

Plenary Session I: The Future of Northern Cooperation

Wednesday, September 24, 2008

Rapporteur: Dessislav Sabev

Chairs: Steven Bigras and Zaneta Ozolina, members of the NRF Steering committee

Panelists:

- Dr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, President of Iceland
- Professor Nikita Lomagin, Dept. of World Economy, St.Petersburg State University, Russia
- Deputy Minister Inuuteq Holm Olsen, Greenland
- Rasmus Bertelsen, PhD Research Fellow, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge
- Jussi Laine, Doctoral student of the Department of Geography, University of Joensuu

This session kicked off the 5th Northern Research Forum (NRF) with an intriguing discussion on what is probably the main reason and overarching topic of the NRF, namely the future of circumpolar cooperation. Big issues were delivered directly by a heterogeneous participants' panel including the President of a northern country, Arctic Council representatives, policy analysts, and young researchers. While the panellists came from four different member states in the Arctic Council (Iceland, Russia, Greenland/Denmark, Finland), not all of them were official representatives of those states. Nevertheless, this panel's geopolitical configuration, combined with the absence of voices from countries like USA, Canada and Norway, strongly oriented the discussion towards the Eurasian North and was dominated by the (new) Russian Arctic agenda.

The most fascinating feature of this panel was the friendly confrontation of five different and sometimes contradictory perspectives on northern cooperation. President Grimsson, one of the most prominent makers and promoters of northern cooperation, put a special emphasis on the democratic structure of the Arctic Council (AC), which includes northern communities' organizations (such as ICC) in the decision-making process. This is what makes the Arctic Council unique among the multilateral political structures today. As a result of this democratic structure, the driving force in the AC would be, according to President Grimsson,

the political will, not the political strength/power. For that reason, he sees a danger for the future of northern cooperation if it is to split into "boxes", i. e. into different negotiating tables. The way to overcome this danger would be, as President Grimsson has been repeated it since the 1st NRF 8 years ago, to engage Russia in a positive way in the process of northern cooperation. He did not precise though how this was to be achieved and why, one decade later, our main objective in northern cooperation is still to woo Russia.

Part of the answers came from Professor Lomagin's much structured and less romantic presentation on Russia's northern agenda. His talk reminded us that the priorities in a government's northern agenda are tied up to the special "national interests" within the "Arctic race". Indeed, the Arctic appears primarily as a race field in the Russian agenda, then northern cooperation is supposed to follow. Professor Lomagin's lecture made it clear that Russia is ready for action and that if northern partners are not prepared to join it, Russia will act independently. And if President Grimsson eventually took this last statement to reaffirm his sustainable idea of positive cooperation with the largest member of the AC, it nevertheless demonstrated that it is rather Russia who sets up the northern agenda, and that Iceland rather agrees. This was a compelling demonstration of a beautiful, although asymmetrical, friendship.

Once again Russia appeared as a main driver of change in Iussi Laine's presentation on the "B/ordering North" where Russia was a critical actor in the delicate "balance of northern cooperation". Probably a Finnish touch on that research was its EU vantage point. This provoked much interest in the audience and resulted in a question of whether EU is expected to become a full member of the AC or not. President Grimsson's answer was not a standard one and thus took some by surprise. It was not his clear-cut "no" to EU's aspirations that surprised us but rather the reasoning that supported it. Hence it appeared, according to President Grimsson, that EU was, in fact, not friendly enough with Russia, and therefore not a welcomed guest on President Grimsson's Arctic table where Russia turns out to be a very special guest.

A couple of presentations from the standpoint of another Arctic player, namely the Denmark/Greenland team, gave us a well-deserved break from Russian politics. Drawing a picture of the international perspective of Greenland, Deputy Minister Olsen added some opportune emphasis on the indigenous aspect on northern cooperation although in some parts

of his speech Arctic indigenous communities appeared as subjects of government protection rather than actors of northern cooperation. He notably pointed out the need to "protect indigenous communities" within the circumpolar negotiations. Then Rasmus Berthelsen expounded his much ambitious "vision for a North Atlantic Security and Surveillance Organization" for the former Danish zone of influence, namely the places he defined as "micro-states" such as Iceland, Greenland, and the Faeroe Islands. Hence, this session was a compelling demonstration that what we called "the Borderless North" two years ago is (still) divided into states, zones of influence, in a word: "boxes". The Arctic has become a focal point of stronger-than-ever national interests. But isn't that what makes the future of northern cooperation a most exciting process to watch?