

Main findings of the PhD dissertation

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**The geopolitics of the changing Arctic – with particular regard to the  
appearance of environmental aspects and local indigenous peoples in  
forming international politics**

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## 1. Introduction

The Arctic is a geopolitical and geographical space at the same time. Great powers and states with significant economic and political weight are present in the region, such as the United States of America, the Russian Federation, and certain member states of the European Union (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden), as Iceland, and Canada. The countries of the region cooperate, e.g. in frame of the Arctic Council, but there is also the possibility of conflict between them, primarily due to territorial disputes, and the confrontation between the West and Russia.

As a result of climate change, the Arctic has become a geopolitical hot-spot<sup>1</sup>. The change in climate brought many further transitions, including the discovery and appreciation of the region's mineral raw material reserves. In the classic geopolitical framework, strategic resources become available (natural resources and sea shipping routes), which is a process contrary to other regions, (elsewhere, mineral raw materials are being exploited, and some deposits have already been exhausted), which makes the Arctic region unique. In addition, factors, important in term of critical geopolitics, were also highlighted, such as environmental security and identity issues. Regarding these elements, non-state actors appeared in the international arena. The local indigenous peoples came to the fore shaping the affairs of the Arctic.

These changes are the developments of the last three decades. The transformation is fast, complex and concentrated in a specific geographical area, the Arctic region, the local phenomena are also called the changing Arctic. One of the region's most noted research institutes, the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland (Lapin yliopisto) in Finland, also has its own permanent exhibition entitled '[Arctic in change](#)'.

Due to its rapid transformation, unique processes and the condensed presence of geopolitical phenomena, the Arctic region is also considered a laboratory of geopolitics and international relations: *'These rapid geographical changes offer a unique 'test laboratory' hardly ever available to political scientists. Instead of counterfactual reasoning, the real changes occurring to the Arctic's physical geography make an investigation of the relationship between state policy, power structures, and geographical changes possible'* (Wegge & Keil, 2018, p. 4). The characteristics of the Arctic carry many contradictions and opportunities (geopolitical, geoeconomic) as well as risks (climate change, decline of indigenous cultures). Global, regional and local issues appear as well as the clash of long and short-term interests and economic and

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<sup>1</sup> The geopolitical hotspot refers to areas or countries where complex political processes are taking place and affect many other countries or regions, and there is even the possibility of war conflict.

environmental aspects. Classical geopolitical and realist theories can be applied to it, as can more recent critical geopolitical approaches.

The reason for my choice of topic – in addition to the uniqueness and diversity of the phenomena of the region – is that the geopolitical processes have been scientifically elaborated in recent years and few regions are exceptions to this, one of them is the Arctic. I was justified in examining a geographical unit that is new in Hungarian research, and the local processes themselves are also unique. In the course of my research, I made an attempt to comprehensively present the geopolitical processes of the Arctic, and I included in my investigation the results of my own one-month study trip to Finland, which I carried out at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland.

## **2. The aim of the research**

The aim of the research is to explore and present the geopolitical processes taking place in the Arctic region, within the framework of this, to analyse the phenomenon of climate change in the Arctic, which also affects international relations. The climatic processes of the Arctic region have global implications, furthermore, it is also an important aspect in local environmental issues. The Arctic is one of the least polluted areas on Earth even today. The rapid transformation of the Arctic can accelerate the international competition for the region's natural resources and their exploitation and use of them. In addition to the surrounding great powers and regional states, the newly available resources attract the interest of countries outside the region as well as large companies. Due to the complex situation of the Arctic region, it affects a wide range of international actors (local and extraterritorial) and diverse types (states, international organizations and sub-state forms). Due to the complex interactions between different levels and actors, local affairs are extremely complex and have many aspects, including geopolitical aspects, security policy, economic and international legal perspectives.

