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The Arctic Conundrum as Geopoetics: Russian Politics at the North Pole

The article develops a geopoetic approach to Arctic politics. It is based on the observation that conventional approaches that explain state behaviour in terms of gains for security and wealth do not resonate with empirical observations, which highlight cooperation as well as the uncertainty of returns to the billions of dollars of investment that states are undertaking in the region. Something else therefore has to account for the plausibility of policies.

Geopoetics focuses on the cultural roots and their cognitive-emotional dimension, on the basis of which claims to the Arctic and related policies resonate with a broader audience. The article particularly analyses Russian politics, arguing that policies have their foundation in a utopian ideal of Soviet socialist realism that was widely popularised in the 1920s and later decades. Introducing the concept of topos as a hermeneutic tool, the article highlights that three features stand out that interweave into a coherent imaginary of the Arctic: first, the heroic explorer embodying certain values; second, the conquest of vast space of nature; and third, the role of science and technology. Analysts would do well to bear in mind how the Arctic becomes intelligible when commenting on policies.

The Arctic was once referred to as the last unmanaged frontier of humanity (Bloomfield, 1981). Yet due to climate change this frontier is shifting and it is no longer unmanaged. The Arctic is the world's region that is most severely affected by climate change with temperatures rising four times faster than elsewhere (Bintanja & van der Linden, 2013). Changes to the ecosystem bear consequences for species as well as humans living in the region. While some species are in danger of extinction, such as the Polar Bear, fish hitherto unknown in these latitudes thrive in warmer waters and replace other kinds (CAFF, 2017). The changing flora and fauna also impacts on indigenous people's ways of life where these are closely connected to the ecosystem (Arctic Council, 2013), while receding sea ice potentially opens up new waterways along the Northwest and Northeast Passage, also making subsoil gas and oil resources better accessible (Melia, Haines & Hawkins, 2016). Over the course of the last two decades Arctic countries¹ have invested hundreds of billions of Dollars in infrastructure projects that include roads, railway lines, ports, ice-breaker capacity, energy as well as faster internet connections (Conley, 2013; Staalesen, 2016). At the same time, there has been a considerable militarisation of the Arctic, with more troops stationed in the area as well as newly-built vessels and army bases (Depledge, 2015; Singh, 2013). At the same time, Russia, Canada and Denmark have submitted applications to the United Nations Committee on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to extend the boundaries of their

¹ These are: Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, the United States, and Russia – the so-called Arctic – plus Finland, Iceland, and Sweden, so so-called Arctic-8.

respective exclusive economic zones, albeit with contradictory and overlapping claims (BBC, 2014; McKie, 2016). Russia also seemed to pursue this goal outside the administrative framework of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) when an expedition of submarines led by Duma member and Arctic explorer Artur Chilingarov planted a flag on the ocean floor at the North Pole in August 2007. This move was rejected by the Canadian foreign minister as politics from the 15th Century (Parfitt, 2007).

Against this background it becomes clear that established ways of human interaction are subject to change. The examples raise the central question of this article, namely what is the nature of this interaction and how can it be understood? Realist perspectives frame the changing landscape of the Arctic as a question of national security (Borgerson, 2008; Denmark, 2017; Huebert, 2013; Huebert et al., 2012; UK Parliament, 2016). This perspective highlights the worth of a potential rush for resources combined with a claim to territory. The approach is based on the notion that states' *raison d'être* is their own survival and their only obligation is towards themselves and their people (Kissinger, 1977). Yet a decade after the flag-planting incident, much has been written about the uncertainty of resources actually existing (Keil, 2014), let alone being accessible for commercial exploitation (Atlantic Council, 2017; Baev, 2017). Well-functioning cooperative practices in the Arctic Council and/or within the confines of international law suggest that realist scenarios struggle to survive a reality check.²

As an alternative to realist explanations, human and environmental security approaches have made convincing cases for a change of perspective (Hoogensen Gjørsv et al., 2014). Their focus explicitly shifts away from the state as the main referent object of security politics and towards individual human beings, or abstract entities, such as the environment or the economy (Owen, 2004; Suhrke, 1999). It is argued that the perspective helps to unsettle conventional lenses and provide a bottom-up perspective on security (Hoogensen & Stuvøy, 2006). Yet, notwithstanding the many ways in which local projects empower indigenous groups and general population in the region (Śmieszek, Stępień & Kankaanpää, 2017), while such a broadened understanding of security is fruitful, it should not be underestimated that states remain powerful actors of global politics (Gaskarth, 2015) which can significantly impact on the lives of

² For a possible future scenario, see statements by Klaus Dodds and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe in the 2017 Arctic Defence Inquiry (House of Commons, 2017a).

individuals. This assessment leaves us with a conundrum according to which state policies do not appear plausible, yet there is undoubtedly considerable motivation to engage in the Arctic and in various policy projects worth billions of Dollars. In light of the diagnosed blind spot of human security perspectives it should be clear that the analytical pendulum cannot simply swing back and assume a state centric approach.

