



# Thinking about Russian Arctic council chairmanship: Challenges and opportunities<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims at examining the following research questions: What has been the record of Russia's Arctic Council membership by the present-day moment? How has Russia's role evolved? What have been some of the main issues, agreements, disagreements, challenges and problems? What is Moscow's agenda during the Russian Council chairmanship in 2021–2023? The author identifies the following priorities for Russia's Arctic Council presidential agenda: climate change action; sustainable socioeconomic and environmental development; social cohesiveness and connectivity in the region; indigenous peoples; conservation of biodiversity; science diplomacy; Council's partial institutional reform. Moscow will probably try to make the Arctic Council's budget, including specific project budgets, more transparent and systemized. The Russian presidency aims to make the role of permanent participants and observers in the Council's activities more visible. At the same time, Moscow will avoid its former claims to transform the Council from an intergovernmental forum to a full-fledged international organization and bring military security problematique to the Council's agenda. Russia's chairmanship will try to strengthen the Arctic Council's role in asserting regional stewardship by responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing Arctic and the increasingly more integrated policy frameworks from local to global scales.

## 1. Introduction

Russia has extremely important national interests in the region. These interests include the access to and exploitation of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) natural resources (mineral and biological ones). Moscow tries to modernize and further develop the AZRF industrial base which makes a significant and valuable contribution to the country's economy (10% of GDP and 20% of export) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Russia is also interested in opening up (and keeping) of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for international commercial traffic and developing circumpolar air routes. Moscow is deeply concerned about the ecological situation in the AZRF and takes significant efforts to clean up this region from the environmental mess inherited from the past as well as to reduce/prevent air and water pollution. Russia still has considerable military-strategic interests in the region and tries to modernize its armed forces located there to keep them in a good shape and be ready to cope with potential threats and challenges. Similar to other coastal states, Moscow sees its military presence in the

region as an efficient instrument to demonstrate its sovereignty over and protect its national interests in the Arctic.

On the other hand, the Kremlin believes that there are no serious military threats emanating from the Arctic and, for this reason, defense and security issues are put on the bottom of Moscow's priority list in its strategic documents (Putin, 2020a, 2020b).

On a more general note, it should be noted that in contrast with some media, politicians, and strategic analysts describing the changes in the Arctic states' military capabilities as a significant military build-up and even a renewed arms race in the region, the real picture is far from this apocalyptic scenario. It is possible to speak only about limited modernization and increases or changes in equipment, force levels, and force structure. Some of these changes – for example, the creation of new units (specially designed for the cold weather conditions), commissioning more sophisticated and better armed warships, new aircraft, and the establishment of new command structures in the north – have little or nothing to do with power projection into the potentially disputed areas (where the Arctic coastal states' claims overlap) or region at large;

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rather, they are for the patrolling and protecting of recognized national territories and waters that are becoming more accessible, including for illegal activities, such as overfishing, poaching, smuggling, and uncontrolled migration. Others changes – such as modernization of the Russian, US and UK strategic nuclear forces – may have more to do with maintaining a global deterrent potential rather than with developing offensive capabilities. In other words, it is safe to assume that these modernization programs do not provoke an arms race or undermine the regional cooperation (Konyshv and Sergunin, 2019; Lasserre et al., 2012; Sergunin and Konyshv, 2017).

At the same time, the Russian leadership repeatedly emphasized the need for multilateral diplomacy and a proper governance system to solve numerous ‘soft’ security problems in the region. This explains why Moscow believes that global (e.g., UN bodies), regional and subregional international institutions are crucial for the success of Arctic cooperation.

