

Inter-Parliamentary Institutions & Arctic Governance

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The participation of inter-parliamentary institutions in the processes of international cooperation, especially in the processes of regional governance in almost all parts of the world, has been expanding in the last few decades. The Arctic region too can be praised for the existence of a number of such entities, such as the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians, the Barents Parliamentary Conference, the Nordic Council and the West-Nordic Council. This paper aims to provide, for the first time, a comparative analysis of the activities of these bodies in regards to their participation in the Arctic governance system, focusing in particular on the relations and links between the inter-parliamentary institutions and the Arctic Council. The paper ends with a reflection on the forthcoming role of such institutions in the future development of multidimensional cooperation among Arctic and non-Arctic nations as well as the threat of a possible democratic deficit in the Arctic.

Introduction

One of the manifestations of the changes taking place in the Arctic over the last few years is the transformation of regional governance understood as structures of authority that manage collective regional problems (Elliott & Breslin 2011). The number of its participants has increased, the range of subjects of cooperation has expanded, and the the rules and mechanisms that constitute it have been refined (Pelaudeix 2015; Exner-Pirot 2012; Graczyk & Koivurova 2014; Molenaar 2012). Although the foundations of the governance structures, where the Arctic Council plays a central role, were shaped at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, its subsequent functioning is generally quite highly rated in terms of normative design and institutional performance (Young 2005; Koivurova & VanderZwaag 2007). For example, according to some authors, “(B)y international standards, the Arctic region has been a leader by constantly pushing the edges of governance innovation” (Poelzer & Wilson 2014: 183). One of the most important patterns of this ‘governance innovation’, has been the considerable participation of non-state actors in regional cooperation, and especially a unique status granted to indigenous people in the Arctic Council (AC) (Koivurova 2010; Young 2009; Duyck 2012; Stepień 2013; Graczyk 2011).

However, due to many political developments taking place in the Circumpolar North since 2008, when the Ilulissat Declaration (Ilulissat Declaration 2008) was issued, and especially the growing interests of non-Arctic actors in the region, the position and role of non-state actors has been

challenged by pressures from the Arctic national governments (Koivurova et al. 2015; Steinberg & Dodds 2015; Ingimundarson 2014; Duyck 2012; Graczyk 2011). If this expanding trend of intergovernmentalism within Arctic cooperation continues – and the significance of the Arctic grows further both globally and nationally – then indeed, “defining political community and legitimate participation in Arctic governance” is becoming increasingly important, as suggested in the Arctic Human Development Report II (Poelzer & Wilson 2014: 185). Furthermore, it may lead to questions about the plurality of the regional governance, about its democratic legitimacy and accountability, and finally, a debate on lack of respect for the rules of democracy in the Arctic governance – a subject that is sometimes raised in regard to other intergovernmental institutions (Bernstein 2011; Grigorescu 2015; Zweifel 2006). In fact, such voices and concerns have appeared in the past, in the early 1990s, e.g., when the Nordic Council’s Parliamentary Conference was organized in Reykjavik from 16 to 17 August 1993 (Samstag 1993).

Or maybe such concerns are exaggerated or not fully justified? Maybe Arctic regional governance should not be criticized, taking into account the indigenous peoples’ organizations exceptional consultation rights as Permanent Participants in connection with the AC’s negotiations and decision-making process (Koivurova & Heinämäki 2006) and the development of indigenous internationalism (Loukacheva 2009)? Or maybe the presence of regional inter-parliamentary organizations and non-governmental organizations as Observers in the Arctic Council provides sufficient protection against such objections?

While the issue of the role of the indigenous peoples’ organizations in Arctic governance has been discussed in several other places (Koivurova & Heinämäki 2006; Duyck 2012; Loukacheva 2009; Wilson & Øverland 2007; Martello 2008), this article aims to address the problem of democratic accountability within Arctic governance by means of assessing the impact and significance of the regional inter-parliamentary organizations operating in the Circumpolar North. Rooted in the ongoing discussion on the development and role of inter-parliamentary institutions (Cofelice 2012; Cutler 2013; Kissling 2011), the present study will take a functional approach to this question, taking into consideration the activities of inter-parliamentary institutions operating in the Circumpolar North.