The first aim of the article is therefore to contribute to a better understanding of what is happening in the Arctic by developing an alternative explanatory protocol that focuses not on *geopolitics*, but rather on *geopoetics* (Mitchell, 2000). The article develops geopoetics as a hermeneutic approach that looks at how spaces such as the Arctic become meaningful, what Balasopoulos calls the ‘textuality of geography’, while also taking into account “the set of localizing and particularizing constraints that act upon (such representations)”, which is referred to as the ‘geography of textuality’ (Balasopoulos, 2008: 9).³ The approach decomposes the state into the cultural practices through which it comes to life, particularly the actions of people who draw on and create meaning (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010). In a geopoetics approach, culture is regarded as a process rather than object – a reservoir of meanings that may be stored and transmitted through different media, artefacts or objects, but which requires instantiation in practice to become meaningful (Hansen-Magnusson & Wiener, 2010). These instantiations are embodied experiences that have a strongly emotional component (Crawford, 2014; Fierke, 2014; Mercer, 2014) and are key to how actors make sense of themselves and others (Lebow, 2012; Onuf, 2013), including the space in which they exist (Pain, 2009). Geopolitics and related policies are therefore the result of geopoetics – geopoetics precedes geopolitics.

The article applies the geopoetic framework to Russian Arctic politics as these have been subject of the vast majority of commentaries by European and North American scholars in recent years, especially in the wake of the 2007 flag-planting (Dodds, 2010). The second aim of the article is to contribute to a better understanding of this particular case. Through its framework, geopoetics portrays the Arctic as a space of cultural-political practice. Based on an analysis of primary cultural resources, especially film and literature, as well as secondary resources, the article reconstructs three central topoi that help understand and explain Russia’s politics in the Arctic. The argument put forward holds that Russian politics in the Arctic in the early 21st Century reveals a

³ Critical geographers have argued similarly for a transition from a focus on the survival of states towards one on assumptions, practices and representations (Dodds, Kuus & Sharp, 2013: 6).

striking resemblance to a utopia of the early Soviet empire in which the Arctic played a central role in politics of state-building. These politics fed on notions of honour and standing, centring particularly on, first, heroism, second, exploring, conquering and civilizing nature, as well as, third, on the role of science and technology. It is held that the geopoetics dimension of these *topoi* provides sufficient rationality to pursue policies that do not make sense from the perspective of conventional analyses. With a view to the broader literature on Arctic politics, ultimately I argue that a better understanding of what it is that states do, and how they do it, may benefit human security perspectives, too.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. In the following section I review the conundrum of Arctic politics that emanates from interest-based explanations. Not only are states engaged in considerable efforts to cooperate on a wide range of issues, there is also empirical evidence that questions the rationality to invest in Arctic infrastructure and resource extraction for the sake of state's survival and well-being. Yet still investments are being made, which suggest that there could be other factors that motivate policies. While some research has focused on Russian identity, it did not do so with a view to the Arctic – and vice versa. On the basis that policies might be motivated by a pursuit for standing and honour, the article then moves on to explain how such policies are part of geopoetics. The following section explains the methodological focus on *topoi* as the means through which we can understand how specific policies represent a broader context of national politics in the Arctic. Three *topoi* are particularly significant and presented in detail in the analytical section. They specify through whom, what, and how the Arctic becomes significant from a Russian perspective. The conclusion highlights that Arctic policies are a utopian cognitive-emotional project that needs to be reckoned with when commenting on contemporary politics.

The Arctic Conundrum: the Significance of Signalling Standing

This section argues that there are good reasons to look beyond explanations that champion security and wealth as primary motivations for Russia's Arctic pursuits. Questions of honour and standing, it has been shown, may be similarly, if not more important for foreign policies and studies are showing that Russia sees itself as a great power. Yet this insight on its own does not explain how policies become significant for a

given audience. The conclusion therefore holds that we need to take a look at the way in which connections to an audience are established.

The Mismatch between Theory and Practice

The Arctic conundrum arises from the many apparent contradictions between empirical evidence and theoretical accounts of policies that attempt to put them into perspective. Interest-based explanations of Russia's Arctic policy have framed the practices described at the beginning of this article in terms of sovereignty and security gains along the lines of realist explanations (Borgerson, 2008; Huebert et al., 2012; Piskunova, 2010; Singh, 2007). Accordingly policies strive to widen states' influence over their own and the yet-unclaimed territory and its potential resources. Headlines regarding militarization in the Arctic have frequently led commentary along similar lines or argumentation (Huebert, 2013). Following the realist account of balance-of-power dynamics, every move to widen influence is regarded as a step towards eventual escalation (Waltz, 1979).

Of course, it is difficult to foresee whether any of these scenarios might not come true at some point (House of Commons, 2017b; Human Security Centre, 2017; Kraska & Fahey, 2017) and perhaps it is a sign of diligence to take into account hypotheticals. Yet, it is a well-known problem that predictions are difficult to make, especially when they concern the future. For the time being, retrospective analyses and the current state of the art highlight the amicable cooperation in the Arctic Council and its achievements in fostering scientific cooperation, for instance, on the extent and effect of climate change in the area (Bloom, 1999; Humrich, 2013; Knecht, 2016; Koivurova, 2010; Koivurova, Keskitalo & Bankes, 2009; Larsen & Fondahl, 2014; Pedersen, 2012). From the perspective of international law, there is very little to worry about as state action takes place in the confines of the nomos set by the Law of the Sea (Byers, 2013; Wood-Donnelly, 2013). The existence of *potential* oil and gas resources identified by the US Geological Survey in 2008 does not necessarily translate into *actually* existing stocks (Keil, 2014). Even so, climatic conditions and the currently low price for fossil fuels on the global market put into doubt whether the resources could be accessed at all and at economically viable costs (Atlantic Council, 2017; Baev, 2017). Notwithstanding future changes to the current trajectory, there is very little empirical evidence to support the premises of realist explanations that focus on survival and resource acquisition to

explain state behaviour (Brosnan, Leschine & Miles, 2011; Exner-Pirot, 2012; Laruelle, 2014; Wilson, 2016).

