursina Viktoriia / Shutterstock.com.

# Norway's Arctic Strategy – Steady As She Goes

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In its policy program “Hurdalsplattformen,” Norway’s new government states that the High North is where Norway’s most important strategic interests lay. In doing so it follows up on the actions of previous governments. It also announces “a new deal” for the High North: strengthening international cooperation, stopping population decline, and realizing the green shift.

The previous government (2013-2021) launched its Arctic strategy entitled “People, Opportunities, and Norwegian Interests in the North” in November

2020. Setting out policy from the government to the parliament, the white paper clocks in at 193 pages and addresses a wide range of issues from geopolitics to climate change to local community development (Meld. St. 9 82020-2021). The report was written in a rapidly evolving policy context, with increasing geopolitical tensions, a domestic debate about regional reforms, negative demographic growth in remote regions, and with climate, the oceans, and economic development high on the domestic policy agenda. The main message of the 2020 report was that Norway’s

High North policy takes a long-term view and that the High North is the country's "strategically most important region" with some 10% of its 5 million population living there.

## CONTEXT

Compared to the North American Arctic, a large part of Norway is in the Arctic. Tromsø (77,000 inhabitants), Norway's largest city above the Arctic Circle, is at 70 degrees N – about the same latitude as Point Barrow on the northern coast of Alaska. Due to the benign influence of the Atlantic current, northern Europe is much warmer than corresponding latitudes in North America, and Tromsø has a considerably warmer climate than Barrow.

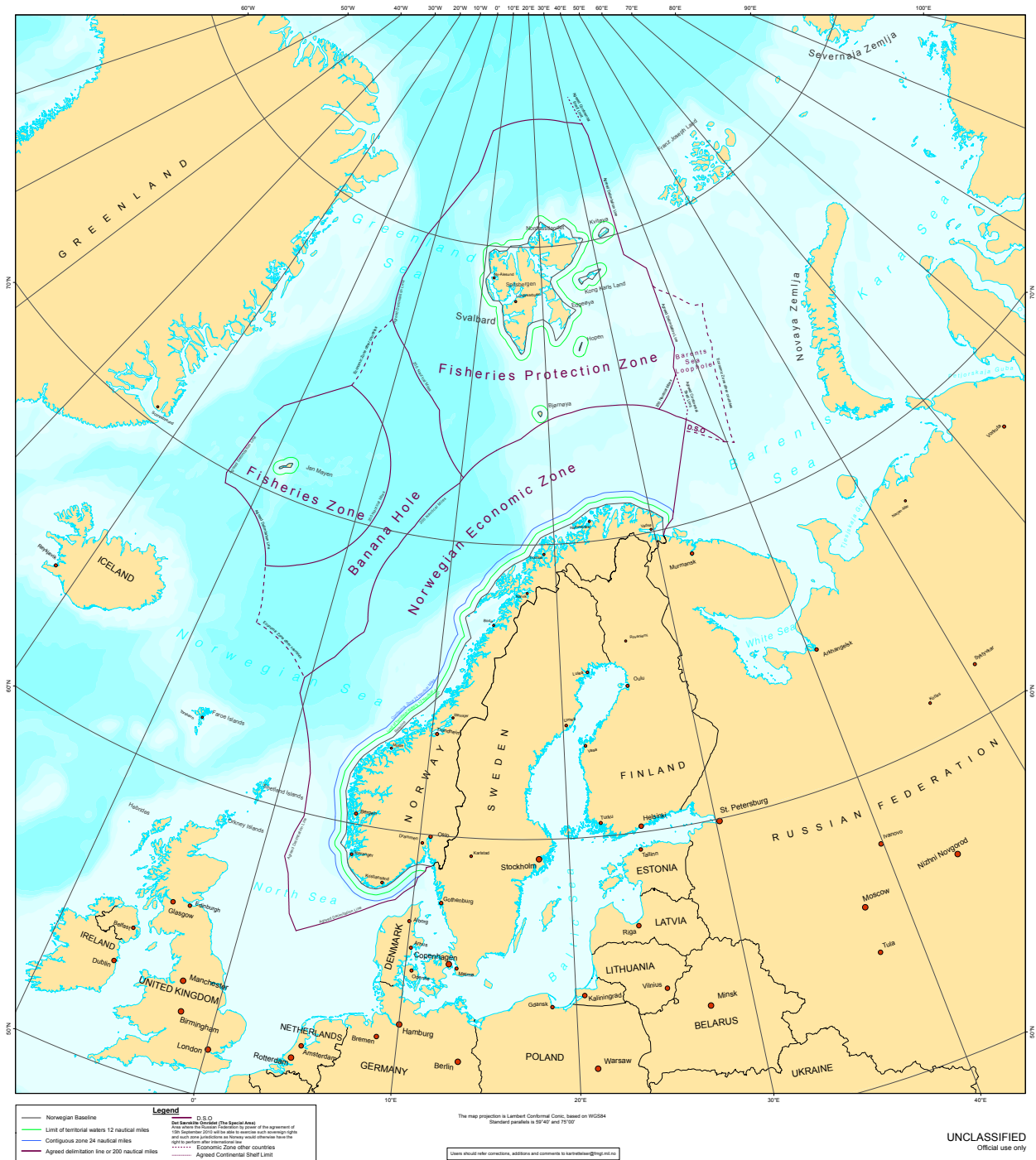
Norway's High North consists of the counties of Nordland, Troms and Finnmark (i.e. North Norway), the Svalbard archipelago to the north, and the island of Jan Mayen in the west. Most of this area sits north of the Arctic Circle. The combined land area of the High North is some 170,000 km<sup>2</sup>, about the same area as Florida. The land area in the High North also brings rights over vast ocean spaces; more than 80% of Norway's 2 million km<sup>2</sup> of ocean territory is north of the Arctic Circle.