The first section will set the general context, highlighting the progressive recognition of the interparliamentary organizations and their importance in regional governance, as well as the particular challenges relating to their roles. The second section will outline the cases of the four organizations: the Nordic Council, the West-Nordic Council, the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians and the Barents Parliamentary Conference, touching on their differing backgrounds, scopes of tasks, and relationship to the Arctic Council, which remains the central cooperation forum in the region. Finally, the results of the analysis will be discussed and prospects for further development of the Arctic regional governance will be considered.

International parliamentary institutions in contemporary international relations

Among the many signs of change in the modern-day international community, it is useful to highlight the gradual structural bifurcation in levels of governance. In other words, international relations today are a stage where two worlds coexist or even overlap – one state-centric, the other composed of transnational actors (Pietras 2009). As Pietras suggests, “Although both ‘worlds’ are

integral components of the same international reality, there are many distinctive qualities that characterize each of them, underlining the structural hybridity of entities in the international realm” (Pietraś 2009: 32). This hybridity, coupled with ever more intensive transboundary relations, redefines and restructures interactions between states, ‘imposing’ and accelerating the development of mechanisms governing the international arena (Pietraś 2007). Some interesting consequences of this evolution include an increasingly ‘saturated’ international political scene and a progressive blurring of boundaries and borders, of differences between the intrastate and the interstate domain (Łoś-Nowak 2013: 49).

Furthermore, Surmacz indicates that “a change in the distribution of power in international relations [resulting from the aforementioned processes] has resulted in parallel changes in the diplomatic realm,” which in turn has led to “the modern diplomatic community [becoming] akin to a series of interactions among both state and non-state actors representing interests that are organized both territorially and non-territorially, implementing both official and unofficial forms of diplomacy” (Surmacz 2013: 9). One example of this relatively new situation is the increasingly dynamic expansion of the international dimension in the activities of different national parliaments (Torbiörn 2007; Puzyna 2007), which Florczak-Wątor and Czarny believe has made “international cooperation input from parliaments a common phenomenon in the world today” (Florczak-Wątor, Czarny 2012: 45). The goal of this part of the paper is to synthesize fundamental conceptual approaches surrounding this modern-day development trend in international relations, highlight its versatility, and especially move toward a clearer notion of the processes behind the creation and operation of inter-parliamentary institutions.

Before delving into the structural characteristics of the international community that underlie the growing involvement of legislative bodies in creating foreign policy, it bears establishing that “a parliament is a ... body organized under a state that is a legitimate subject of international law and, as such, engages in international legal relations with other similar subjects” (Florczak-Wątor, Czarny 2012: 45). While this formulation could be considered a response to any potential questions as to the legitimacy and legal foundations for such activity on the part of parliamentarians, it is at once only a starting point for further clarifying discussion. Jaskiernia, for instance, asks, “How do we treat these activities of representatives of national legislatures in the realm of foreign affairs – as instances of ‘parliamentary diplomacy’ or beyond?” (Jaskiernia 2013: 166). In pursuing the answer to this question it is worth noting at the outset that, for several decades now (though the specifics vary by country), “parliaments no longer limit themselves to making foreign policy, but also expand into executing it” (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 45; Malamud & Stavridis 2011). As far as the extent of control over this area of policymaking is concerned, the clout and capacity of national parliaments have indeed increased.