Yet, the attempt to understand Arctic politics does not need to be abandoned in light of this conclusion. Foreign policy can be based on motivations other than survival or wealth. It has been shown that a pursuit of honour and standing quite often yields considerable analytical sway regarding the explanation of war and conflict (Lebow, 2008). It is worth bearing this in mind when we look at alternative explanations for Russia's Arctic policy because the flag-planting in 2007 is often referred to as primarily symbolic and directed at a domestic audience (Baev, 2017; Laruelle, 2014) as if this observation was insignificant for a potential trajectory of conflict. Yet, symbolic politics are no less real than a pursuit of security and wealth because they are central to establishing an identity (Lebow, 2012), and may trigger considerable domestic resources to influence the course of state policy towards others (Crawford, 2014; Walker, 1993; Weldes, 1998). The question is, how and why do they become real and significant in the first place.

Great Power Identity and Standing

Taking a historical approach that is consistent with the perspective of the state as cultural practice introduced earlier, Ted Hopf (2005) holds that there are multiple Russian identities interacting domestically and abroad which shape the course of the country's foreign policy. The different positions share the common denominator that Russia is a "great power", while each position holds different connotations on what constitutes such power and what policies follow (Hopf, 2005: 26). Hopf's analysis of the 1990s identifies a centrist discourse as dominant, which emphasises family ties to Europe and broadly an adherence to international norms which makes the issue-specific cooperation in the Arctic Council and joint initiatives such as the search and rescue agreement plausible (Exner-Pirot, 2012; Wood-Donnelly, 2013). Yet in a twist of this "great power" perception, Iver Neumann's more recent study reveals how that cooperative position might have shifted during the last decade and a half (Neumann, 2017). He does, however underscore the need to look into aspects of standing and honour in addition to security and wealth, based on the observation that the Russian self-perception continues to be one of a great power, especially vis-à-vis Europe. Akin to Hopf, Neumann identifies the rise of a nationalist, anti-Westernised discourse which

emphasised a “strong state domestically and a great power internationally, with a strong, authoritarian leader” (Neumann, 2017: 177). Both Hopf’s and Neumann’s study reveal the different facets to Russia’s perception as a great power, which we can take as a heuristic device for further analysis. But as neither study (including the chapters in Hopf, 2008) mentions the Arctic in any detail, nor why Russia seems to be selectively cooperative and in adherence to international law, they do not provide an answer to the particular questions of this article.

By contrast, Maness and Valeriano *do* discuss Arctic issues and with an explicit connection to concepts of identity (2015: 26). They reach the conclusion that *in the future* conflict in the Arctic is unlikely because disputes are “not symbolic” (Maness & Valeriano, 2015: 177) but rather tangible because they involve sharable commodities, such as fish. As further factors that make conflict unlike, they highlight that policies take place in considerably remote locations in relation to the capital; the infrastructure and population density is considerably thin; and, finally, public opinion either does not care too much or supports cooperation in the Arctic Council or the confines of international law. While the usual caveat to future prediction should apply, contrary to their intended methodology, the chapter holds very little discussion of identity issues in the Russian Arctic. Public opinion is quoted as an indicator of the salience of Arctic politics but the overview only provides data for a particular point in time. It does not tell us whether the 2011 level are high or low historically, thereby providing no suggestion whether Arctic issues might assume more prominence in the future. Similarly, the distance between the capital and the Arctic appears to be a rather crude indicator of whatever “emotional significance” (Herd, 2000: 237) the Arctic might hold for the country.

Yet coming to terms with this ‘significance’ seems paramount and the current debate in the field holds that next to a pursuit of power as an explanation, identity-based explanations should be considered as well (Hønneland, 2016: 20). If we take the flag-planting as a visible instantiation of Russian Arctic politics, experts remain divided on what it stands for. It has been said that the expedition was primarily the doings of Artur Chilingarov who held strong convictions about Russia’s role and legitimate claims to ownership in the Arctic: “Overall, it is clear that Chilingarov’s expedition was an impromptu rather than a calculated geopolitical move but the Kremlin was quick to follow it up with political and security steps aimed at overtaking and dividing its dumbfounded competitors” (Baev, 2007: 12). If this opinion holds explanatory value and the flag-planting is indeed an incident of public relations, questions remain regarding a)

the nature of the public (who is the audience?), and b) the quality of the relations to the audience. While foreign policy experts seem divided on whether the audience is domestic or international (compare Steinberg, Tasch & Gerhard, 2015: 23), it may be the case that multiple audiences were addressed at the same time: “In addition to the revival of Russian greatness on the international scene, the ‘security first’ variant is viewed as having a more immediate domestic aim: to reassert Russian patriotism in order to secure the legitimacy of the political establishment.” (Hønneland, 2016: 50).