No doubt, the Arctic Council (AC) is seen by Russia as both a centerpiece and cornerstone of the regional governance system which is confirmed by the Russian strategic documents (Putin, 2020a, 2020b) and leadership’s numerous statements (International Arctic Forum, 2019; Lavrov, 2013, 2019). As compared with other regional and subregional organizations and forums (such as the Nordic institutions, Barents-Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), Northern Forum, etc.), the AC is viewed by the Kremlin as a more representative (in terms of its geographic scope), multidimensional (in terms of areas covered by its activities), science-based and efficient international entity (Gavrilov, 2017; Konyshv and Sergunin, 2011; Sakharov, 2015; Sergunin, 2020; Voronchikhina, 2019; Voronkov, 2014; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017). Despite the fact that seven other AC member-states belong to Western institutions that do not include Russia (NATO, EU, Nordic organizations), Moscow feels itself comfortable in the Council because it functions there on the equal footing and it is able to partake in the AC decision-making. Russia’s forthcoming AC chairmanship (2021–2023) further elevates the Council’s role to the highest priority of Moscow’s Arctic strategy in the near- and midterm future.

Russia’s institutional behavior and policies within the AC is, on the one hand, not a very popular theme in the world scholarship and, on the other hand, politically controversial and divisive. Some analysts believe that Russia was included into the Council as a full-fledged member simply because of its formal status of a coastal Arctic state but, in practical terms, it was of little use because of its economic and technological backwardness and poor financial resources (especially in the 1990s and early 2000s) (Chater, 2017; English, 2013). This group of experts suspected that Moscow joined the AC in a hope to get additional channels of assistance to the AZRF, rather than to contribute to solving problems and further development of the entire Arctic region. Other group of Western specialists criticized Russia for its passive/reactive rather than proactive policies within the Council and its units, the lack of initiatives and fresh ideas (Kankaanpää, 2012; Nord, 2017; Thiele, 2018). The Western authors were especially critical of Russia for temporary suspension of its only indigenous peoples’ organization represented in the AC (RAIPON) which heavily criticized Moscow for ignoring aboriginal ethnic groups’ problems in the AZRF (Digges, 2012; Nord, 2016; Rohr, 2014; Wallace, 2013). With the start of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and imposition of Western sanctions on Russia, many experts questioned Moscow’s willingness to cooperate in the AC framework and the Council’s ability to remain an effective regional cooperative platform (Borgerson and Byers, 2016; Exner-Pirot, 2015a, 2015b; Huebert, 2014; Klimenko, 2015). Very few foreign scholars viewed any positive dynamics in Russia’s AC policies over the last quarter of the century (Chater, 2016; Graczyk and Koivurova, 2015).

For natural reasons, the Russian national discourse on Moscow’s relations with the AC is much richer than the foreign one and Russian authors are generally more sympathetic with the Kremlin’s policies on and within the Council. One group of Russian scholars studied the AC’s history and its role in Arctic politics (Gavrilov, 2017; Lyapchev, 2016;

Mikhailova and Mikhailov, 2014; Sakharov, 2015; Tikhonov, 2018; Voronchikhina, 2019; Voronkov, 2014; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017). Another group of authors examined the AC’s relations with other regional and global institutions dealing with the High North (Gavrilov, 2017; Vasiliev, 2016; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017). Some Russian analysts reflected on the future of the Council, including its potential transformation into a full-fledged international organization (Tikhonov, 2018; Sergunin, 2020; Voronkov, 2014; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017; Zhuravel’, 2020). Finally, some experts critically examined Russian policies within the AC by identifying success stories and failures of Moscow’s diplomacy in this area (Mikhailova and Mikhailov, 2014; Tikhonov, 2018; Sakharov, 2015; Sergunin, 2020; Voronchikhina, 2019; Zagorsky, 2015; Zhuravel’, 2020). Generally, the Russian scholars are not that pessimistic about the future of the Arctic cooperation and AC role in maintaining peace and stability in the region even under the current global tensions between the West and Russia.