Returning to the question of what exactly is the international activity of parliamentary institutions (often called ‘parliamentary diplomacy’ (Stavridis 2002)), the answer does not seem to be entirely straightforward, partly as a result of the diversity of forms and goals of engagement (Šabič 2008). As far as forms of engagement go, we distinguish cooperation on the level of (1) houses of parliament operating *in pleno*, (2) the chairs or speakers of these bodies, (3) parliamentary committees, and (4) bilateral parliamentary groups (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 52). Puzyna has offered a different typology, according to which six types of entities can be distinguished within the scope of inter-parliamentary cooperation: (1) conferences or assemblies with the participation

of parliamentary leaders and/or Speakers; (2) inter-parliamentary assemblies or other forums; (3) conferences or meetings of leaders or parliamentary envoys from associated standing committees; (4) inter-parliamentary organizations, associations, or official meetings among individual parliamentarians; (5) meetings of the General Secretaries of parliamentary offices or secretariats; and (6) meetings and networks composed of employees of secretariats or parliamentary offices (Puzyna 2007, p. 40). The first three of these can pertain to both bilateral and multilateral relations. The primary objectives of the international engagement of national legislatures include: (1) exploration and acquisition of information on international partners; (2) exchange of knowledge and experiences between the parliaments of different states and mutual improvement; (3) developing a network of contacts between parliamentarians and the elaboration of shared policy positions on the international arena (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 54).

In Weisglas and de Boer's estimation, the growing engagement of international parliamentarians also serves to strengthen three key aspects: (1) the legislature's control over the activity of its respective government, (2) the democratic legitimization of intergovernmental institutions, and (3) maximum representation of voter interest (Weisglas & Boer 2007). Torbiörn goes so far as to state that parliamentary groups are an 'oxygen tank' in some international organizations (Torbiörn 2007: 32). Jaskiernia looks at the issue from a different angle, suggesting that members of national parliaments who take part in inter-parliamentary debates might sometimes exhibit a greater tendency toward following their own guiding principles in their stated opinions – but this does not always lead to "attenuation of conflicts, which often require a more pragmatic approach" (Jaskiernia 2013: 185).

With respect to the geographical range of the cooperation spearheaded by international parliamentary institutions, we distinguish five varieties thereof: global, intercontinental, continental, interregional, and regional (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 59). Florczak-Wątor and Czarny correctly point out that multilateral parliamentary cooperation:

[I]s by definition general and broad, not specialized. It cannot simply be reduced to collaboration among parliaments and parliamentarians in one given domain of social life in each country. This is a result of the powers and competencies conferred to the legislative of each country in the wide realm of social issues. Irrespective of this, we generally encounter a degree of consistency in the level of priority attached to specific topics in specific forms of cooperation, as it is rather difficult to spontaneously undertake only the problems that are relevant in a given moment" (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 59–60; Puig 2004).

Two more categories of cooperation can be distinguished by analyzing the international activity of different national parliaments: prescribed (when the activity stems from the provisions of an international treaty defining the participants' roles in a given international entity) and optional (when the activity stems from the sovereign decisions of the parliamentarians) (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 60). In presenting this typology, it is also worth noting that inter-parliamentary cooperation can be self-generated (autonomous) or complementary (incorporated into the operations of a given organization) (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 60). It can also be either consistent and institutionalized or temporary and provisional (Florczak-Wątor & Czarny 2012: 61). As shown above, the evolution of the international activity of parliamentary institutions is a highly complex process, which renders its evaluation difficult and the effectiveness of the institutions themselves problematic (Supranational parliamentary and interparliamentary assemblies in 21st

century Europe 2007; Supranational parliamentary and interparliamentary assemblies in 21st century Europe 2007; Šabič 2008: 261).

At this juncture, I will focus on the most important of the many currents that come under this ‘transnational parliamentarianism’ (Marschall 2007) – one which manifests itself in international parliamentary institutions, otherwise known as parliamentary assemblies. Its origins can be traced to the creation of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 1899, though it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that it entered the phase of dynamic growth in which it remains today (Tedoldi 2014). The 1980s and 1990s saw a significant increase in the overall number of parliamentary assemblies, which derived both from the end of long-standing Cold War rivalries and from accelerated European integration (Herranz 2005) coupled with the march of globalization. Marschall points out that modern-day parliamentary assemblies, despite their European heritage, exist across the world, and will continue to proliferate even more dynamically outside of Europe in tandem with increasing regionalization and democratization (Marschall 2007: 3-4).