Contrary to the study presented by Maness and Valeriano, then, this seems to suggest that the Arctic *does* present a salient topic in Russian policy and one that *may* become important enough to warrant policies other than diplomatic ones. If we want to arrive at a better understanding of Arctic politics, the discussion in this section suggests that we should not begin the inquiry with preconceived concepts and assumptions about states intention but rather with the ways in which policies resonate in a particular cultural context.

The Geopoetics of Culture

In order to understand how questions of standing can be posed in a way that they resonate with an audience, we need to consider *how* it would be possible to make a connection. The debate in the previous section underscored that we need to take a geopoetic approach and address the question of the significance of Arctic politics hermeneutically. After all the foundational premise of hermeneutics is that understanding and significance are possible through a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 2004 [1975]) in which communicative interlocutors develop a mutual understanding with the help of shared cultural resources. The horizon refers to the pre-existing perceptions through which one’s environment is rendered comprehensible, without determining the outcome. The horizon is not merely cognitive but also emotional. At a state level, it is on this basis that decision-making procedure are initiated and procedures are evoked (compare Crawford, 2014: 547). Although the relation between geopoetics and geopolitics may be mutually constitutive, the latter cannot exist outside a supportive cultural setting. This section explains the methodology that follows from this premise and how it can be made fruitful for research.

From Culture to Experience

Geopoetics is a topological approach, which perceives the Arctic as a space that socially constructed through meaningful cultural practices (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Elden, 2013; Lury, Parisi & Terranova, 2012). The perspective adopted in this article holds that the Arctic is not constituted as an *a priori* given that is 'out there' awaiting discovery and ownership. Rather, its 'discovery' is part and parcel of sense-making practices and knowledge creation, as a result of which the Arctic becomes, first, comprehensible and, eventually, tangible. It is in this context that one can consider questions of demarcation and territory which are at the heart of Russian (and other states') policies shift the final frontier of humanity and manage life alongside it, to paraphrase Bloomfield (1981).

As befits a hermeneutic approach, the article develops its argument through an interpretive reconstruction. It focuses on primary sources of literature and film as cultural media that establish 'geographies of textuality' (Balasopoulos, 2008). They were narrowed down and selected for further analysis following secondary sources that comprise historical and sociological accounts of Russian Arctic politics. Particular attention was given to works created during the period of or under the programmatic guide of Socialist Realism, which developed not only its idiosyncratic aesthetic but also focused on conveying the Soviet way of life in a manner sanctioned by the state (McCannon, 1998; Sarkisova, 2015). Additional secondary sources from human geography, history, and cultural studies were drawn upon as heuristic devices to guide the interpretation of what Balasopoulos refers to as 'textualities of geography'. They were assessed in terms of the ways in which they establish particular actors and identities as well as their relations towards each other.

The analysis followed a narratological approach which zooms in on particular creations of knowledge. As the hermeneutic philosopher Richard Kearney explains, such an approach focuses on the "communicative practice in which someone (a narrator) tells something (a story) to someone (a narratee) about something (a real or imaginary world)" (Kearney, 2002: 5 and 150). It requires the analyst to focus on which actors feature in a text or film, how they are portrayed, how their relations are formed and conveyed and which broader context they are embedded in. Each of these points of analysis contribute to answering the central question, i.e. "how does the Arctic become the subject of cognitive-emotional experience?"

Topoi – Making Sense of Sense-Making

This question and the related heuristics generated the data for the analysis presented in the following section. The data is tied together with the help of the central analytical concepts of the *topos* (or *topoi* in its plural form). Denoting “place” in Greek, the term refers to literary conventions, formula or themes as well as rhetorical commonplaces.⁴ It has been used by international relations scholars but not in a way that was accompanied by systematic exploration and development (Bigo & Walker, 2007; Kornprobst, 2007; Koslowski, 1999; Neumann, 2001). On the basis of this precedent, the article employs creative leeway and expands on Friedrich Kratochwil’s explanation of the term. Kratochwil explains *topoi* as “commonplaces [...which not only] establish ‘starting-points’ for arguments, but also locate the issue of a debate in a substantive set of common understandings that provide for the crucial connections within the structure of an argument.” (Kratochwil, 1989: 220) While the reference to ‘structure of an argument’ refers to the rhetorical connotation of *topos*,⁵ the article applies a broader, less literal understanding that is not confined to the dialogic exchange of an argument. Rather, the article assumes that geopoetics is part of establishing such common understandings through which the Arctic becomes part of geopolitical contention. Following the premise that geopoetics precedes geopolitics, the Arctic and related policies exist in the form of argumentative exchange, which are created, embodied and advanced through various cultural forms and interactions. These practices establish a web of meaning (Geertz, 1973) that may be subject to change over time. Through the links between different *topoi*, the web centres on deeply political questions of possession, ownership, resource allocation and distribution, as well as questions of justice and access.