However, it should be noted that the existing body of scholarship still lacks a comprehensive analysis of Russia’s recent institutional behavior in the AC (especially in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis), as well as of substantial changes in Moscow’s thinking about the Council’s future status and powers. For obvious reasons, the existing literature lacks analysis of Russia’s AC presidential agenda for 2021–2023. This study has an ambition to fill the existing research gaps and shed a light on Russia’s future policies in the AC in the short- and midterm perspectives.

Based on the past research, this paper aims at examining the following underexplored questions:

- What has been the record of Russia’s AC membership by the present-day moment?
- How has Russia’s role evolved?
- What have been some of the main issues, agreements, disagreements, challenges and problems?
- What is Moscow’s agenda during the Russian AC chairmanship in 2021–2023?

## 2. Material and methods

The data for the study of Russia’s institutional behavior and plans for its forthcoming chairmanship in 2021–2023 was drawn from the following categories of sources:

- AC ministerial and Senior Arctic Officials meetings’ documents.
- Russian conceptual and strategic documents on Moscow’s Arctic policies.
- Russian statesmen’s statements and interviews.
- Academic publications.
- Mass media reports.

In dealing with Russia’s institutional behavior and policies in the AC, it is quite difficult to create a reliable database. Different sources can contradict each other and/or be fragmentary. Available statistics is sometimes misleading or incomplete. As far as analytical works are concerned their authors used to differ by their methods of assessment and interpretation of the empirical data. That is why it is important in the process of research to permanently check and double check available sources in terms of their reliability as well as to compare them with each other to exclude unreliable or erroneous data.

More specifically, three main principles were used to select and interpret empirical data:

1. Sources should be representative, i.e. they are supposed to reflect typical rather than irregular developments in Russia’s policies within the AC.
2. Preferences are given to the data that provide valuable and timely information on the above-mentioned policies.

3. Priority is also given to the sources that reflect original data as well as fresh/non-traditional approaches to the study of Moscow's activities in the Council.

With the help of these research tools, the shortcomings of my empirical base can be successfully overcome and a set of reliable data for this study can be effectively created.

To continue the description of my research methodology, it should be noted that to evaluate the activity of an AC member-state the Canadian scholar Andrew Chater and Russian researcher Darya Voronchikhina suggested several criteria. Chater (2015) identified four parameters: (1) a number of comments made by each state delegation at the Council's meetings for a certain period; (2) a number of agenda items that each state delegation provided comments on for a certain period; (3) the average size of state delegations at the Council's meetings for a certain period, and (4) a number of projects sponsored by each AC member-state.

Voronchikhina (2019) suggested a slightly different set of criteria: (1) a number of delegates from the Arctic countries to participate in the Council's meetings; (2) a number of projects funded by the Council member countries; (3) a number of projects initiated by specific AC member state, and (4) a number of comments made by the representatives of a member state at the Council's meetings for a certain period.

Since Voronchikhina's indicators reflect all substantial aspects of AC member states' activities and, in addition, her data is more representative than Chater's one (he selected data only for the periods of 1998–2000, 2007–2009 and 2013–2015, by the way, missing the period of Russia's first chairmanship in 2004–2006), Voronchikhina's methodology is preferable.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Is Russia a "good AC citizen"?

From the very beginning, Russia was involved in both the creation and further development of the AC. Moscow was one of the initiators of the so-called Rovaniemi process/Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in 1991 and establishing the Arctic Council in 1996. According to the USSR/Russia, the AEPS was crucial for the expansion of cooperation in the field of Arctic research, environmental monitoring, assessment of human impact in the region, and the implementation of measures to control and reduce emissions of major pollutants (Sakharov, 2015). Moscow also believed that the AEPS was important not only for identifying areas of potential collaboration but also for laying the foundation for the institutionalization of the Arctic multilateral cooperation mechanism. Under the AEPS auspices, four programs and working groups were established, all of which were eventually transformed into the AC working groups.

Similar to other Arctic countries, in the early period of the AC activities, Russia has considerably contributed to developing rules of procedure and mandates for the Council's various organs, as well as incorporating the work of the AEPS into the AC activities.