Today, two of the basic qualities of parliamentary assemblies are the fact that they are composed of delegations from different national parliaments, and the fact that they pursue a consistent and institutionalized agenda, typically outlined in a charter or statute. Many parliamentary assemblies lift institutional approaches (e.g. in structure or manner of operation) that work effectively on the national level (Marschall 2007: 12). A large majority of assemblies are affiliated (though in different ways) with intergovernmental organizations, and many of them additionally form an integral part of the structures of other transnational institutions (Marschall 2007). This ‘tethering’ has an important effect on the range of issues they undertake, the effectiveness of their policy decisions, and the sway they hold over decision processes on both the national and international level. Marschall clarifies, however, that the real clout of parliamentary assemblies is manifested in their contribution to the development of multilevel parliamentarism (Marschall 2007), which is gaining importance in governance as it is envisioned by modern international relations (Jancic 2014; Crum, Fossum 2009).

To round out these considerations on the various forms of international activity of parliamentary institutions, it should be noted that the legislatures of the Nordic countries have always played an active role in their development (Götz 2009, 2005). Close collaboration among the Nordic parliaments has been ongoing since the end of the 19th century, and in 1907 this collaboration was formalized in the form of the Nordic branch of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, known as the Nordic Inter-Parliamentary Union (Piotrowski 2006b). Subsequent phases of this collaboration enabled the creation of new institutions (Schouenborg 2012; Fasone 2013), including those that later get engaged in the Arctic region.

Inter-parliamentary organisations in the Arctic

In the Arctic, regionalization does not take place like it does elsewhere, hampered by the transcontinental nature of the region, low population density, sparse infrastructure, and its landscape of endless sea and ice (Łuszczuk 2013; Knecht 2013). These difficult conditions did not, however, prevent the states of the region from establishing inter-parliamentary cooperation in the Arctic immediately after Cold War rivalries started to fade. This process began among the Scandinavian countries, but subsequently spread to other corners of the Arctic (though with the Nordic countries still in a clear dominant role).

The so-called ‘Scandinavian Parliament’ (Piotrowski 2006b: 107) has been a crucial component in the process of tightening cooperation among the countries of Northern Europe. Its initial incarnation was the Nordic Inter-Parliamentary Union, which first convened in 1907. It was under this entity that the countries decided, in 1951, to breathe life into the idea of a ‘pan-Nordic parliament’ (parliamentary council) composed of parliament members from individual Scandinavian countries as well as representatives of their respective governments. Further work on this project led to the adoption of a statute for a new Nordic Council. The subsequent evolution of the Council increased the number of participating countries (since 1970, the five Nordic countries have opened participation in sessions of the Nordic Council to include representatives from local parliaments in the Faroe and Åland Islands, while Greenland was invited in 1983) as well as ever greater diversity in the subject matter, but also had a structural-institutional aspect (e.g. in the creation of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1971) (Piotrowski 2006a; Nowiak 2001).

The results of the Nordic Council’s activity (both positive and negative) as well as the vast swathes of territory it covered paved the way to the creation of another inter-parliamentary assembly in 1985 – the West Nordic Council. At the same time, changes in geopolitical conditions in the region contributed to the diversification of contacts and connections within the region, eventually bringing about the establishment of the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians in 1993. However divergent the range and, in particular, the method of operation of each of these North European-dominated parliamentary institutions, each of them has, in its own way, expanded its level of engagement in Arctic issues in the first two decades of the 21st century.

The Nordic Council

Given that the genesis of the modern Nordic Council is strictly tied to the international engagements of parliamentarians from individual Scandinavian countries, it should not come as a surprise that, from the outset and until the creation of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1971, the primary operational body of the Nordic Council was the parliamentary assembly (Piotrowski 2006a). The group of 87 delegates from eight national parliaments and governments make up its current incarnation, though governmental representatives are not given the right to vote. The assembly traditionally convenes annually for regular sessions (5-10 days in the capital of each successive member state), with additional special sessions organized when necessary. The delegates are arranged in their seats alphabetically by last name, and each of them is entitled to one vote. The parliamentary assembly of the Nordic Council passes non-binding recommendations and statements addressed to national governments and the Nordic Council of Ministers; the sessions typically feature debates on issues raised by the governments that make up the Nordic Council. Representatives of the Nordic Council are at once delegates to the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, the Barents Parliamentary Conference (BPC), and the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians.