Analytically, the concept of *topos* thus lends itself to a spatial understanding of discourse (Holzscheiter, 2014) in which the web of meaning resembles an “ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with

⁴ Compare the Oxford English Dictionary entry for “*topos*”:
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/203433?redirectedFrom=topos#eid>

⁵ Regarding the structure of an argument, three common forms of *topoi* are that of objection to a premise or prior statement, of consequence regarding the alleged cause-effect relations and of authority regarding singular practices or someone’s trustworthiness, suggesting ulterior motives.

straight and regular streets and uniform houses” (Wittgenstein, 2009 [1953]: para 18). Reconstructing topoi resembles a way of mapping such an ancient city. According to John Ruggie, this reconstruction involves two “orders’ of information: the descriptive and the configurative” (Ruggie, 1995: 94). The descriptive order refers to a chain of events as they unfolded over time, which are interpreted through a kind of thick description (Geertz, 1973). The configurative order ties these descriptions together and assembles them into that Polkinghorne (1988) refers to as ‘coherence structure’ or ‘interpretive gestalt’.

The analyst thus needs to understand that policies and representation in film, literature and other media are an attempt to transform “haphazard happenings (...) into story, and thus (...to make them) memorable over time. This becoming historical involves a transition from the flux of events into a meaningful social or political community.” (Kearney, 2002: 3) Reconstructing topoi means presenting a second and third order interpretation (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006; Lee et al., 2015) in which I make sense of others’ sense-making. Topoi enable us to understand how Russian politics make the Arctic intelligible and, as a consequence, subject to particular policies.

Arctic Topoi: Heroism, Nature and Technology

Three topoi stand out from the analysis which form the core element of how the Arctic becomes a comprehensible space and through which policies resonate with a domestic audience. The topoi address questions of who, what and how, i.e. the characteristics and main attributes of the main character or force at the centre of Arctic action; the object to which the main character’s action relates; and the nature of these relations. My argument in the following passages holds that Russia’s politics in the Arctic today appears plausible when considered as a performative re-enactment of a utopian vision that was prevalent in the early days of the Soviet Union. Utopias portray unitary, perfect worlds and are the source of identity and moral guidance (Lebow, 2012: 52ff.). Typically, they are

“forward looking and motivated by reformist, even revolutionary projects. (...Unlike the pessimistic depiction of Golden Ages, their) starting assumption (is) that people can make the future better than the present. Utopias are offered as model societies in which individual happiness and collective harmony are achieved by means of institutions and practices that rest on and reinforce what their authors depict as universal human traits and aspirations.” (Lebow, 2012: 62). A

As will become plain, Russian Arctic politics evolves around (1) the heroic explorer, (2) who overcomes the adversities of nature, while (3) making use of the latest developments in the realm of science and technology.

The Heroic Explorer

The key actor in the utopian vision of a Soviet Arctic is the heroic explorer. Predominantly, but not exclusively, a male character, the boundaries between fiction and real life are blurred as actual expeditions were represented in literature and film, while the latter media had a constitutive effect on explorers' longing to push the boundaries of knowledge. Explorers "became celebrities of the first magnitude, and their widespread appeal made the Arctic a central, even definitive, feature of Stalinist mass culture and propaganda" (McCannon, 1997: 347). Of the many examples I could use, I will focus particularly on three figures who stand out in the early days of Soviet exploration. Their biographies show how much exploration of the Arctic is intertwined with state interest and administration. Their conduct in real life was expected to resemble particular virtues, and was portrayed accordingly on film when turned into story. The lines between fiction and reality were further blurred when heroes on screen, not necessarily explorers but medieval knights, were treated to similar victory parades as were explorers upon their return from the Arctic.

A central figure of the heroic explorer topos is Otto Yulyevich Shmidt, a mathematician-turned-explorer who led several excursions into Arctic waters during the 1930s. He became famous for exploring the Northern Sea Route with the icebreakers *Sibiryakov* and *Chelyuskin* in 1932 and 1933/34, respectively. Particularly the first expedition was noticeable in that it was achieved in one navigation rather than during two summers. This achievement highlighted the potential use of the route and Schmidt subsequently headed the Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route (shortened to *Glavseморput*) until his dismissal in 1939. He expanded the operation of the directorate to stretch from the White Sea to the Bering Strait and become known as the Ice Commissar (Josephson, 2014: 69). During this time he was in charge of organising the so-called SP-1 mission, which is named after the Russian words for North Pole. SP-1 was a manned ice station that drifted on an ice floe for nine months. In Shmidt we meet the explorer who does not merely venture into the wild for the sake of personal honour but who has a national mission to fulfil. In light of his achievements, it is also clear that the Northern Sea Route is not merely of strategic or economic importance to Russia today, as some commentators hold (Lajeunesse, 2017).

Despite the uncertainty about returns to investment, money spent on developing the infrastructure appears sensible in light of the emotional significance of the route.

Following Shmidt as head of the *Glavseморput* was Ivan Papanin who had been the commander on the SP-1 ice floe. He received the title *Hero of the Soviet Union* along with the other members of the expedition, and once more in 1940 when he was in charge of coordinating rescue efforts for the icebreaker *Sedov*. As a high-ranking bureaucrat he sought to develop further the infrastructure around the Northern Sea Route, claiming that it would be a “powerful means for the development of the productive forces of the Far North and for the strengthening of the defenses of the Union.” (quoted in Zenzinov, 1944: 70) His achievement were popularised in a series of films whose titles translate as *At the North Pole!*, *We conquered the North Pole!* and *Papanin’s Team* (Sarkisova, 2017).