There were ups and downs in Russia's activities in the framework of the Council. For example, during the U.S., Finnish and Icelandic presidencies (1998–2004) Moscow paid more attention to its own socio-economic and ecological problems in the AZRF rather than to the pan-Arctic agenda. Since its first presidency (2004–2006) Russia became more involved in the Council's region-scale activities. Since 2011, when the Project Support Instrument was created, Russia (along with Canada) became its main financial donor.

The Ukrainian and Syrian crises have negatively affected the Arctic cooperation in general and AC activities particularly. The U.S. and EU introduced economic sanctions against Russia, including some offshore energy projects in the AZRF. NATO stopped all military-to-military contacts with Moscow. Search and rescue (SAR) exercises under the auspices of the AC and BEAC were suspended for a while (Konyshev

et al., 2017). However, after some time, the work of the Council more or less returned to its former course; Arctic cooperation was restored, and it even began to expand.

The Ukrainian crisis occurred during the Canadian AC chairmanship (2013–2015). Canada and the U.S. skipped some working group and task force meetings in Russia, such as meetings in April 2014. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov skipped a Council ministerial meeting in May 2015 in Iqaluit, Canada (the Russian delegation was led by the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment) (Sergunin, 2015). Canada then cancelled a planned AC event in Ottawa amid concerns that Russian officials would attend.

No surprise that Russian activities in the AC have significantly decreased. The average size of Russia's delegation during the Canadian presidency was reduced to 1,0 although other Arctic states also reduced their representation in the AC meetings as compared to the pre-crisis period: Canada (9,5), U.S. (7,0), Denmark (4,5), Norway (4,5), Sweden (3,0), Finland (2,5), and Iceland (2,0) (see Table 1). For the same period, Russia made 11 comments which is comparable with the Danish (10) and U.S. (8) records while only Canada (30) and Norway (16) had better records. Finland (6), Sweden (5) and Iceland (1) were among the 'outsiders' (see Table 2) (Chater, 2016).

At the same time, Russia was rather active in terms of initiation of AC projects. During the Canadian presidency, Russia sponsored 21 projects which is less than the U.S. (32), Canadian (29) and Norwegian (29) cases, but more than the Danish (11), Finnish (8), Swedish (5) and Icelandic (3) ones (see Tables 3 and 4) (Chater, 2016). It should be noted that most of Russia's projects were circumpolar in scope (although four of them were of domestic nature, focused on contaminants and shipping). Russia also sponsored projects in a wider range of areas, compared to its earlier interest in economic development. Russia rather effectively collaborated with the U.S. in the Council. For example, the U.S. sponsored two projects on environmental protection in the Russian Arctic. The U.S. and Russia co-sponsored eight projects. Russia co-sponsored four projects with Canada despite Ottawa's most tough position on Moscow in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis (Chater, 2016: 49).

The Council's role in regional governance continued to shift as policymaking continued during Canada's leadership. The Council did not create any formal agreements during Canada's turn as chair, seemingly indicating that the institution's policy-making role has diminished or paused. Instead, the Council created two less formal agreements. First, the Task Force on Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Prevention created an informal agreement, with its mandate to identify how best the AC can contribute to marine oil pollution prevention in the Arctic, recommend a concrete plan of action, and, as appropriate, develop cooperative arrangements to implement the Action Plan.