In terms of the time frame of my study, additionally to the basic historical overview, I primarily conducted research from the 1990s to the events of recent years. As a temporal starting point, I considered the creation of the first Arctic-related international initiative of major importance, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (1991)<sup>2</sup>. After all, this initiative led to the

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<sup>2</sup> The Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) is a non-binding multilateral international agreement to which the Arctic states (Denmark, the United States of America, Finland, Iceland, Canada, Norway, Sweden, and then the Soviet Union) are parties, as well as the local organizations of indigenous peoples, the purpose of which is to protect the environmental values of the region. The agreement signed in 1991 in Rovaniemi, Finland, was the basis for the Arctic Council established in 1996 (Csatlós, 2013).

establishment of the Arctic Council (1996), which is the most important international forum dealing with the affairs of the Arctic.

### **3. Research methodology**

In the following, I will show how the available sources can be classified:

- The primary research and the review and evaluation of the quantitative data from the point of view of the research topic were the starting point for me. Therefore, the primary sources could include mainly elements such as interviews with researchers of the topic and employees of the Finnish Sámi Parliament, international legal documents, and statistics prepared by international organizations (among others, OECD, World Bank, Nordic Council, Arctic Council), and data from national statistical offices. The fact that I was able to conduct research at the University of Lapland<sup>3</sup> in Finland, Rovaniemi, greatly contributed to the realization of the personal interviews.
- A large number of secondary sources were available. The international literature is extremely extensive, both scientific publications and study volumes and monographs. I mainly had specialist literature in English at my disposal, but I tried to review the literature in Finnish. The fact that I was able to do research at the University of Lapland, where I had access to many sources in foreign languages, was a big step forward in processing the sources (but even more important was the fact that I was able to consult internationally recognized researchers of the topic). In Rovaniemi, I got to know the Finnish perspective on Arctic affairs. Furthermore, I considered it important to map the Hungarian connection points of the Arctic, in which the domestic literature helped me.

I started publishing my research results in scientific journals and presenting them at conferences from the beginning of my doctoral studies, i.e. from the first year of my doctoral studies, the academic year 2016/2017. These publication opportunities have been an important reference point in the study and processing of individual sub-topics over the past years.

I examine research questions related to my studies from several perspectives, and I compared the hypotheses of different authors and researchers. I developed my own research results in the light of the investigations.

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<sup>3</sup> During my study trip to Finland (University of Lapland's Arctic Center) in March 2019, I had the opportunity to interview experts on the topic and collect resources for my research.

#### 4. Results

The aim of the dissertation was to produce a scientific work that examines the consequences of climate change in the Arctic in an interdisciplinary manner, the geopolitical processes of the region, the change in the range of international actors interested in regional affairs, with particular regard to the appearance of indigenous people groups (among them the Northern European Sámi) in international forums, the local natural resources, as well as its environmental state. Based on the research results, I summarize the evaluation of the initial hypotheses as follows:

**H1: I will examine and prove that there has been an increased interest in the resources of the Arctic not only in the last three decades, but that the natural treasures of the region are also significant in a longer historical perspective. The geostrategically valuable resources of the region have changed dynamically over the past centuries. This continuous transformation must also be considered when predicting future trends.**

In the first hypothesis, I examined the determining factors and resources of the Arctic from both a geopolitical and a historical perspective. The analysis of the region's natural resources on the basis of temporal dynamics is in itself considered an original, insufficiently researched topic. However, from the perspective of this study, this is a key question and a starting point. The resources of the region were the driving force behind regional discoveries and conquests. The cultural background of the settling peoples, different from the local ones, meant that the society, economy and culture of the original population, the indigenous peoples also radically changed over the past centuries.

I consider the first hypothesis to be justified by reviewing the historical processes of the region. Over the centuries, the range of the most important geostrategic factors and the range of powers interested in the region have continuously changed, but the presence of geopolitical considerations has remained constant. In the future, it may also be worth investigating whether the actors appearing in the region belonged to the states or to organization below the state level (e.g., business organizations).

**H2: I will examine and prove that classical geopolitical theories – despite the fact that they did not particularly deal with the Arctic region – can be well applied in the investigation of local geopolitical processes. At the same time, the aspects of critical geopolitics can also be applied to regional affairs.**

In the second phase of my research, I tried to prove that the classical geopolitical theories can be applied to the current processes of the region, since the exploitation of traditional natural resources is the geopolitical

interest of the states within the region and in many cases it is extraterritorial. At the same time, the alternative geopolitics can also be interpreted for the region, through the promotion of post-material interests such as environmental security. Furthermore, identity politics is also an important accompanying phenomenon of the policies related to the conservation of the environmental state, as it most directly affects the local indigenous peoples. The unique world view and close-to-nature way of life of these ethnic groups partly lives on even today and is reflected in their political advocacy.