Another explorer/hero was Valery Chkalov, a favourite of Stalin and indeed widely admired in the Soviet public. Chkalov was probably the most widely recognised pilot next to Mikhail Vodopyanov, who had landed on the North Pole to supply construction material for SP-1, and was also one of seven pilots involved in rescuing Otto Shmidt and the crew of the *Chelyuskin* when they ran aground in 1934. Their and other pilots’ popularity is a result of the enormous importance Stalin’s state sought to bestow on the profession (Palmer, 2005). Chkalov was the first pilot to fly over the North Pole during a world-record setting non-stop flight over 63 hours from Moscow to Vancouver, but fatally crashed under unknown, if not dubious circumstances in 1938 (McCannon, 1997: 356). His demise was widely mourned: “Upon Chkalov’s death, poet Alexander Tvardorsky wrote the following eulogy of the fallen pilot: ‘We loved him so much that he seemed to belong to each of our lives, as if each of us had drunk with him, eaten with him, flown with him.’” (quoted in McCannon, 1998: 134). In 1941, shortly after his death, his life story was turned into a film.

Noticeably, it is not just *what* the explorers do but also *how* they achieve their goal and conduct themselves. The Soviet explorer-as-hero is not just brave and successful but also moral, building on the virtues of spontaneity and consciousness that Marx bestowed on the working class on its way to the revolution (Clark, 1981: 15-24). For some commentators, Otto Shmidt best embodied these ultimate character traits propagated by Socialist Realism, which focussed on virtuous heroism comprising strength and boldness as well as traits of chivalry. An example is delivered in Shmidt’s writing when he claims, “(W)e in the Arctic do not chase after records (although we break not a few upon the way). We do not look for adventures (although we experience them with every step). Our goal is to study the North in order to settle it economically ... for the good of the entire USSR.” (quoted in McCannon, 1997: 350)

Of course, the Soviet public at the time would have been familiar with the theme of chivalrous leadership figures, for instance, through films such as civil war hero *Chapaev* (1934, by Georgi and Sergej Vasilyev) and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938, by Sergey Eisenstein), a 13th Century prince who saved the Russians from an invasion of crusading German knights. Highlighting the natural bond between the people of Russia and the Northern/Arctic conditions, in *Nevsky* the invaders pay the ultimate price by breaking into the ice of a frozen lake. Whereas Chapaev dies, even though his mission is successful, Nevsky returns home triumphantly to cheering crowds. Further blurring the lines between narrative and practice, the hero's welcome is an honour that Shmidt, Papanin, Chkalov and others experienced in real life, too (McCannon, 1998: 78; Skakov, 2012: 119).

Overall, these examples demonstrate that the explorer is not a 'lone hero' character but firmly embedded in Soviet society. Whereas Robert Peary's expedition to the North Pole set out to further the honour and prestige of the USA but primarily that of his New York club (Peary, 2008: 89) the portrayal of Soviet Arctic heroes as well as their celebration in real life demonstrate that the achievements are really meant to signal the society's achievement. What is more, the success is enabled by the benevolence of the country's leadership: media at the time portrayed filial relations fostered by Stalin as the head of state, who assumes a father-like role for the country and its heroes. Allegedly, Stalin masterminded the pilots' missions and provided advice on how to execute them successfully (McCannon, 1997: 351).⁶ There is symbiotic relation between the heroic explorer and the state. Explorers' achievements are part of a collective effort, much like the planting of the flag at the North Pole was not exclusively Chilingarov's achievement. Even though it may not have been planned as such, but it ultimately came in handy to communicate a broader claim to the ocean floor, the mission *had* to be presented as a collective achievement. After all, the Arctic is the region in which heroic achievements take place for the benefit of the collective.

Conquering Nature

The second topos that marks the utopian tale of the Arctic centres on nature as the object of conquest and domestication. The Arctic is presented as a blank slate, a *terra nullius*, to which various heroes export Soviet/Russian achievements and virtues. Given the hostile climate, this is a task that is not undertaken easily but which requires the full amount of heroic

⁶ Stalin is repeatedly presented as omniscient and wise, a source of inspiration to the pilots who do their bit to uphold this image: Valery Chkalov remarked on the alleged heavenly glow that surrounded Stalin, "Where there is Stalin, there is no darkness, only bright light" (quoted in Palmer, 2005: 44).

effort and virtues. This topos describes how adversity brings out the best in characters, how hardships can be overcome through collective efforts, and how conquest of the vast Soviet space is a part of a grander utopian vision of Soviet life.

In the Arctic “blockbuster” (McCannon, 2010: 90) movie *The Seven Bold Ones* (1937, directed by Sergey Gerasimov), a group of five men and one woman set out to explore the Arctic, when they find a stowaway who becomes the seventh member of the group. The film is a parable on Soviet achievement and (its citizens’) character. The Arctic is being claimed symbolically by planting flags wherever the explorers venture, while the local Chukchi population is won over when they require medical help, which luckily the female surgeon is able to provide. Unity between the population at the periphery and the group from the centre is restored as the Chukchi help the explorers out of distress caused by avalanches and failing rescue missions.

