

B/ordering North: Russia and the Balance of Northern Co-operation

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Introduction

The circumpolar north has been rapidly developing into an arena for international co-operation. A number of proposals to enhance northern co-operation have, however, either excluded Russia altogether or approached it only as an object rather than an involved actor in the co-operation. Such asymmetric approaches have often been taken by Russians with a grain of salt and, as a result, Russia's motivation to fully engage itself in co-operation has been questioned. Russia represents a vast northern country with a number of neighbors and borders. Already its mere physical size makes it a noteworthy player in the field and its actions, or lack thereof, are likely to have an effect on other countries as well. Accordingly, it is also in the interest of these countries to try to influence the direction of developments in Russia. The co-operative joint policies, such as the Northern Dimension (ND) initiative of the European Union (EU), that this paper addresses, are likely to have a strong impact on how Russia regards co-operation with its neighbors and, in consequence, the entire order and balance of a changing North.

Sub-regional governments have recently become increasingly active in promoting and developing contacts across national borders, which have certainly played a role in engaging Russia in grand proposals. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that regional and sub-regional co-operation do not exist in a vacuum and are still context dependent, i.e. restricted by the top-level policies and relations. Russia's recent strengthening of centralist state logic may signal that instead of having a situation-specific approach to each case of international co-operation, a more one-form-fits-all type of solution may well be more likely to be utilized. In this respect, the Northern Dimension may have a crucial role to play in influencing what that model will actually look like. Positive experiences from an equal partnership in this context may well open Russia to participate also in parallel efforts elsewhere.

The End of Marginal (-izing) North

“North” is semiotically highly ambiguous; it is a direction, a place or region, a metaphor or a state of mind (Shields 2003, 204). Whereas the East, West, and even South have fairly fixed meanings, the North has features of obscurity and anonymity; “it is more often communicated than experienced, imagined rather than embodied” (Medvedev 2001a, 91). Even though northern regions do certainly share special features that set them a part from other areas of the world, the common perception of the North has been more stereotypical, a homogenous unity defined not only by latitude but also by certain qualities of “Northernness”. Northern areas have been commonly characterized as passive, underdeveloped, remote, dependent, and helpless.

Northern regions have commonly been considered peripheral or marginal for a number of reasons. In addition to what is often considered to be their disadvantageous geographical *location*, northern regions often lag behind in their *position* in relation to a national core (Figure 1). The core-oriented organization of activities transformed many northern regions into resource restricted backwoods, which consequently became more dependent on national, rather than transborder connections. Especially during the Cold War period, international co-operation was, for the most part, frozen, forcing the regions of the North to rely on their respective national cores. For many, given the North’s position as part of these ordered deep structures, Northernness seemed to be naturalized and sedimented to such an extent that it was difficult to comprehend that, in the end, the north also forms a discursive construct with changing boundaries and meaning (Joenniemi 2003, 224).

In many ways, Northernness was created to complement a southern core and to function as its backwaters. It has been in the interest of the core to reinforce its own position and marginalize the North and perceive it as an object of its policies rather than a subject with its own voice. As elaborated by Joenniemi (2003), the reasoning for such a lopsided relationship has been the assumption that having been northernized, i.e. pushed further towards the edge and emptied of its previously rich political, social, and cultural content, the northern areas may, at least in principle, also be re-furnished with new qualities that better fit the agenda as defined by the core. The originally Finnish initiative of Northern Dimension can be seen as a ground-breaking attempt to go against this convention by making the voice of the North heard and, in doing so, challenging the traditional power relations between the core and the periphery. As elaborated further on in this paper (see also Romsloe 2005), it seems reasonable to assume that there has

been a need to downgrade and question the initiative's credibility due to its unorthodox approach of the "periphery" exercising considerable influence by attempting to tell the "core" how to run its business; i.e. to challenge the core's relative power over the North as well as sovereign, yet self-proclaimed, right to order and border its sphere of influence.



Figure 1. Peripheral North. A cartogram of the world's population could also be seen as a cartogram of the traditional, marginalized image of the North. Map acquired from: <http://strangemaps.wordpress.com>.