In contrast with gloomy prognoses on the possible failure of the Canadian AC presidency, the 2015 Iqaluit ministerial meeting demonstrated that Ottawa's chairmanship was a rather productive one. For example, a key achievement during the Canadian presidency was the establishment of the Arctic Economic Council, a new independent forum of business representatives to facilitate Arctic business-to-business activities in the region. Other important achievements included: (1) the publication of a compendium of best practices in promoting the traditional ways of life of Arctic indigenous peoples; (2) recommendations on how to better use traditional and local knowledge in the work of the Council to improve decision-making and research; (3) the publication of a guide on how to respond to oil spills in snow and ice conditions in the Arctic; (4) a collection of work related to short-lived climate pollutants that will lead to local health, economic and climate benefits; (5) the development of the Arctic Marine Strategic Plan (2015–2025), which aimed to provide a framework to protect Arctic marine and coastal ecosystems and to promote sustainable development in the region; (6) Arctic biodiversity work, including an action plan to implement recommendations from the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment, and a detailed work plan to protect migratory birds along key international flight paths

**Table 1**  
The number of delegates from the member states to attend the Council's meetings.

Year	Country, number of delegates							
	Russia	Norway	U.S.	Canada	Finland	Denmark	Sweden	Iceland
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1998	6	10	7	16	9	9	5	4
1999	3	6	43	19	3	7	2	2
2000	5	7	33	23	6	8	2	1
2001	5	9	12	15	17	8	4	4
2002	3	6	19	16	14	6	3	3
2003	2	8	13	18	6	4	3	5
2004	5	11	13	17	3	5	3	4
2005	–	6	7	9	5	2	3	1
2006	–	24	17	11	14	12	12	5
2007	8	21	14	16	5	8	5	1
2008	7	15	10	8	2	4	4	1
2009	5	5	5	3	1	10	6	1
2010	6	18	9	10	3	10	3	2
March 2011	10	24	12	13	5	11	9	3
Nov. 2011	5	9	6	11	5	5	16	2
2012	6	9	10	10	5	8	9	2
2013	3	3	4	8	3	6	4	3
2014	1	5	4	12	3	5	3	2
2015	1	4	10	7	2	4	3	2
March 2016	1	5	10	8	3	8	7	3
Oct. 2016	1	7	7	9	7	6	6	3
March 2017	1	5	9	8	4	7	4	4
May 2017	12	12	12	10	12	12	10	7
March 2018	2	6	6	5	7	4	3	4
Nov. 2018	2	5	6	7	7	4	4	4

Source: [Voronchikhina \(2019\)](#).

**Table 2**  
The number of comments made by the representatives of the Russian Federation in the Council's meetings.

Year	Number of comments
1998	0
1999	11
2000	35
2001	10
2002	6
2003	3
2004	16
2005	12
2006	9
2007	8
2008	10
2009	8
2010	12
2011	7
2012	5
2013	4
2014	3
2015	4
2016	7
2017	9
2018	7

Source: [Voronchikhina \(2019\)](#).

([Sergunin, 2015](#)).

As was expected, the ministers agreed to defer decisions on pending observer applications and examine the roles and responsibilities of observers within the AC. There was widespread agreement by the Council that the observer system needed to be seriously revamped before more nations can be let in.

In the specific case of the EU, which also wanted its status in the AC upgraded and which was seen as a promising candidate for observer status, the decision was postponed because Canada and some indigenous peoples organizations were displeased with the European ban on seal products that Inuit hunters say was ruinous to local economies. Moscow joined the opposition to the EU observer application because of its dissatisfaction with sanctions imposed by Brussels in 2014–2015.

During the U.S. presidency (2015–2017), Russia preferred to keep a rather low profile in the AC. Its average delegation size was kept on the same level as under the Canadian chairmanship (1,0). It should be noted, however, that other AC member states were also relatively passive in terms of their representation in the Council's meetings because the Arctic was not very high priority for Washington (especially under the Trump administration). Their average delegation size remained almost the same as under the previous presidency: the U.S. (12,0), Canada (10,66), Denmark (8,33), Norway (7,0), Sweden (6,66), Finland (5,33), and Iceland (4,0) (see [Table 1](#)).

However, Russia was a leader in terms of supporting Council-sponsored projects (6) while other countries (even the U.S. chaired the AC) were less active in this area: Canada, Norway and Sweden supported four projects each, while Denmark, Finland, Iceland and the U.S. funded only three projects each (see [Table 3](#)). Moreover, Russia sponsored four more projects on a separate basis (see [Table 4](#)).