Also, Norway's High North neighborhood is more crowded than that of North America. Russia, Finland, and Sweden are to the east of Norway, and Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands are to the west. In the Central Arctic Ocean, Norway is one of five coastal states along with Russia, the US, Canada, and Denmark/Greenland. International



Tromsø, Norway – 660 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Source: Mykhailo Brodskyi / Shutterstock.com.

FIGURE 1. NORWEGIAN MARITIME BOUNDARIES



Source: Norwegian Military Geographic Service

relations are therefore a critical aspect of Norway's High North Policy. This applies in particular to fisheries, as transboundary fish stocks require international cooperation (Hoel 2020).

In Norway, the moniker "Arctic" has traditionally been applied to the northernmost parts of the kingdom: Jan Mayen and Svalbard. Where other countries speak about the Arctic, the preferred Norwegian nomenclature has been the "High North" ("nordområdene") which implicitly includes North Norway: the northern part of the mainland with its two counties, Nordland as well as Troms and Finnmark (see map). The latter will be divided into two counties again in 2024. In a marine context, the term "Arctic Ocean" does not really have a Norwegian translation. Instead one speaks about the "polar ocean" ("Polhavet") which is the Central Arctic Ocean, the Barents Sea, and the Norwegian Sea.

Since the 1970s, the public debate about the High North has centered on geopolitics and security issues (Pedersen and Skagestad 2020), although this has changed over the last two decades with the growth in regional (Barents Region) and circumpolar (Arctic Council) cooperation and an increasing emphasis on economic and environmental issues. Domestically, Norwegians have given much attention to economic development of the petroleum industry and aquaculture in particular. In recent years, climate change has also become a major policy issue in the north, with inherent tensions between being a petroleum producer and having a progressive climate policy.