Northern regions are unquestionably peripheral but this peripherality does not have to necessarily represent a disadvantage. Since the so-called Murmansk speech (see Åtland 2008) of 1987 by then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, ushering in the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War tensions, the circumpolar North has been tapping into its potential to transform from resource-based militarized backwoods towards a competitive field of interaction. As Heininen (2004) has elaborated in detail, there has been a steady increase in circumpolar co-operation among various organizations and sub-national governments in northern region-building based on bottom-up activities as well as in the intensifying relationship and interaction between the North and the outside world. In all, these trends indicate that the North is no longer willing to acquiesce to its marginalization, but is actively making its voice more clearly heard also outside the region. The increased number and strong status of its many international organizations create unseen possibilities for the North to become an active player in world

politics (Heininen 2004, 221). At the same time, globalization is bringing new actors to the North, technological developments are helping to make these regions more accessible, not to mention the alarming results of climate change that have forced the wider public and decision makers from around the world to turn their gaze Northwards (see Heininen 2008).

Even if diverse, many northern regions face the same problems and challenges and are, thus, seeking new opportunities from other northern regions, creating unseen unity among northern actors. As underlined by Heininen (2004, 212; see also Heininen & Nicol 2007) such a trend represents a novel approach in geopolitics; rather than seeking control through the exercise of power, the North is focusing on achieving a socially stable and environmentally sustainable region. As a consequence, the North has been successfully clawing its way from the margins towards the centre of the international scene, where it needs to be in order to engage the outside world in the fight against common challenges such as global warming, which does not only leave the North on thin ice but will affect world as a whole.

Russia in the North

Northernness as a non-bordered open space with endless opportunities resonates well with some parts of the Russian self-understanding.

Joenniemi & Sergounin 2003, 108

No matter how the circumpolar north is demarcated, the Russian Federation constitutes, as shown in Figure 2, a significant share. Already its mere physical size makes Russia a noteworthy player and its actions, or lack thereof, likely affect other countries as well. Accordingly, it is in the interest of these countries to try to influence the course of Russian development. The problem has been that in many of these policies and instruments Russia has been regarded as an object rather than a partner. Such an approach has harmed the potential of “others” to actually influence Russia through intergovernmental co-operation.

It has become obvious that today’s Russia is increasingly more self-confident than the Russia of the 1990s. The EU-Russia relationship is tenser, and Russia is evidently less willing to take advice on domestic issues from abroad. Russia is also well aware of its strategic Northern and global importance. Based on its vast energy sources and the related economic growth, Russia is re-gaining its strength as a great power (see e.g. Kanet 2007), clearly impacting how it sees its own role in the international scene. By listening to current Russian foreign policy makers, it is

not all too difficult to hear a yearning for the 19th century world model, in which international order was based on the role of states and, above all, on the balance of power between the great powers.

We have already successfully solved many problems including those that seemed insoluble just recently. We have finally – legally and practically – restored the country's unity, strengthened the authority of the state, brought the federal power closer to the regions.

Vladimir Putin (in Feifer 2003)



Figure 2. Circumpolar North. Map acquired from: <http://expertvoices.nsd.gov/>.

In contrast to a period of Russian weakness during the 1990's deconstruction of the Cold War international order, the pre-1990s great power era and related world model is often viewed

as the good and thriving period in the Russian history. The scenario adduced by Russian leaders to retreat back to this kind of world order does reveal a very different understanding of the world and where it should be going compared with the general trend of northern co-operation discussed above.

The Russian North, with its vast strategic resources and military emphasis, has always been a significant economic, geo-political, and strategic engine of Russia. Now, we can see that Russia is again searching for these capabilities and taking advantage of its strategic resources in its international relations. This is reflected in Russia's reserved attitude towards its engagement in international institutions.

As indicated by Heininen (2008, 4–6), there has already been a number of major changes in northern geopolitics and these changes have brought forth new forms of uncertainty, risks, and threats. Therefore, there is an urgent need to cooperate in various fields, such as resource development, scientific exploration, indigenous people's affairs, environmental protection, nuclear safety, and marine transportation. Being the largest northern country, Russia shares most of the same conditions, challenges, and opportunities as the other northern countries. Thus, it would also be crucial to come to a mutual understanding concerning the interests and responsibilities among the northern players.

Russia and the Northern Dimension

In the North of the continent, unique experience has been acquired in broad-scale equality-based interaction among states which have such unifying factors as geography, history, a mutual desire to strengthen relations and the urge to seek together ways of meeting the challenges of our time.

