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RUSSIAN COAL MINING IN SVALBARD: PATHS TO SUSTAINABILITY

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Svalbard, the Norwegian Arctic archipelago, possesses unique status in the international relations. Being discovered in late 16th century by Dutchmen (although some scholars claim otherwise), after several decades of international conferences and disputed claims the archipelago fell under Norwegian sovereignty, but with the right for all the signatory states to maintain economic activities there on the equal basis with Norwegians. During the 20th century, only Norway and the Soviet Union have been maintaining significant presence in Svalbard, the archipelago being of strategic importance for both countries — especially during the Cold War period when both countries were considering Svalbard as their western or, correspondingly, eastern Arctic outpost. Nowadays, Norway has three wealthy and prosperous towns in Svalbard, while only one Russian mining town, Barentsburg, is still active.

The paths that two countries had chosen for developing their towns are as different as they could be. Norwegians, having realized in the early 1990s that the coal mining industry cannot be the basis for a modern sustainable community, have turned to the tourism development and have successfully diversified the economy to achieve long-term resilience goals. Russians have been clinging to the old framework used during the Soviet times, which implies large state grants for maintaining the town and direct governance from Moscow, all to keep the Russian presence in the Western Barents Sea. As a result, the town has been gradually declining for two decades, having only recently started to develop other areas like tourism and research.

Barentsburg is now on the verge of great changes, which is reinforced by complex international situation and new Russian Arctic strategy implying the active development of the circumpolar settlements. What steps would its authorities make and what development path would their take? I argue that there are windows of opportunities that would allow the town to achieve sustainability, but these windows should be used with regard to the specific features of the settlement. The strategy aimed at economy diversification that the mining company has recently chosen to pursue is a positive signal, but blindly copying the steps made by Norwegians won't work as there are geographical, political and cultural differences between two settlements. Basing on own anthropological fieldwork of 2014 and on interviews with mining company representatives, I describe the current steps undertaken by the company to achieve changes (infrastructure renovation, changes in social policy) and thus argue that the sustainable framework for Barentsburg should comprise of profound measures in all fields (societal, cultural, governmental) including changes in environmental policy and business approach.