

The 17th Polar Law Symposium and the Opening Speech of Rector Anders Fällström

Anders Fällström*

Rector, Mid Sweden University, Sweden

Øyvind Ravna

Faculty of Law, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

Ekaterina Zmyvalova

Department of Economics, Geography, Law and Tourism, Mid Sweden University, Sweden

From September 23 to 26, 2024, Gaskuniversiteete (Mid Sweden University) hosted the 17th Polar Law Symposium. The event was officially opened by the university's rector, Anders Fällström, who, in his speech, underscored the significance of the symposium for both the university and its role as a global institution with a strong commitment to regional engagement. Fällström highlighted that Gaskuniversiteete is the only university in Sweden located within the South Sámi region, with Sámi issues forming a central part of its academic mission.

The editors of Arctic Review on Law and Politics attended the symposium and are pleased to have received permission to publish Rector Fällström's speech. One of the key reasons for publishing the speech is that it exemplifies the commitment academic institutions have toward the surrounding Indigenous communities. For the Indigenous Sámi people, such commitments include research, education, and collaboration aimed at promoting the use of traditional knowledge and developing expertise in Sámi culture, language, and law. It is hoped that Gaskuniversiteete will continue to foster this Indigenous-academia partnership, ensuring its success in practice as well as in principle.

*Correspondence to: Anders Fällström, e-mail: Anders.Fallstrom@miun.se

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to Gaskeuniversiteete – Mid Sweden University! We are located in the heart of Sweden, though many Swedes may consider this the northern part of the country. More specifically, we are situated in *Åarjelsaepmie*, the South Saami area, a region with a rich cultural heritage.

The County Councils of Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland, and eight of the municipalities situated here, are part of the administrative area for the Saami languages.

Mid Sweden University has two campuses: one here in Staare (Östersund) and another approximately 200 kilometers east in Sjädtavallie (Sundsvall). As a comprehensive university, we conduct research and education across nearly every field, with the exception of medicine and fine arts. We serve around 24,000 students and employ about 1,200 staff members.

Our research is strong in areas like risk and crisis management, sports science, technical chemistry, physics, tourism, and political communication. Given our broad scope as a relatively small university, we prioritize focus areas within each subject to maintain excellence.

We are a global university with a firm commitment to regional engagement. This dual focus on internationalization and local collaboration shapes much of what we do. As with all universities, fostering international connections is critical to us. We believe that universities should be melting pots of diverse ideas, brought together by people from all over the world. A truly global university also applies local knowledge and examples to help solve global challenges.

At the same time, we remain deeply engaged in the development of our own region and northern Sweden. As the only Swedish university in the South Sámi area, our commitment to Sámi issues is a cornerstone of our mission. This includes research, education, and collaboration with Sámi communities to promote their knowledge, culture, and rights.

Our university proudly offers courses on Sámi history, culture, and languages, ensuring that younger generations can learn about and appreciate this vital part of our shared heritage. Importantly, even our students who are not specializing in Sámi-related subjects, such as those studying to become nurses, teachers, psychologists, and social workers, are given the opportunity to develop a strong understanding of Sámi culture, enabling them to better support and serve diverse communities.

In addition to this, we address contemporary challenges faced by Sámi communities, including environmental sustainability, reindeer herding, and cultural preservation. Through collaboration with Sámi organizations, we aim to strengthen their voice and contribute to a more inclusive and just society. We are proud of the role we play in advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples and preserving Sámi culture, ensuring these crucial issues remain at the forefront of both local and global discussions.

But this conference, while touching on Sámi issues, also addresses a broader and increasingly urgent topic – the Arctic. This region has grown in global importance in

recent years. Along with Indigenous rights, critical issues like security, environmental protection, and resource management are at stake.

The Arctic, in particular, has become a focal point for geopolitical interests. The rapid melting of sea ice is opening new shipping routes and making resources such as oil, gas, and minerals more accessible. This has drawn the attention of nations from around the world, leading to growing tensions over territorial and resource claims. These developments heighten the risk of conflicts in the region.

At Mid Sweden University, we are committed to research that fosters sustainable development and security. Our scholars in environmental science, political science, and sociology often collaborate to analyze these issues. Geopolitical tensions, global power dynamics, and opportunities for cooperation are key areas of our study, and we aim to contribute to keeping the Arctic a peaceful and stable region. International agreements, such as those overseen by the Arctic Council, are critical in this regard.

Security in the Arctic is not just about politics or resources – it is also about protecting the environment. The polar regions are among the most vulnerable ecosystems on Earth. Climate change is causing glaciers to melt at unprecedented rates, leading to rising sea levels and disruptions to the global climate system. These changes have widespread impacts on biodiversity, weather patterns, and human livelihoods.

Our university is deeply engaged in environmental research. However, protecting the Arctic's environment is not only about safeguarding nature for its own sake. It is also about preserving the ways of life of the Indigenous peoples, such as the Sámi, whose culture and livelihoods are closely connected to these lands. The warming climate threatens their traditional practices which is central to their culture and economy.

In conclusion, the Arctic represents one of the most pressing challenges of our time. We must carefully balance the need for security, environmental protection, and the rights of Indigenous peoples to ensure a sustainable future for this region. Here at Mid Sweden University, we are proud of the role we play through our research and education, and we hope to contribute to a more peaceful, environmentally sound, and socially just Arctic.

Now, I'm sure you're all eager to dive into the conference. Before I go, let me once again warmly welcome you to our beautiful campus here in Staare, Östersund.