Igor Ivanov (2000, 7), Russian Foreign Minister 1998-2004

Coining the Concept

As a concept, the Northern Dimension (ND) is not new. The term surfaced already before the 1995 EU enlargement when the Union encountered post-Soviet Russia in the North, along the Finnish-Russian border. Such a situation led Finland, the most directly affected EU member state, to introduce and initiate the Northern Dimension in order to strengthen the EU's standing in the North and, even more importantly, to assure that the interests of the North would be taken into account at the European core as well (See e.g. Heikkilä 2006). As a new EU member state,

Finland was especially interested in providing the EU with a special agenda towards its Russian border and the wider European North. The initiative had also special importance to Finland itself. By launching the ND, Finland sought to attach the EU to broad regional goals including immigration and asylum, crime fighting, border control, social welfare, labor protection, and the development research networks (Archer, 2001; Arter 2000, 685). On the other hand, Finnish border regions have been very active in promoting cross-border co-operation with northwestern Russia, and due to the decentralization of centre-periphery relations following the breakup of the Soviet Union, it became possible for these Russian regions to develop closer contacts with neighboring Finnish regions and municipalities across the border.

The initiative was officially launched by Finland's then Prime Minister, Mr. Paavo Lipponen, in his 1997 speech in Rovaniemi, Lapland and was then readily accepted as a part of the EU's common policy framework. It then became part of EU agenda in the subsequent European Councils in 1997 (Luxembourg) and 1998 (Cardiff), and the Vienna European Council in December 1998 approved a report from the Commission on the Northern Dimension (Heininen 2001, 29–30). The decisive process towards the actual materialization of the ND came in 1999 when Finland held the EU Presidency, and in December of the same year the initiative became officially a part of the EU's external and cross-border policies.

Initial Reception

The Finnish initiative elicited a great deal of attention from scholars (Ojanen 1999; 2001, Arter 2000, Haukkala 2001; 2004, Dubois 2004, Joenniemi 2003, Catellani 2001, Browning 2001), yet its success was also openly debated. Within the EU there existed clear skepticism towards the relevance of the ND, not only by certain southern member states but also by the Commission. Also, other EU Northerners, namely Sweden and Denmark, were to a certain extent critical of Finland taking the lead (Novack 2001; Heurlin 1999; Haukkala 2001).

The Russian government, in turn, was fairly cautious about the initiative. It took nearly two years for Moscow to formulate its official strategy towards the initiative and to produce academic analyses of the issue (Leshukov 1999, 30-31; see also 2000). Even though the proposal was eventually welcomed, it nevertheless posed a number of challenges to traditional Russian security thinking. As summarized by Joenniemi and Sergouing (2003, 28–30), the ND entailed an apparent shift from “hard” to “soft” security domain, which was atypical for Russian strategy

planners as the Russian North has always been perceived as a heavily militarized zone of confrontation with the West. Secondly, the sub-regional approach of the ND undermined a core pillar of the traditional security policy pursued by Russia in Europe, one aimed at elevating the OSCE to be the main pan-European security institution. Thirdly, the ND provided Russia with a previously unseen degree of choice and initiative by inviting Russia to define itself what should become the priority of co-operation. Being unaccustomed to such a situation, Moscow remained unable to pursue the options laid out before it as, according to Joenniemi and Sergounin (2003, 29), Russian traditionalists would have rather seen the ND fail in order to put the blame on Brussels for its lack of co-operation and good will than to initiate the charting of a new political course. Fourthly, the ND also revealed that Moscow undervalued the role of regionalism/sub-regionalism/transregionalism. It was suspicious about the ND's sub-regional nature and worried about potentially strengthening separatist tendencies in its northwestern regions through deep involvement into sub-regional co-operation. Finally, the ND challenged Russia's traditional concept of national sovereignty, where all Russian regions constitute an integral part of the federation, thereby having an equal status. Accordingly, Moscow feared that the ND could strengthen disparities between the regions and evoke an unhealthy competition between them. (Joenniemi & Sergounin 2003, 28–30.)

Even though it was finally accepted, Russia's involvement and interest in the initiative was short-lived. As a result, the entire initiative came close to stalling as the Russian side began to feel that the ND was, after all, all about dealing with the EU's concerns about Russia, i.e. as an effort to avoid the negative effects caused by Russia's geographical proximity, rather than engaging Russia in a mutually beneficial co-operation in which the Russian side would also exert control.