Similarly, though in the style of a documentary, *In the Heart of the Arctic* (1955, direction by Dmitri Shcherbakov) charts the history of Arctic exploration and then focuses on the SP-1 mission. It relives the events as a story in which the explorers tried and failed, such as Schmidt’s 1934 attempt to explore the Northern Sea Route, including the successful rescue mission by Chkalov and the other pilots. As the film (and Soviet efforts) progress, though, the North Pole is eventually successfully conquered (“By now man is the master of this Arctic wasteland”, minute 11). Despite all technical difficulties and climatic adversities, nature cannot break the social bond between the group and society, expressed in the statement “Although they’re far away at the top of the world, the men never feel neglected or cut off from their country” (minute 44.44). Once the “noble work of conquering the Arctic” is accomplished (minute 49.29), the explorers are treated to a heroes’ welcome to crowds of jubilant fellow citizens, including children. These scenes closely resemble the return of the hero in *Nevsky*.

The theme of nature as an object that is subject to conquering and possessing, the course of which lends itself to bring out the most virtuous sides of Soviet people, would have been well familiar to the contemporary audience. Dziga Vertov’s *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926) is probably the film that has been most widely viewed. Originally commissioned to advertise the State Trade Organization it shows how producers in the countryside and the foreign industrial world are linked. It is a black and white silent montage with intertitles that celebrates the vastness of the Soviet Union and its achievements in what has been described as a “‘wholesale’ promotion of the ideological and political foundations of the new regime, combining its economic rationale with a progressivist discourse” (Sarkisova, 2007: 26). This

is achieved through portraying genuine Soviet achievements but also by juxtaposing and repeating these with the decadence and exploitation of Western capitalism, especially the shame of colonialism, slavery and the use of black people for entertainment. The intertitles address the audience directly and remind them that they own the productive forces of the country. Whatever happens in the Soviet Union is shown to be part of a grand and coherent strategy for the good of all. Vertov captures this diverse, yet united Soviet Union by “ascribing symbolic significance to spaces, identifying them not by their geographical locations but by political and economic conditions.” (Sarkisova, 2007: 28) There is a particular section in the film that captures the Arctic as part of the empire. Trade brings prosperity and progress to remote parts of the country, which is made clear when indigenous populations are portrayed in the middle of the film as no longer exploited but actively involved in the Soviet empire: “Far away in the Arctic Circle, where the sun does not set for half a year and night-time lasts for half the year, the Samoyedes sit motionless and look intensely toward the ocean” (minute 47.15) – waiting for the ice breaker to bring gramophones and wood in exchange for fur. On the gramophones “they hear Lenin himself” (minute 49.05), while the fur is shipped to “capitalist country” and are exchanged for “machines for the Soviet Union” (minute 50.57). Unity and progress are ensured through the icebreaker *Lenin*, the image of which is accompanied by the caption, “you break the ice with your chest, we pave the way” (minute 62.40).

In a similar vein, the themes of nature as an obstacle that can be overcome and domesticated through Soviet unity and virtues are advanced in the film *Salt for Svaneti* (1930, by Mikhail Kalatozov). The black and white film with intertitles portrays the isolated people of Svaneti, inhabitants of a historic, mostly mountainous region in what is nowadays Georgia. They live in rather simple conditions and are at risk from the doings of a local robber baron, the weather, the land and their devotion to religion. Salt is the resource that is lacking and is evoked in a number of metaphors throughout the film that refer to themes such as death, work and people themselves. As is typical of a utopia, despite all hardship, the film ends on an encouraging tone: bare-chested Soviet workforces arrive in great numbers to fell trees and blow through rocks to build a road that connects Svaneti to the rest of the country. The ending of the film features a number of quick cuts and montages which show close-ups of explosions and men’s chests to suggest the power of communism. The film uses the stylistic device of a synecdoche when it shows a flag-draped steam-roller and flag-holding labourers (bare-chested, of course) that march like armies. Equipped with the symbolic device of conquest

(flag), the mise-en-scène suggests that geopolitics is achieved by other means than usual, and the film itself becomes message and medium.

The Role of Science & Technology

Examples of the central role of science and technology as a third topos that closely interacts with the other two have already been mentioned in passing in the previous sections. This section therefore focuses on a broader discussion of key characteristics as it is possible to identify a close intertextual relation between Soviet politics as well as film and literature.

Science fiction is the genre in which technology and science can work for the greater good of humanity. It is often employed as a comment on the present, literally challenging the boundaries of what is taken for granted. Science fiction can be used to create utopian worlds to an extent that technological and social change are presented and become part of the cultural common sense in which policy gets developed (Weldes, 2003: 12). While the course of history showed that the attempt by Soviet communism to turn the Marxist utopia into reality led to a dystopian nightmare (Lebow, 2012: 42), this development could not be foreseen in the 1920s and 1930s. Accordingly, there are plenty examples through which we can come to see the geopoetic dimension of Soviet approaches to science and technology.