The Nordic Council’s interest in the Arctic region, which after all represents a considerable portion of their collective land mass and territorial waters, was not initially a key area of focus for the Council, whether at the external or the internal level. At most, it fell into broader operations and policy initiatives such as environmental protection or fomenting forms of regional cooperation in the Arctic (e.g. through providing an initial stimulus for the creation of the CPAR) (Bohlin 2010: 28). For all the activity described above, the Nordic Council only initiated its Arctic Co-operation Programme in 1996 and has been systematically expanding it since then in

organizational,¹ financial,² and functional (areas of interest) terms (Stokke 2007). It should be clearly noted here that the chief body responsible for the Nordic Council's engagement in the Arctic is the Nordic Council of Ministers, which has held Observer status with the Arctic Council since 2000. In this case, the role of the parliamentary assembly of the Nordic Council is to provide support to the Council of Ministers via active participation in drafting successive versions of the Arctic Co-operation Programme during the assembly's special sessions³ as well as practical input into the debates held during the Arctic Council's conferences on the Arctic region.⁴ It is possible that one way in which the Nordic Council's parliamentarians could get further involved in the near future could be in creating a common Nordic strategy for the Arctic; the intent to do so was accepted by the Presidium of the Nordic Council in 2013 (Nordic Council 2013).

Furthermore, the Nordic Council may have an important input in the future pathways of parliamentary diplomacy in the Arctic.⁵ In this respect, Annika B. Rosamund suggests an interesting scenario where the Nordic Council could play the role of a mediator between the Arctic Council and the European Union (Bergman Rosamond 2011: 26). This development seems relatively plausible given that cooperation between the different parliamentary assemblies (NC, EP, and CPAR) has been ongoing and free of major complications for the last several years (European Parliament 2009; Ojanen 2004).

The West Nordic Council

The West Nordic Council was founded in 1985, during a meeting in Nuuk, as the West Nordic Parliamentary Council of Cooperation. It is composed of representatives from Iceland and two autonomous territories of the Kingdom of Denmark: Greenland and the Faroe Islands. According to Nielsson, the factors that came into play in the decision to create the Council included, on the one hand, the ever-greater sovereignty of the Danish territories, and on the other, the myriad similarities that linked these three countries, strewn as they are across the wide expanse that divides Europe and North America (Nielsson 2014; Eyþórsson & Hovgaard 2013). It is pertinent to add that the political, economic, and sociocultural ties between the other Nordic countries and Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands gradually unraveled in the post-war period, which at once generated aspirations among them to play a more independent, self-representing role, perhaps not yet on a fully international level, but at least insofar as Nordic cooperation was concerned. One argument that supports this assessment is the agreement signed between the Nordic Council and the West Nordic Council on the terms of cooperation between these two assemblies (Nordic Council 2006); other authors point out the reluctance and distrust of these countries towards the European Union (Bailes 2014).

In 1997, the Council was renamed the West Nordic Council, its statute was revamped and expanded, and the mechanisms of cooperation were extended from just the sociocultural to the political and economic spheres (Nielsson 2014). Today, the West Nordic Council encapsulates its objectives in five points: (1) to promote West Nordic (or North Atlantic) interests; (2) to protect and preserve the resources and culture of the North Atlantic and support West Nordic governments in promoting their interests, beyond such vital concerns as resource management and pollution; (3) to sustain and expand West Nordic intergovernmental cooperation; (4) to cooperate with the Nordic Council and act as an intermediary in overall Nordic cooperation; and (5) to act as a parliamentary intermediary for other West Nordic organizations, participating in parliamentary cooperation across the Arctic region (West Nordic Council 2015).