The Renewed Northern Dimension

In order to revitalize the ND, the policy has now been intergovernmentalized; i.e. transformed from being a part of EU external policy into a common regional policy of its partners. At the Helsinki Northern Dimension Summit on 24 November, 2006, the EU, Iceland, Norway, and Russia adopted two new documents, namely *the Policy Framework Document* and *the Northern Dimension Political Declaration*, which now provide the basis for a new permanent Northern Dimension policy jointly implemented by the EU, Russia, Norway, and Iceland. As a

consequence, the ND now covers a broad geographic area from the European Arctic and Sub-Arctic areas to the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, including the countries in its vicinity and from Northwest Russia in the east to Iceland and Greenland in the west (Figure 3).

The purpose of the renewal of the ND was to invigorate policy and shape it into a comprehensive multilateral arena focusing on co-operation in the North and as a common platform for facing the challenges and opportunities in this vast geographical area by strengthening the commitment of all the involved partners. The new, jointly negotiated documents transformed the ND into a genuinely common policy involving the EU, Iceland, Norway, and Russia. In the case of Russia, this meant that its status was transformed from being an object to an actor, again making the entire project considerably more attractive for Russia to engage in.



Figure 3. The Northern Dimension focuses increasingly on North West Russia, the largest territory covered by this policy, with its specific challenges and opportunities for the whole Northern Dimension region. Map acquired from: http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/north_dim/.

Nevertheless, given the Western tradition of trying to mingle with Russia's internal issues either directly or indirectly, it is hardly a surprise that no policy initiative directed towards Russia is immediately rubber stamped, no questions asked. Yet, compared with the U.S. Government-led Northern Europe Initiative (NEI), the EU's Northern Dimension initiative may well stand a

chance as it does undoubtedly manifest itself as less confrontational and intrusive. Whereas the ND is being officially marketed as “a common project of its Partners, the European Union, Iceland, Norway and the Russian Federation” and recognizes “that their cooperation framework can only be driven by a spirit of partnership and based on shared confidence”¹, the approach of the NEI, as indicated by a U.S. State Department official (cited in Longworth 1999), resonates a remarkably different tone:

We're not trying to break up Russia...but Moscow doesn't have the resources to deal with some of the issues [addressed by this policy]... Where appropriate, we want Russia involved. We want the Russians not to think that this is [aimed] at them. This is not anti-Russian.

Any foreign initiative to integrate a particular region of Russia into international co-operative networks or to promote universal (read: Western) values in Russia while still approaching Russia as an object rather than an actor is likely to fall short and end up benefiting no one. Such initiatives are easily interpreted as attempts to weaken Moscow’s control in the region and could be more at odds with current Russian policy making. Desired or not, today’s Russia, dazed by its re-emerging strength, is far too self-confident and proud to choose foreign assistance, insistent to try to solve the regions’ problems by itself

The Multilevel Approach: Synergy and Added Value

The strength of the new ND lies also in its multilevel and holistic approach; ND co-operation comprises not only co-operation at government level but includes also regional, sub-regional, and local authorities as well as non-governmental organizations, universities, research institutions, and business and trade union communities. A crucial role is also played by the northern regional councils: the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Arctic Council, all of which are now also full participants in ND policy and carry out highly important work by identifying the needs for development and co-operation in their respective areas and by supporting practical project implementation in various ways:

- **Barents Euro-Arctic Council** (BEAC; est. 1993): is a forum supporting and promoting intergovernmental co-operation in the Barents Region (the northernmost parts of Sweden,

¹ See European Commission/External Relations at http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/north_dim/

Norway, Finland, and Northwest Russia). The members of the Council include Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the European Commission.

- **Council of the Baltic Sea States** (CBSS; est. 1992) is an overall political forum for regional intergovernmental co-operation. The members of the Council consist of the 11 states of the Baltic Sea region as well as the European Commission.
- **Nordic Council of Ministers** (NCM; est. 1971) is the forum for Nordic governmental co-operation. Even if only Nordic governments may be accepted as official members, the council has aimed to engage neighboring regions (Russia and the Baltic states) in the council's activities and programs.
- **Arctic Council** (AC; est. 1996) is a high level intergovernmental forum, providing a mechanism to address the common concerns and challenges faced by Arctic governments and Arctic peoples. The Council includes Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, the United States, Sweden, and Finland as members.

