

Russia's international Arctic policy after the invasion of Ukraine:

Experts' voices in the domestic media

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In the second year of Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council (AC), the other seven-member states unanimously condemned its invasion of Ukraine and suspended cooperation with Russia, later partially resuming the Council's work on projects not involving Russia (AC a, 2022; AC b, 2022). The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), and UArctic took similar steps (BEAC, 2022; IASC, 2022; UArctic, 2022). This isolation – along with security challenges posed by Finland and Sweden's decision to join NATO – became a major topic in Russia's domestic media, as the Arctic narrative has traditionally been high on the agenda in Putin's Russia (similar to the Soviet period).

This short paper is a report on the preliminary results of a study reviewing the assessments of the current situation and forecasts by Russian experts published in March-October 2022 in the domestic, government-controlled media. Its purpose

is to shed some light on the discussion involving members of the Russian academia, as transmitted by the popular media to the general public.

Russian scientists have traditionally been influential in the Arctic community, have long-established ties with their foreign counterparts, and have communicated with them via conferences and meetings held within and outside Russia, visited Arctic-related research institutions all over the world, and have joined numerous international research projects (many of which have been put on hold after the start of the invasion) (Breum, 2022).

The scope of our study ranged from digital broadsheets (such as *Izvestia*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and *RIA Novosti*) to local papers (e. g. *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti*) and portals specializing in the Arctic and international issues (such as *Go Arctic*, *Arctic: Territory of Dialogue*, *Russian*

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International Affairs Council (RIAC)'s website etc.).

The experts quoted represent such centers of international relations research in Russia as MGIMO University, Saint-Petersburg State University, Russian Academy of Sciences Institutes (the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Institute of Northern Europe etc.), and think tanks (the Russian International Affairs Council, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, Institute of Regional Expertise etc.).

It should be kept in mind that the Russian government further tightened its control over the media and research institutions after the invasion, so the authors of the articles and the experts they interviewed had to weigh each word so as not to be charged with violating the repressive legislation adopted on March 4 after the start of the hostilities (Meduza, 2022).

The main points of the reviewed commentaries, columns and interviews may be summarized as follows:

- **The Arctic seven's decision jeopardizes the current Arctic governance structure and the privileged position of the Arctic states.**

- Decision on the exclusion of Russia from the AC by the rest of its member states breaches the consensus as the decision-making rule of this forum and undermines

the legitimacy of AC (Danyuk cited in Kazargin, 2022).

- The situation is further exacerbated by proposals of new cooperation frameworks excluding Russia such as Nordic Plus or Arctic Council 2.0 (see Kirchner, 2022; Rogoff, 2002). Such steps may jeopardize the Arctic foothold of such states as Denmark (connected to the Arctic only via Greenland) and the US, which is facing serious competition from China (as demonstrated, for instance, by comparison of the two states' icebreaker fleet) (Belukhin, 2022; Fedorov, 2002).

- **Russia may move to other international Arctic forums.** If the current deadlock persists, Russia will have to consider such alternative forums for discussion of the Arctic agenda as the Arctic Circle or Arctic Frontiers (Lipunov, 2022; Zhuravel, 2022; Korchunov, 2022).
- **Russia should focus on its domestic Arctic agenda and cooperate with non-Arctic states.** In the face of the boycott by the rest of the AC states, Russia will concentrate its efforts on the domestic Arctic agenda, inviting non-Arctic states such as China or India to join partnerships with Russian public bodies and private companies for the development of the Russian Arctic zone (AZ) (Lipunov, 2022;

Zhuravel, 2022; Arctic: Territory of Dialogue, 2022).

- **The Northern Sea Route may be closed to unfriendly states.** The closure of the Northern Sea Route to the vessels of unfriendly states is the necessary security measure in response to NATO's expansion and its military maneuvers in the Arctic (Fedorov, 2022).
- **AC breakup is detrimental to Arctic research and environmental protection.** Scientific research in the Arctic, which is pivotal to studying the impacts of global climate change, requires the participation of Russia as the largest Arctic state (Lipunov, 2022; Labetskaya, 2022; Mikhailichenko, 2022).
- **Science diplomacy may be a way out of the deadlock.** Science diplomacy, in which non-state actors are the key players, may pave the way out of the current deadlock. The expert community should act in the interests of humanity in general (Sergunin, Devyatkin cited in Sukhoverkova, 2022).

From the Russian media discourse communicating the domestic experts' views, the following "antithetical" propositions may be distilled:

1. **International dialogue and cooperation vs. self-sufficiency in the Arctic.** Most experts concur that

international dialogue and cooperation in the Arctic are crucial for the sustainable development of the Russian AZ, although they emphasize Russia's self-sufficiency (Koktysh cited in Kazargin, 2022).

2. **Russia's departure from its "exclusionist" Arctic stance vs. apprehensions over encroachment of "extra-regional" players.** The gradual worsening of the relations with the rest of the AC members led Russia to reconsider its "exclusionist" stance (formerly shared with Canada) on the non-Arctic states' involvement in the Arctic. On the other hand, the experts show apprehensions about the consequences of the breakup of the Arctic states' regional unity and the advance of "extra-regional" players such as China or the UK (Lipunov, 2022; Izvestia, 2022).
3. **Hopes for mediation by the expert community vs. Russian government's tightening grip over research, education and media.** Although the mediation by the expert community could be beneficial, considering the impressive record of scientific cooperation in the Arctic since the Murmansk Initiative, it appears problematic in view of the tight control (financial, regulatory) of the federal agencies over research and

educational institutions and activities, as well as the media.

We will continue monitoring the Russian experts' assessments and forecasts and their coverage in the Russian media as part of the larger Arctic-related policy discourse in Russia. Next steps could be to include independent media as sources, to broaden the scope of the study to other non-state actors such as subnational governments, businesses and Indigenous communities, and to trace the Arctic and non-Arctic states' academia responses to their Russian counterparts' statements. These steps would allow us to explore the impact of such a dialogue on the future of scientific collaboration and broader Arctic cooperation, and numerous regional forums involving Russian actors and other members of the Arctic community.

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