The Council is made up of 18 members (6 delegates from each country), and its focus and direction are indicated by a three-member presidium augmented by the Council secretariat, based in Reykjavik. The West Nordic Council convenes twice a year – once for a general plenary session, which elects the presidium for a one-year term, and once for a special session dedicated to a topic considered important to the interests of the West Nordic community. These assemblies typically produce joint recommendations, which are then conveyed to the parliaments of the three member states for discussion, and eventually find their way to the governments of each. Nielsson points out that the recommendations made by the West Nordic Council in recent years have touched on a variety of issues, though many of them had a distinct Arctic dimension, e.g. issues of resources and transportation, environmental protection, or international relations (Nielsson 2014).

The issue of greater participation in cooperation on matters pertaining to the Arctic was taken up by the West Nordic Council relatively late, namely at in the early 2010s (Hovgaard & Eythórsson 2013). In 2012, following a scientific conference on the geopolitical conditions surrounding West Nordic cooperation, the Council adopted a resolution that encouraged the governments of the three countries to promote cooperation in matters of the Arctic as well as evaluate the possibility of designing a common Arctic strategy.

Several months later, during the Council's session in Narsarsuag, Greenland, the parliamentarians decided to prepare a tentative analysis of this issue. The conclusions were as follows: (1) a common West Nordic Arctic policy would strengthen regional cooperation and bolster the West Nordic states' international standing; (2) economic cooperation gives these three countries promising perspectives, and should be geared toward an eventual free trade agreement as well as a common economic zone; and (3) the West Nordic countries should jointly strive for international support for their plans, e.g. by attracting foreign investors.

The issue of a common strategy on the Arctic and the reinforcement of the relative standing of the three West Nordic countries was a subject of debate during the 2014 session of the West Nordic Council, which took place in Reykjavik in mid-September 2014 (Ryggi 2014). As a result, the Council communicated a request to the governments of Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands to develop such a strategy (Konradsdóttir & Nielsson 2014). This matter has been also expected to top the list of topics of discussion at the next session of the West Nordic Council in 2015 (Ryggi 2014). It would appear that the spheres of operation that could create a foundation for a common Arctic policy among these three countries include: extraction of energy resources, natural resource management, development of transport infrastructure, and the promotion of tourism. A real step in the direction of strengthening the position of the West Nordic countries in Arctic cooperation was the West Nordic Council's petition for Observer status with the Arctic Council, made in August 2013.

The Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians (CPAR)

Another of the institutions selected for this analysis – but one focused strictly and exclusively on the Arctic region as a whole – is the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians (CPAR), which takes place every two years (Puig 2008: 99). Its roots can be found in the conference organized by the Nordic Council in Reykjavik on August 17, 1993 (The Nordic Council's International Conference for Parliamentarians on Development and Protection of the Arctic region 1993). The announcement made after the conference had declared the creation of a new body – the Standing

Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region. The Committee began operations in September 1994; its members met three or four times a year to discuss the current situation in the region as well as to evaluate the impact of previous announcements and resolutions promulgated by the Conference. The first role of the Committee was to support the initiative to create the Arctic Council.⁶ Once this formally occurred in 1996, the Standing Committee took the role of an Observer entity (formally from 1998). The members of the Standing Committee also function jointly to represent Arctic interests as Observers in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) (Langlais 2000: 28). In 1999, the Committee drafted and recognized its own overall rules and regulations, and the rules of the Conference were also laid out (Langlais 2000: 29).

Meetings of the Conference are attended by delegations from the parliaments of the eight Arctic states as well as the European Parliament, while the proceedings also feature input from 'Permanent Representatives' of organizations that represent the indigenous peoples of the Arctic as well as envoys from different international organizations or Observer countries of the Arctic Council. In recent years, both the Conference and the Standing Committee are clearly involving themselves in deliberations on shipping, education and social development, as well as climate change in the Arctic. In the Declaration of the participants of the 11th (and most recent) Conference, which took place on September 9-11, 2014 in the Canadian town of Whitehorse, a number of additional areas of interest were indicated, including: (1) infrastructure for balanced development, (2) management models and decision processes, (3) economic development, resource extraction, and building potential in the High North, and (4) new challenges in environmental protection in the Arctic.