As Heikkilä (2006, 7) reminds, all of these councils have evolved out of different needs, they all existed prior to the creation of the Northern Dimension concept and policy framework, and each of them operates independently in its own area. Even though the councils are not subordinate to the ND, a strong and rational connection does exist between them, and this, in turn, may do wonders in tackling and illuminating what has been called an institutional overkill, which has afflicted the region.

The engagement of the regional councils of the North to the ND policy can be seen as an important contributor to the ND's perceived success. The councils' work broadens both the content and scope of the ND significantly by incorporating, for instance, indigenous peoples, provincial-level operations, and co-operation between northern universities in overall activities (Heikkilä 2006, 47). In fact, both ND Action Plans included several topics that originated in the regional councils. Therefore, the valuable work carried out by the councils, especially in the field of environmental protection and social welfare, has provided the ND with a longed-for element of pragmatism.

Altogether, the relationship between the grand policy initiative and the regional councils can be deemed as fairly symbiotic and synergic. The ND, being a part of the broader EU-Russia co-operation framework, has its managerial role in providing the overall leverage and promoting and facilitating council-initiated projects, engaging different actors in various fields as well as in promoting networking, interregional co-operation, and coherence of different sectoral policies. The regional councils, in turn, are in their element in identifying the needs for development and co-operation, bringing in practical experience and a strong people-to-people dimension,

supporting practical project implementation and in fulfilling important objectives and priorities of the ND. Moreover, whereas official governmental jurisdiction stops at the political border and any actions beyond that might easily be taken as an intrusion, the regional councils seem to be less restricted from moving back and forth across the border and entering into cross-border co-operative relationships, breaking up the surprisingly persistent East-West divide. It is exactly these relationships that form the basis when higher politics go sour and play a vital role eventually in re-establishing the relations.

The Northern Dimension focuses on areas of co-operation in which a regional and sub-regional emphasis brings added value. The core activities are being coordinated around the model of “partnerships” based on the defined priority sectors. Currently, there are two already existing ND partnerships, the Northern Environmental Partnership (NDEP) and the Partnership in Public Health and Social Well Being (NDPHS), in addition to which the Partnership on Transport and Logistics is under preparation and the possibility for Energy Partnership is being explored (see Aalto, Blakkisrud & Smith Forthcoming 2008). These partnerships have been proven to be an effective way to organize the practical implementation of projects and, thus, they can be seen as yet another expedient to strengthen the practical dimension of the initiative.

It has also proven to be a major improvement that when ND actors meet to negotiate future actions, the international financing institutions active in the North, notably the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Nordic Investment Bank (NIB) are present to support ND policy and the implementation of the projects as well as give their immediate response to that which is proposed. Lastly, the observer status of Canada and the United States – both members of the Arctic Council – provides an important frame of reference for intensified transatlantic co-operation, especially regarding issues related to Arctic regions.

From Concentric to Olympic Rings

Even though the end of the Cold War and the related world order did not denote a sudden disappearance of borders, at least not in the case of former ideological divisions, fuelled by the realization of new areas of commonality, a number of region-building projects have been gradually eradicating barriers (Browning 2003). Largely thanks to the ND initiative and the regional councils of the North, Northern Europe has been developing towards an overlapping

arena of post-modern regionalism creating a new approach to the geopolitics of the North (*Ibid*; Joenniemi 2003; Heininen 2004, 212-218). Within such an approach, borders remain (cf. Moisis 2003, 84) but, as stated by Joenniemi (2000a, 21), become blurred and discontinuous confirming the distinction between the internal sphere of “we” and the external sphere of “they”. Moreover, the underlying logic of multilateral governance highlights aspirations that are broader than the narrow self-definitions of state and nation; where power is dispersed through the processes of networking rather than exercised by one over another.

The success of the northern region-building process has also had evident influence on European order. Both Joenniemi (2000b; 2003 2008; also Browning & Joenniemi 2003) and Medvedev (2000; 2001b) have proposed that the Northern Dimension and related northern regionalism contributes to the construction of a “Europe of Olympic rings”, a vision of European order that challenges more traditional notions of an empire-like “Europe of concentric circles” emanating out from Brussels in which power and subjectivity decreases with physical distance from the centre² (Figure 4).