Moscow supported the U.S. initiative to establish an Arctic Coast Guard Forum in October 2015. Now the ACGF operates as an independent, informal, operationally-driven organization, not bound by treaty, to foster safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic. All Arctic countries, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Island, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States are members of the forum. Chairmanship duties of the ACGF rotate every two years in concert with the AC Chairmanship.

**Table 3**  
The number of projects funded by the Council member countries.

Year	Country, number of projects							
	Russia	Norway	U.S.	Canada	Finland	Denmark	Sweden	Iceland
1996–1998	2	3	3	2	4	2	2	5
1998–2000	4	10	7	7	5	5	4	4
2000–2002	7	2	2	2	2	4	1	1
2002–2004	11	12	12	13	8	6	4	3
2004–2006	23	13	12	13	9	7	3	3
2006–2009	13	16	18	18	4	3	2	6
2009–2011	6	3	3	3	2	2	3	2
2011–2013	6	5	6	4	4	2	8	1
2013–2015	21	29	32	29	8	11	5	3
2015–2017	6	4	3	4	3	3	4	3
2018–2019	No data							
Total	25	24	21	25	24	20	21	23

Sources: [Chater \(2016\)](#); [Voronchikhina \(2019\)](#).

**Table 4**  
The number of projects sponsored by Russia.

Years	Number of projects
1996–1998	2
1998–2000	4
2000–2002	7
2002–2004	11
2004–2006	23
2006–2009	13
2009–2011	6
2011–2013	6
2013–2015	21
2015–2017	6
2018–2019	No data
Total	72

Sources: [Chater \(2016\)](#); [Voronchikhina \(2019\)](#).

Notably, the U.S. and Russia co-chaired the Scientific Cooperation Task Force, which in July 2016 agreed a text of a third legally binding agreement negotiated under the auspices of the AC which was formally signed at the 2017 Fairbanks AC ministerial meeting ([Arctic Council, 2017](#)). This development is particularly worth noting considering that the US co-chaired the SCTF along with Russia at the time of a general freeze in relations between the two countries following the start of the Ukrainian crisis. As Śmieszek and Koivurova note (2017), despite very serious tensions between the former Cold War adversaries in other parts of the world and the sanctions imposed on Russia by all other AC member states, it was the policy of the U.S. during its AC chairmanship to diligently and consistently maintain the Council as a platform of dialogue, collaboration, and engagement with Russia.

The U.S. and Russia also initiated the discussion on the need to develop a long-term strategic plan for the Council, the idea which was endorsed by the SAOs at their meeting in October 2016. These discussions were continued under the Finnish (2017–2019) and Icelandic (2019–2021) chairmanships.

Russia supported major initiatives of the Finnish presidency. For example, Moscow prioritized the preservation of the Arctic's biodiversity, its unique and extremely vulnerable ecosystems, as well as prevention of sea and ground pollution and improvement of practical cooperation among the Arctic states as regards joint response measures.

Russia favored expanding coast guard cooperation within the Arctic Forum framework. For example, the Russian Coast Guard took an active part in the multilateral Polaris exercise staged in the Gulf of Bothnia in late March and early April 2019.

Russia also supported Finnish initiatives in areas, such as enhancing the region's resistance to global climate change, minimizing man-made environmental impacts, preserving biodiversity, developing the telecommunications infrastructure and expanding the cooperation with the Arctic Economic Council, which was seen as a promising venue for

attracting investment and promoting business and innovation ([Lavrov, 2019](#)).

Moscow supported Helsinki's efforts to make AC observers' activities more efficient and better integrated into the Council's activities. Along with other AC member states Russia welcomed the International Maritime Organization as a new observer. Moscow also approved the Finnish initiative to organize a separate session with observers as part of the 2018 Senior Officials Committee plenary meeting, where they presented measures undertaken to fight pollution in the Arctic and maintain its biodiversity ([Lavrov, 2019](#)).