A summary evaluation of the roles and capabilities of the Conference and the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, we must inevitably note that while these institutions indirectly enjoy indirect popular legitimacy and a 'social mandate' in Arctic affairs, their role in the Arctic Council is largely limited to that of observers, not inspirers, pacesetters, or commanders. One expression of this relatively weak position is the proposal to organize meetings of the Conference not every two years, but annually, which would allow greater flexibility and clout in its relations with the Arctic Council. The fact remains, however, that relations are sometimes strained, difficult, and hardly congenial, as evidenced in the barring of Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) from participating in the Conference in March 2014 (CPAR 2014). It seems that this is not only a symptom of the 'intergovernmentalization' of cooperation in the Arctic, but also a sign of narrowing possibilities of open debate on the future of the Arctic through the vehicle of the Arctic Council.

The Barents Parliamentary Conference

Although cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region has developed since 1993 primarily on two levels – intergovernmental (Barents Euro-Arctic Council – BEAC) and inter-regional (Barents Regional Council – BRC) – it also encompasses the interparliamentary dimension, as each BEAC chairmanship organizes a Barents Parliamentary Conference (International Barents Secretariat 2015; Hasanat 2010). Because the chairmanships run on two-year periods, the parliamentary conference takes place biennially. The participants of the Conference can be elected members of local and regional as well as national and indigenous peoples' assemblies in the Barents Region (International Barents Secretariat 2015).

At their meetings, the representatives focus on “topical issues and practical aspects of cooperation for further consideration by national and regional executive bodies” (International Barents Secretariat 2013). These debates are usually concentrated around such topics as: health and social well-being, the rights and traditional livelihoods of indigenous peoples, environmental protection, and strengthened cooperation in the region in the realm of culture, education, and economy (Barentsobserver 2009).

The first meeting of the Barents parliamentarians – called also the Barents Forum – was held in Kirkenes in 1997. Interestingly, although the first conference was organized in 1999 in Alta, the following one was held six years later, in 2005, in Bodø.

During the 6th Barents Parliamentary Conference, which took place in April 2013 in Harstad, Norway, “the parliamentarians decided to include representatives from the Barents parliamentary cooperation in the delegations to the BEAC ministerial meetings and to the meetings at the Regional Council and Committee levels” (International Barents Secretariat 2013). They also recommended that the national and regional governments of the Barents region strengthen the ties between the intergovernmental entities as well as their corresponding parliamentary assemblies and bodies (Barents Parliamentary Conference 2013). This development does not denote any immediate and significant change of position of the Conference in the cooperation structures of the Barents region. It still remains a forum of debate, although in some documents it is also named as one of “the two key forums for Arctic interparliamentary cooperation” (Thórdarson & Gallagher 2013). Since the Barents region is a sub-region of the Arctic, virtually all discussion taking place during the Conference meetings are relevant for the Arctic. At the same time, without any standing body, the Barents Parliamentary Conference has no formal and working relations with the Arctic Council, and the representatives of the latter are just participants of the conferences.

According to Ari Sirén, former Head of the International Barents Secretariat:

In spite of the fact that political issues are not dealt with by the Barents Cooperation, a political instrument in the form of biennial parliamentary conferences is nevertheless significant. Taking into consideration the increasing international role of Arctic cooperation the parliamentarians from member states could perhaps discuss Barents-related issues more often. Brainstorming is, after all, needed when coming up with good idea (Sirén 2012).

Conclusions

To summarize the findings and reflections presented in this paper, firstly, there are many differences in the foundations and level of engagement of the four assemblies in cooperation on matters of the Arctic. The institutions in question were formed at different stages of development of Arctic cooperation, while for two of them – the Nordic Council and the West Nordic Council – the Arctic region became only one of many areas of interest, and did not even gain immediate priority when the respective Councils were created. The Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians represents the opposite case, where exclusively Arctic issues were in the spotlight from the outset. The Barents Parliamentary Forum’s attention is focused mainly on a part of the European sector of the Arctic region; moreover, its activities have reflected the ups and downs of the Barents cooperation.