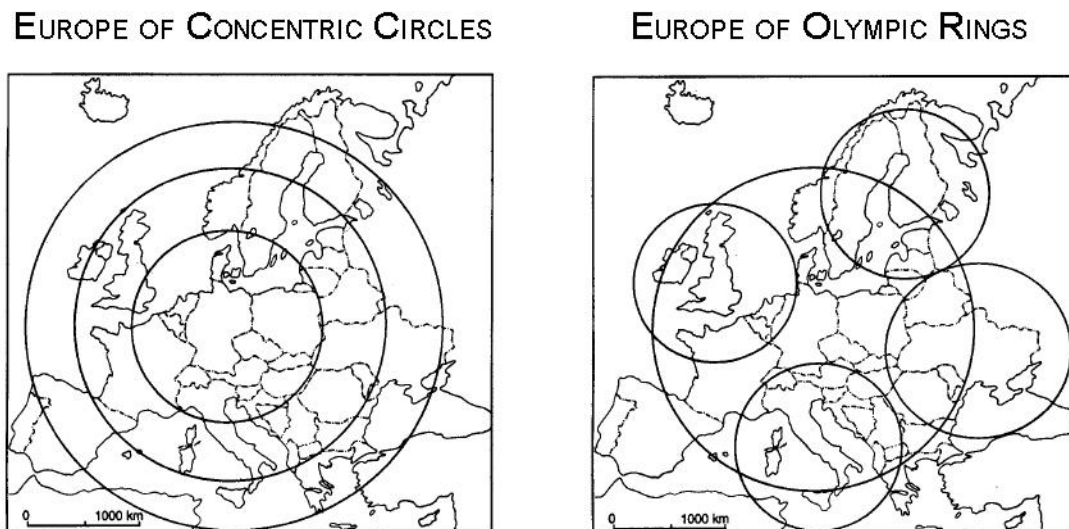


Figure 4. “Europe of concentric circles” and “Europe of Olympic rings”.

² See Walters (2004) for a more thorough elaboration of geostrategic models to organize the space of the border between EU-Europe and the outsider (cf. Browning 2005).

In this context, the model is significant as the metaphor of Olympic rings is presented as a way to integrate Russia into Europe irreversibly. Within northern Europe, the Olympic rings metaphor would reflect the dissolution of the stubborn “East-West” and “we-them” divisions ingrained in people’s mind during the Cold War era. As Medvedev (2000, 100) puts it, the Olympic ring of the CBSS, BEAC, and Northern Dimension framework “reaches out to Russia, engaging her in a non-discriminating manner, not as a periphery but as a full-fledged partner.” In such a vision Russia is seen to possess regulating and constituting power to engage on equal terms in defining new Northernness as a neutral framework to which Russia itself could ultimately choose whether or not it wishes to become involved (Browning 2003, 51). If successful, it would also serve as an example of the de-securitization of Russia in Western security rhetoric – “a process aiming to resist the construction of a new eastern European boundary and common European identity against the Russian Other” (Moisio 2003, 83).

Discussion

As discussed by Heininen (2008) and (Grímsson 2008) in particular, the strategic importance of the North is mounting and, as a result, North is shifting rapidly from the margins to the core of the international scene, from being an object to an active subject in geopolitics and economics. Northern regions are diverse, but they share a great number of the same problems and challenges, which has led them to actively seek out new opportunities and partners from other northern regions, creating unseen unity among northern actors. Thus, the circumpolar North has become an international region in which new ideas about governance, international co-operation, and environmental protection have taken hold (Heininen & Nicol 2007, 134). Such an approach provides a well-needed alternative and a counterweight to the 19th century world model and the related stance of superpower confrontation in the Arctic. Yet, by referring to the new era of northern multilateral co-operation without properly taking into account Russian dominance of the region, one is likely to miss the taiga for the trees.

As elucidated by Heikkinen (1999), compared to the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation is remarkably a more northern nation and its political and economic focus has moved northwestward. Already its mere physical size makes Russia noteworthy and its actions, or lack thereof, are likely to affect also other countries. The environmental problems of Northwest Russia are an alarming example of this. The primary liability to act upon these issues has to be reserved

for the country of origin, but as pollution observes no borders, it is in everyone's interest to co-operate and look for potential solutions (*Ibid.*).