## THE 2020 WHITE PAPER

The 2020 white paper followed on the heels of a series of government reports and strategies on

the High North, starting in 2003 with an expert committee addressing Arctic change and possible Norwegian approaches to this (NOU 2003). Subsequent documents include several white papers to parliament as well as a number of other strategy documents (Pedersen and Skagestad 2020).

In the 2020 white paper (Meld. St. 9 82020-2021), an introductory chapter sets out the goals and main messages for the High North policy. No less than six overarching goals are identified:

- **Peace, stability, and predictability**
- **International cooperation and law**
- **Integrated and ecosystem-based management**
- **Enhanced jobs and value creation**
- **Strengthened business-academia cooperation**
- **Attractive living conditions and welfare**

These goals are not new and reflect broad, societal goals of Norway generally. Northern Norway does not have a distinct "Arctic" identity and most people consider themselves northern and not Arctic residents. The "Arctic" to a Norwegian means the areas to the north of the mainland, i.e. Svalbard. Northern Norway is also densely populated compared to northern Canada or Alaska. Further, by Norwegian standards its economy is doing well, and standards of living are comparable to those in the rest of the country. Infrastructure and communications are well developed compared to other regions in the Arctic.

Considering the evolving context of the High North policy, the white paper notes several developments over the last decade. First of all, security aspects



Saami reindeer herder dressed in traditional winter regalia. Source: V. Belov / Shutterstock.com.

have become more prominent and the geopolitical situation in the High North reflects heightened tensions between major powers globally.

Second, the effects and impacts of climate change are now more visible and are set to become increasingly so. Sea ice in the Barents Sea is retreating, with associated changes in marine ecosystems. Svalbard is experiencing unprecedented warming, and the Northern Barents Sea is among the most rapidly warming areas in the world.

Urbanization and population decline is a third theme, very much felt in remote regions of the Norwegian High North. Young people are leaving in

droves and not returning to their homes, resulting in a stagnating or declining population in remote communities in particular.

The role of technology (digitalization, etc.) in confronting and adapting to these developments is discussed, as are economic development and the importance of trade (exports are critical to North Norway's economy), labor and capital, and strengthening infrastructure for transportation and communications. The strengthening of the culture and culture-based industries of Indigenous peoples (the Saami) and minorities (kven) in the context of the broader High North policies is also discussed.

Altogether the white paper contains six

substantive chapters with more than 150 recommendations for actions. Many of these stated intents relate to economic issues and reiterate what is already stated in other, prior documents: “The Government will continue to...” For example, in relation to climate, the government states it will continue to contribute to efforts to reduce emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> – hardly a novel policy.

## WHAT'S NEW?

The 2020 white paper does not depart in any dramatic way from previous strategy documents on the High North. There is an increased emphasis on economic development and business interests. The most prominent policy initiative in the report is the establishment of a northern investment fund. This is motivated by an understanding that lack of capital is a significant impediment to business development in the High North. The state will provide at least 50% of the capital for the fund, the management of which is to be located in the north. The fund is currently in the process of being set up.

A new aspect introduced in the white paper was the involvement of youth in the process leading up to the report, as well as the attention given to youth issues within the report itself. This reflects the increasing concern with large-scale demographic trends where many communities are losing younger generations to more urban areas. Young people emphasize the importance of being included in policy processes and of presenting North Norway as an attractive part of the country where innovation and economic growth is prominent.

One could ask what is missing from the report. The discussion of science is thin, given the important role of research in most policy fields in

the north. Moreover, the most important economic sectors in the region – fisheries and aquaculture – are not widely discussed. These issues are subject to major policy debates in their own right, however, with their own strategies and white papers (e.g. Hoel 2020, Meld. St. 36 (2016-2017)). Such omissions reflect the challenge of writing a geographically-oriented report which addresses policy issues that are simultaneously subject to extensive discussion in other policy processes. Also, ministerial ownership of issues relate more to policy sectors than to geographic areas. The Ministry of Environment, for example, is likely to be more concerned with environmental questions than their specific Arctic manifestations.