This complex situation of the four institutions under scrutiny here has its impact on the differential degrees of activity of the different assemblies with respect to issues affecting the region, as well as their different roles in the Arctic governance system. One interesting feature of all four institutions is their openness to mutual contact, collaboration, and effectively warmer relations. This supports the notion that parliamentary diplomacy in the Arctic is an attractive and dynamic form of regional cooperation that elicits great interest from its participants, with the willing engagement of individual parliamentarians as the glue that binds them together. Finally, out of the four assemblies, only the Standing Committee of the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians possesses the authority to contribute to the proceedings of the Arctic Council as an Observer; the West Nordic Council is only in the process of petitioning for this status, while neither the Nordic Council nor the Barents Parliamentary Forum seem interested in applying for it.

The varying degree of participation of each of the institutions in Arctic cooperation does not indicate any vital role of the 'Nordic dimension' in ensuring their continued success and activity. What is more, a breakdown of the motivations underlying each institution creates the impression that only the Nordic Council is truly interested in chiseling out common Nordic responses to questions affecting the Arctic. At the same time, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which its resolutions and recommendations have even a marginal, indirect effect on the operations of the Arctic Council. Jointly, they may constitute a step towards a common Nordic strategy on the Arctic. With respect to the West Nordic Council, it is possible to draw the conclusion that it does not simply promote the 'West Nordic lobby' or detached positions benefiting the West Nordic nations, but rather genuinely protects the interests of its member states in the Arctic. At the same time, in many cases the key areas of operation of these four assemblies with regard to the Arctic are similarly perceived and managed.

In analyzing these four parliamentary assemblies and their cooperation in the Arctic as a proxy for the roles these kinds of institutions play in contemporary international relations, three issues are worth pointing out. First, they are indeed 'messengers' voicing the opinions and interests of publics, and as such, they can ensure the democratic legitimacy of decisions made on a supranational level, often regarding transborder issues. The weight of democratic legitimacy in the overall process, however, is a separate issue. Second, through their familiarity with many pertinent issues from a practical perspective, parliamentarians working in inter-parliamentary institutions can have valuable inputs infused with a unique understanding of international relations, and useful for making optimal decisions. Third, it is in evidence that parliamentary diplomacy is now a mature phenomenon – one inscribed in the mechanisms of contemporary international relations – and its further development may make for an interesting 'counterweight' to inter-governmental diplomacy on the one hand, and different modern-day forms of 'paradiplomacy' on the other.

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Notes

1. For example, an Advisory Expert Committee was established in 2002, comprising Nordic members of the Arctic Council and envoys from the autonomous territories (Nordic Council of Ministers 2015a). Defining the specifics of the Programme and the evaluating its results are the responsibility of the Nordic Working Group on Sustainable Regional Development in the Arctic (Nordregio 2015).
2. The funds allocated by the Programme in 1996 amounted to 1 million Danish crowns; in 2009, it was 8 million; and today it stands at 10 million (Nordic Council of Ministers 2015b). Since 2009, the research institute Nordregio has been in charge of managing the Programmes.
3. This was the case in 2012, during a special session that was held on March 23, in Iceland (Nordic Council 2012). Another debate of this kind took place at the 66th Session of the Nordic Council in late October 2014, in Stockholm (Nordic Council 2014).
4. The Nordic Council has already organized several conferences and seminars on Arctic issues, including “Common Concern for the Arctic” in 2008, “Arctic – Changing Realities” in 2010, and “An Arctic Agenda” in 2011.
5. One interesting example of cooperation among the parliamentary assemblies is the fact that the Arctic Co-operation Programme for 2009 was consulted with the Sami parliaments (Bergman Rosamond 2011: 25).
6. The declaration made by the Second Conference, which took place in March 1996 in the Canadian city of Yellowknife, the tasks of the Standing Committee were to include: (1) monitoring the execution of recommendations and responsiveness of governments and international organizations to the requests of the Conference, (2) observing the process of consolidation of the Arctic Council and ensure an appropriate role and level of participation for parliamentarians in its work, and (3) probing for future forms of interparliamentary cooperation among the Arctic states and reporting on this topic at the following Conference (Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region 1996).

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