These complex phenomena can be evaluated both in the framework of classical and alternative geopolitics. I believe that the second hypothesis can be verified by reviewing different types of theories. In relation with the compound phenomena of the Arctic region, characteristic features of classical, territory-based geopolitics also appear, as well as aspects of environmental protection and identity politics.

The coexistence of the traditional and alternative interpretation framework in the region has several consequences, among them the presence of many types of actors in the region. At the same time, this phenomenon can be considered not only as a cause, but also as a consequence. The large number and many types of actors contribute to the fact that several types of discourses and narratives have emerged about the region. In the case of state actors, the ambivalent co-presence of environmental aspects and interests that prioritize resources can be observed. Meanwhile, the local indigenous people or the international public prefer to prioritize environmental safety issues and the protection of indigenous cultures.

**H3: I will examine and prove that the geopolitics of the Arctic focuses on a wide range of international actors, and that in addition to state actors, other political actors are able to form policies related to the region. Indigenous peoples appear as non-state actors in the international arena and deal with Arctic issues in international forums, especially due to international collaborations such as the Arctic Council.**

The third hypothesis can be partially verified, although the local indigenous peoples appear in the shaping of regional affairs and in the most important forums dealing with the affairs of the region, but their role is only advisory. There are many factors behind the limited presence, but the lack of an appropriate institutional system, the low number of people, and the division of individual ethnic groups (large number of dialects, diverse ethnic background, i.e. the presence of many small ethnic groups) can be highlighted.

Hypotheses two and three in themselves draw attention to the paradox that exists between resource-centred geopolitical thinking and environmental security. In the thesis, I analysed the factors that resource-based thinking can

cover, both in terms of the current appreciation of the Arctic and historical resources. I also considered it important to examine the question of how the environmental protection aspects, which are a counterpoint to the economic utilization of the area, relate to each other in the geopolitical interpretation framework.

**H4: I will examine and prove that the Arctic is one of the areas with the most significant growth potential in the world, which increases the value of the region from a geopolitical point of view. Strategically important raw materials (petroleum, natural gas, shipping routes) play a key role in this. The resources of the Arctic region can greatly contribute to the fact that the most developed northern states can preserve or even increase it compared to lying regions.**

During the investigation of this paradox, I first analysed how the currently available resources of the Arctic influence the power status of the regional states in the international arena. I consider the fourth hypothesis to be partially justified; the strategic resources of the region can represent a significant economic potential and a source of conflict between the great powers of the region and attract the interest of distant great powers such as China. However, the resources of the Arctic have so far mainly represented future reserves and are becoming available only extremely slowly. It is difficult to predict what importance local resources may have in the future, given the development of technology and possible world political and economic restructuring (e.g. China's growing weight in world politics). Furthermore, climate protection aspects are becoming more important for global public opinion and policy-making, which may also reduce interest in the exploitation of the region's resources.

**H5: I will examine and prove that the transformation of the natural environment of the Arctic and the increasing international interest in the resources thus becoming available, which significantly influenced the lifestyle of the local indigenous peoples, as well as their social situation and the development of their political advocacy. In the political representation of indigenous peoples, not only the rights of the ethnic group appear, but also the rights of their natural environment (climate and nature protection considerations).**

Environmental safety considerations and the struggle for the preservation of the lifestyle and close-to-nature culture of the local indigenous peoples work against the utilization of the resources of the Arctic. In the last stage of my research, I examined how the transformation of the natural environment affects the local indigenous peoples and thus the development of their political advocacy.

The fifth hypothesis can only be partially justified by reviewing the theories. The living conditions of the indigenous people of the Arctic region were transformed by colonization and the settlement of Western civilization, in which process the resources of the region were a decisive factor. Then the climate change also forced the indigenous people who lived a way of life closer to nature to further adapt, but the adoption of the achievements of globalization and Western civilization had a much greater effect on the local peoples.

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