

Arctic Futures 2024

Closing remarks and Summary by Marie Anne Coninx

This 15th edition of the Arctic Futures Symposium is ending. As Director General of DG MARE - *Charlina Vitcheva* - said, a milestone, bringing the Arctic to Brussels.

We had a full, comprehensive programme, and good, lively debates. While many of the challenges of the Arctic have been addressed at previous conferences, today, we are confronting a fundamentally different context. Today, these challenges are taking place in a dramatic, volatile, unpredictable context, affecting developments in and outside the Arctic region. There is no more “business as usual.” This was reflected throughout this Conference.

In providing a summary of the Symposium, I will particularly focus on the take-aways of each of the Sessions or Panels.

First day - 2 December 2024

The opening Keynotes.

Take-aways:

- Key messages from the EU High Officials (SG *Stefano Sannino*, EEAS & DG *Charlina Vitcheva*, DG MARE).
 - The EU is clearly an important and active player in the Arctic.
 - Whatever the EU does, it wants to be sustainable and inclusive.
 - *Stefano Sannino* acknowledged that the international landscape has become more complex, but that this is exactly a reason to work more closely together.
 - DG *Charlina Vitcheva*, recalled major deliveries by the EU in recent times going from reinforcing relations with Greenland, setting new standards of cooperation with the EU project networking Arctic Cities, strong engagement with Arctic Youth, to well-known major EU contributions on Science, Research, and Innovation. She stressed “*nothing in the Arctic without the Indigenous Peoples.*” She did not disclose whether there will be an updated EU Arctic Policy but promised to keep pace with us.

- Key-message from the State Secretary of Norway, *Maria Varteressian*.
 - The Arctic is a top strategic priority for Norway because this is “*Where local meets global.*”
 - She mentioned the biggest trends, starting with a “C”: Conflicts, Climate Change, China, and Competition.

- With this bigger picture, she said also “*there can be no business as usual,*” adding (as stressed by the EU keynote speakers) that this has increased the need for cooperation between the like-minded.
- Key-message from *Sara Olsvig* from the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC).
 - *Sara Olsvig* recalled the key-importance of upholding Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
 - She cited two recent (negative) examples of international negotiations (on “Plastic” in South and COPs), where Indigenous peoples have not been sitting at the table. But also positive examples, such as at the UN Panel on critical minerals and energy transition.
 - And finally, stressing the urgent need of people working together, and of the importance to cooperate with Indigenous Peoples, as Arctic governance is exercised by the people of the Arctic.

The Panel on the Arctic Council. A Practical Vision of Moving Forward.

Take-aways:

- I was struck by the optimistic message regarding the Arctic Council, not anymore “struggling for survival,” but being “alive and driving” and this with including Indigenous People and youth.
- It was agreed that the Arctic Council is still not “*business as usual,*” but there is enthusiasm certainly at the level of the Working Groups, pleased with the progress that is being realized.
- Another positive development noted, is an increased involvement of Youth.
- Whether there is place for Observers “in the crashed bus, which has been repaired”, made drivable again, by the Norwegian Chair, is not clear.
- Clear however was the message (from ICC) to the Chair(s) of the Arctic Council: “*you have to make the Arctic Council meaningful for all who live in the Arctic.*”

Transatlantic Cooperation in the Arctic in 2025 and Beyond.

Take-aways of both parts of this Panel:

- Regarding cooperation with the US, there is a lot of uncertainty, but several panelists were confident that there will be a lot of continuity.

- There will be changes, for example regarding climate action - with a bigger focus on fossil fuels extraction, and also regarding “security.” As to security, a bigger role will be expected from the EU (“*Europeans have to take care of Europe*”) and from Nordic cooperation.
- There still will be opportunities, but probably more at the bilateral level, not so much on the multilateral level.
- Several panelists said: “*You cannot ignore China!*”
- Finally, strong message from the Norwegian MP: “Stop hoping, and start acting!”