There are, however, a number of lessons that have already been learned from the past. In order to be successful, a mutual understanding has to be found regarding the basic rules of the game; co-operation with Russia has to be based on the principle of equality and project ownership has to be bestowed on the Russian side as well. In this manner, the role of Russia transforms from being an object to an actor in co-operation initiatives, allowing relations to become shaped by dialog rather than confrontation. The dialog enables both sides to gain more knowledge about each other, fostering thus mutual understanding, the key prerequisite for effective co-operation.

The European Union's Northern Dimension initiative can be seen as an excellent example in this respect. As a policy, it has certainly had its challenges, but more importantly, it has been able to react to criticism and concerns and likewise actually aimed to implement the ideas that many others are still only discussing in principle. As elaborated by Aalto, Blakkisrud and Smith (Forthcoming 2008), when mutual understanding has been ensured, given Russia's re-emerging strength and ability to contribute on an equal basis, the potential and possibilities of the co-operation are greater than ever.

Focusing on the North could be useful in pushing aside the hackneyed Huntingtonian "clash of civilizations" and, thus, in rejecting the age-old forms of ordering. The bordering between East and West has left a very little room for Northernness to be tapped into, especially in Russia, yet it is exactly there where the common goals crucial for successful co-operation might just be the easiest to identify (Joenniemi & Sergounin 2003, 108). This comes precisely down to Medvedev's (1998, 8) proposal that, if utilized properly, Northernness could stand out as "a post-modern solution in the form of a third", i.e. it could function as a common element that both parties can recognize themselves in and, thus, transcend the binary division between the East and the West. Northernness could be favored because of its openness, elements of partnership, and the fact that the representation has a rather apolitical, innocent, and more balanced sound (Joenniemi & Sergounin 2003, 107; Heininen 2004), which might go better together with the current Russian policy making than initiatives considered Western.

In addition to eroding the East-West division, the focus on the North could also divert attention from deteriorating EU-Russia relations at least slightly elsewhere. The new ND

represents a common regional policy of its partners rather than an EU tool to influence Russia, Russian engagement in it might no longer be seen as a “backdoor approach” to Europe as opposed to directly addressing Brussels, a perception described by Joenniemi & Sergounin (2003, 110) before ND’s renewal and before the recent decline of EU-Russian relations. As compellingly elaborated by Prozorov (2006; 2007), basing his argumentation on a wealth of Russian sources, EU-Russian relations have depreciated to the point that the best option for Russia might just be to self-exclude itself from Europe – neither join nor confront Europe, but to simply “get over” it (Remizov 2002 in Prozorov 2006, 67). Rather than living in a constant state of conflict, Prozorov concludes, the best way forward for the EU and Russia would be to “divorce” and simply move on towards a model of interaction that would not be hampered by the possibility of integration (*Ibid.*) Examining the situation today, signs of a development in this direction are eminent. According to this reading, Russia may enable itself to actively take part in northern co-operation that would be for the most part apoliticized. It would not fear being judged for using Europe’s or anyone else’s backdoor now that the goal of even entering no longer exists. In this sense, the role of the EU is no longer to try to have an impact on Russia directly, as this would prove useless, but to influence its development indirectly through the example it sets; i.e. following the model already long used within northern co-operation.

It seems reasonable to argue that the North may represent the best means to incorporate Russia into multilateral co-operation, and this is exactly what must happen if we are to undertake circumpolar co-operation, by definition, at all. However, this is not to say that the challenges facing co-operation would be solved. Russia is without question northern, but here we have to revisit the very definition of North and reflect on who possesses the right to define it. As of yet, Russian Northernness still differs greatly from, e.g., Nordic Northernness (see Jukarainen 2003; Joenniemi & Lehti 2003). As a result, the question is, as discussed by Joenniemi & Sergounin (2003, 106), whether or not a Russian expression of northernness is applicable in bridging relations to other northern states? Moreover, it is up to Russia itself to decide to what extent to make use of its northernness in order to qualify the North. Northern co-operation has to adhere to the principle of equality and testify to the possibility of truly mutually beneficial co-operation. Otherwise, the North may still remain too marginal for this re-emerging great power and, thus, fail to resonate with the way Russia perceives itself and comprehends its location and position in today’s world.

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