## ARCTIC DEBATES

The 2020 white paper arguably was the among the most anticipated reports to parliament ever, at least in North Norway. The academic community, media, as well as the policy world speculated extensively on the coming report, with the main Norwegian foreign policy journal devoting a special issue to the report (Internasjonal politikk 2020). While the white paper was prepared, the debate centered on what it ought to be, and after it was released, the debate shifted to what it ought to have been. Many commentaries failed to recognize that well developed national policies already exist on almost everything touched upon in the report, with associated white papers laying out policy. Security is a case in point, where a 2017 white paper was presented to and debated by parliament (Meld. St. 36 (2016-2017)). The lesson here is perhaps that it is important to read geographically-oriented white papers in the context of the various sector policies they touch upon.

The Parliament debated the strategy in March 2021, broadly supporting the government's High



Storting – Norwegian Parliament Building in Oslo, Norway. Source: Nanisimova / Shutterstock.com.

North policy. In its assessment of the white paper, it stated at the outset that Norway's interests in the Arctic should be promoted through a strong North Norway. It also emphasized that the best foundation for promoting Norwegian interests in the High North is viable and positive economic development for people in the north.

While the report was praised for its description and analysis, it did not meet expectations when it came to new, concrete policy initiatives. With the possible exception of the financial mechanism (i.e. the investment fund), there were few new, bold policy measures. Rather, the government stressed continuity. However, the description and analysis were also important in forging a common understanding of the situation and trajectories of development in the High North. Importantly, the white paper emphasized the connection between

the local and international levels, that the region's development is impacted by geopolitical tensions, globalization, and international cooperation on the one hand, and domestic developments on the other. The High North is a region where foreign and domestic policies meet. In the context of the debate on High North, policy commentators in academia have also stressed the importance of old (Pedersen and Skagestad 2020) as well as new security tensions in the High North (Østhagen 2021).

The report was well received in the north because of the extensive consultations and involvement in the process of writing the report. Also, the analysis of the developments both internationally and at the domestic level were found accurate by most Norwegian commentators.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

An important aspect of Norway's High North policy over the last decades is that several major ideas have come to fruition. Initiatives that were taken more than 10 years ago, such as a new ice-capable research vessel, the Fram Centre research facility (a research program and a building), and the Barentswatch information sharing platform, were funded, built, and are now in operation. The research vessel *Kronprins Haakon* is now one of the world's most advanced research vessels and is dedicated to work in the polar regions. The Fram Centre in Tromsø hosts some 20 research institutions and government agencies. About 500 people work there and, combined with the university, this makes Tromsø one of the largest Arctic research hubs in the world. Barentswatch is a unique platform for cooperation among more than 20 government agencies on information sharing and cooperation across sectors regarding Norway's oceans and coastal areas.

With the election in September 2021, a new government was formed by the social democratic Labor Party and the centrist Center Party, occupying the center-left political space of the country. It is perhaps too early to speculate on where the new government will take the High North policy. However, the declaration it produced upon assuming office does signal high ambitions in this respect (Regjeringen 2021). In its statement on foreign policy, the government reiterates, "the High North is Norway's strategically most important area." It goes on to speak about "a new deal for the High North" and reiterated its high ambitions for the region. It wants to reverse the negative demographic development, utilize local resources to generate growth, make the High North a center for the green shift, and take new initiatives for international cooperation. These ideas were also

emphasized by Prime Minister Støre in a major speech in Tromsø in February 2022.

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This edition of *Polar Perspectives* was written before the Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Developments since then have had major repercussions for international cooperation in the Arctic, as well as for Norway's High North policy. This has brought questions regarding security and relations with Russia to the forefront of public debate. International cooperation in fora like the Arctic Council are severely upset. The security architecture of the High North will be subject to new assessments, and the Norwegian government has taken steps to strengthen its armed forces as well as international security cooperation in the High North.



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