Second Day - 3 December 2024

Keynotes by Mr. Høgni Karsten Hoydal, Faroe Islands’ Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, and by Mrs. Aaju-Peter (Inuk Lawyer)

- Faroe Islands Deputy PM stressed the importance of “democratic sustainability.” In addressing the topic of security, he highlighted the crucial role of the EU.
- Inuk Lawyer (Canada): Was extremely critical towards the EU’s seals ban, adding “*It is immoral to kill animals if you do not use them.*”

The Presentation of the Laurence Tran Arctic Futures Award

- Congratulations to the winners, *Siu-Tsiu* from Greenland, which focusses on education, training, and integration of Youth.

The current Security and Geopolitical Status of the Arctic.

The focus of the discussion was how to strike a balance between the need to keep the Arctic an area of “low tension,” and at the same time, to be ready in case of high tension (or even escalation).

Take-aways:

- Collective security is built on trust.
- Our biggest challenge is our capacity to adapt quickly enough. For security in the Arctic the most important is to work together.
- Security threats are not any longer the traditional threats but also include actions to destabilize societies.

- Security also matters at regional and local level. To this end, essential elements in ensuring security are, among others: civil-military cohesion; a focus on preparedness; ensuring responsibility at all levels; having the necessary critical infrastructure, which can be dual-use (hence also helping to facilitate business development) and making use of space-technologies.

Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Regional Collaboration to meet Arctic Challenges on Sustainability.

The focus of this panel was to highlight the most innovative solutions to ensure sustainability in the Arctic.

Take-aways:

- Regional collaboration is key. Special attention should be paid to developing the East-West corridor (as most connections within the Arctic region from north to south), and the necessary infrastructure, for security and business development reasons.
- SME's (Small Medium Enterprises) are the backbone of the European economy, but also economic development in northern regions. The EU provides many instruments to support SME's in the Arctic, financially and by other means.
- To ensure innovation, it is important to have social acceptance, the necessary capacity building, supporting networks, and to eliminate barriers to mobility, permitting one to leave and to come back to the region (offering favorable work-options upon return).

Building and Maintaining Workforce and Resilient Arctic Communities.

The focus of this panel was on best practices and smart initiatives, to attract and keep an Arctic population, including the much-needed workforce for the Green Transition.

Take-aways:

- The major question addressed during this panel was how to attract the necessary workforce in regions that have sufficient economic opportunities, but where the population is going down.
- One condition is the need to create attractive living conditions.

- It is also necessary to attract especially young people. To this end, what is needed is for example, is good education (including strong university structures and long-life learning facilities), affordable housing, adequate working opportunities, recreation (e.g., youth centers), connectivity and health care provisions (including for mental health).
- It was recalled that the situation of young people is different, depending on which part of the Arctic they are living. In some very scarcely populated regions (e.g., in the North American Arctic or in Greenland), they often are a very vulnerable group, requiring other needs and approaches.
- To say it with the words of the Rector of the University of Lapland: *“Communities that keep the human in the center, are the winners.”*

Critical Raw Materials & Resource Supply Chains. Tensions & Trade-offs

The main focus of this Panel was how to promote responsible mining in the Arctic. “Responsible” mining, not only in terms of sustainability, but also - and especially - in light of the rights and involvement of the local people and communities.

Take-aways:

- There was a discussion on the meaning or definition of “responsible mining;” not all panelists sharing the same view.
- *Sara Olsvig* clearly stated: *“There is no responsible mining without the respect of Human Rights.”*
- Similar clear message from a Saami panelist: *“unless mining does not have direct benefits to the community, it is not responsible.”*
- A panelist from Canada said, the responsible mining means being done in a responsible country, with strong mining codes.
- The importance of partnerships with local communities was stressed.
- It was stressed that standards do matter, provided they are developed with all stakeholders, and checked by audits.
- During Q&A the question was raised of preference to be given to responsible mining in our Arctic region, rather than to less or non-responsible mining in other parts of the world. Clear message from a panelist: *“We should speak more about us, and less about them.”*

Arctic Futures was closed by *Mike Sfraga*, US Arctic Ambassador at Large for the Arctic, a definite highlight of this 2024 edition.