Like the optimism portrayed in the novels of Jules Verne, Soviet film and literature knows of utopian examples that tie together the topoi of heroic exploration, mastering of nature and technology. One example in point is the 1935 film *The Space Voyage* by Vasili Zhuravlov. The story is set in Moscow of 1946, and the famous astrophysicist Sedych has decided to fly to the moon, yet the officials do not want to risk the life of an ageing national hero. Defying official orders he gets together with his rival's female assistant and younger brother and the trio manages to get on board of the space ship, demonstrating that in Soviet society everyone can be a hero. Once it is too late to stop the space ship, the country unites behind them, making their personal mission a national one. In the course of the mission the three literally take possession of the moon in a flag planting ceremony (minute 38.28), while the Soviet public is delighted when they manage to send a signal back to Earth, which is a huge "USSR" projected onto the moon's surface (minute 52.28). Despite a few mishaps the three make it safely back to Earth where they receive the well-known heroes' welcome. Their fate exemplifies that personal heroism is embedded in the greater good of the nation, an expectation that real-life cosmonauts would live up to later. Yet, while the spirit of comradeship and hard labour go a long way to unite the diversity of the country internally, they are hardly the sole means by which this is achieved. Usually unity is literally achieved by

physically building connections, such as portrayed in *Salt for Svaneti* or *A Sixth Part of the World*. Other examples may focus on railroads or electrification, and even virtual ties, such as radio transmission.

In this context the Arctic is a place on the fringes where the heroes not only showcase their and the land's virtues but also Soviet progress in science and technology. True, in *The Seven Bold Ones* technology may cause most of the problem for the explorers, but they are ultimately rescued through the use of technology – and have plenty of opportunity in the meantime to rely on comradeship and other virtues. The use of icebreakers played a role not just on screen but also in real life to make possible the active use of the Northern Sea Route (Moe, 2014). Russian engineers were proud to produce the first nuclear powered icebreaker in the 1950s and beat the United States to this achievement (Josephson, 2014: 347). Further, as described above, the role of pilots and the use of planes were a central component of Soviet geopoetry (compare Palmer, 2005). The SP-1 mission epitomized the role of science in the discovery and conquest of the Arctic, and the ensuing cinematic portrayal in *In the Heart of the Arctic* further popularized the connection between science and technology and the Arctic.

The connection between the portrayal of character and technology is not surprising given that progress and human betterment through science and technology are a typical topos of post-enlightenment thinking in the 19th Century. It can be found in the works of Henri de Saint Simon, Auguste Comte and Karl Marx (and, of course, there are the more pessimistic positions associated with the Romantic and other counter-Enlightenment writings). Marxism, in its Soviet instantiation served “as a state-sponsored ideology to reinforce almost unbounded faith in science and technology” (Josephson, 1995: 520). It formed part of the Soviet struggle for ‘standing’ (Lebow, 2008) because

“(t)echnologies are symbols of national achievement. They reflect the omniscient power of scientists and engineers. They give legitimacy to political systems. They are central to national security strategies. They serve foreign policy through technology transfer. They entrance a public, which becomes intoxicated with symbolism and overlooks potential dangers to society.” (Josephson, 1995: 521)

The technological projects of the early days of the Soviet Union have been described as both instrumental for the industrialisation of the country as well as imaginative (Vaingurt, 2013: 5). They thereby resonate well with movements in Russian literature, which sought to discover the true spirit of the Russian soul by making a Montesquieu-inspired assumption that the climatic conditions of the country somehow resonate in the national character – in this case allegedly Nordic qualities like courage, manliness, and bravery as well as social and technical progress (Nilsson, 1987: 128ff.). All of these traits are themes that contemporary

nationalists evoke in discourses as well as policy proposals concerning the Arctic (Laruelle, 2014: 39). They help us see that Arctic politics is a cultural project that is emotionally charged.

Conclusion

A geopoetic perspective does not claim to predict future developments. But it greatly helps to understand contemporary developments. It is in this light that the article explored the conundrum of Arctic politics. It focused on Russia as Russian Arctic politics has received most attention by non-Russian commentators, politicians and scholars. With a view to the broader debate on geopolitics, geopoetics is able to show how states rely on cognitive-emotional resources in light of which particular policies become plausible, which is not to say that they follow a strategic path (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Ruselle, 2013) as the flag-planting incident may have been primarily a private incentive that was integrated into state policy post facto. But geopoetics investigates the cultural resources on the basis of which state action becomes plausible.

As far as such actual policies are concerned, given the effects of climate change, at first glance the attempt to secure access to resources as well as territory seems sensible. Yet in light of the uncertainty of return to investments due to the climatic conditions, accessibility of resource and potential use of seaways, this seems less to be the case. Also, widespread cooperation among Arctic states contradicts the assumption of conflictual relations. However, from a geopoetic perspective it is possible to find rational grounds and motivations for current practices. When we consider that the three topoi of the heroic explorer, the conquest and dominance of nature, and the use of technology are a key component of Russian culture, investments in infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route are identitarian projects at least as much as they are potentially ones of wealth and survival. They resonate with a theme of greatness that originated during the 1920s and following decades. Militarisation makes sense from this perspective, too, as it is not just a geostrategic tool but also a reminder of one's standing and achievements. Being able to overcome the adversities of nature is a successful test of character for both men (sic) and machines. Through their cross-references, the topoi establish a utopian aspiration that make the Arctic intelligible and particular policies appear plausible. The observation that the Arctic matters emotionally should be borne in mind when commenting on the rationality of Russian Arctic policy.

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