Both President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov expressed their support to the program of the Icelandic Chairmanship (2019–2021). They underlined that Russia has common interests with Iceland in the region, primarily in the sea, including the promotion of marine bio-economics and green shipping, mitigating marine refuse, including microplastics, as well as ocean acidification ([International Arctic Forum, 2019](#); [Lavrov, 2019](#)).

To sum up the above historical analysis, Russia is a rather 'good AC citizen' in a sense that it contributes to the Council's budget on a regular basis and at a sufficient level. Moscow has also significantly contributed to AC discussions on all major issues ranging from the Arctic's sustainable development and environment protection to maritime safety and indigenous peoples' rights. Along with other AC member-states, Russia helped to some extent to 'bracket out' Arctic cooperation from Moscow's tensions with the West caused by the Ukrainian crisis.

### 3.2. Russian and international discourses on Russia's forthcoming AC presidency (2021–2023)

The fact that the AC faced a series of challenges of both endogenous and exogenous character became obvious even before the Council's 20th anniversary in 2016. The internal challenges stemmed from the evolving and constantly growing workload of the Council, which led to problems with overlapping and prioritizing work across AC working groups and task forces, funding the ongoing projects and new initiatives, and, regarding the effective implementation of the AC recommendations by the member states ([Supreme Audit Institutions of Denmark, Norway, The Russian Federation, 2015](#)).

As mentioned above some Russian and international experts ([Exner-Pirot, 2015a](#); [Graczyk and Koivurova, 2015](#); [Klimenko, 2015](#); [Lyapchev, 2016](#); [Sakharov, 2015](#); [Śmieszek and Koivurova, 2017](#); [Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017](#); [Zhuravel', 2020](#)) believed that a remedy for internal AC problems could be a comprehensive vision of Arctic cooperation to guide the work of the Council and bring to it more continuity between rotating chairmanships. Moreover, such a vision – as well as establishing more stable financing mechanisms – could make the Council more secure in view of shifting political priorities and radical changes on Arctic states' domestic political scenes. The 2013 AC "Vision

for the Arctic” pledged to “pursue opportunities to expand the Arctic Council’s roles from policy-shaping into policy-making” (Arctic Council, 2013). The statement missed, however, any further details and the debates for the prospects for the development of the AC’s long-term strategic plan continued for several years.

Russian and international experts pointed out that a new vision should better define position and role of the AC within the regional governance system. It appeared that the Council was not a principal venue for solving many important Arctic problems in areas such as shipping, fisheries, climate change or biodiversity (Exner-Pirot, 2015a; Graczyk and Koivurova, 2015; Klimenko, 2015; Lyapchev, 2016; Sakharov, 2015; Śmieszek and Koivurova, 2017; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017; Zhuravel, 2020). For example, negotiations launched within the UN bodies in 2018 to develop an implementing agreement under the UNCLOS on conservation and the sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, if successfully completed, would be of major relevance to the Arctic Ocean. However, the AC and its relevant working groups did not participate in these negotiations. Another example is the 2018 agreement on the commercial fishery ban in the Central Arctic Ocean, where discussions were held within the extended Arctic Five including China, Iceland, the EU, Japan and South-Korea, but not in the AC framework (Sergunin, 2019).

It should be noted that very important changes happened in the Russian academic and formal/official thinking about the future of the AC, its functions and the role in the regional governance system. Prior to the Ukrainian crisis and the rise of tensions between Russia and the West Moscow’s official position and the Russian academic discourse favored transformation of the AC from the intergovernmental discussion forum to a full-fledged international organization (with formal charter, institutional structure and power to conclude binding agreements).

For example, in his 2013 article the then Russian ambassador for Arctic Affairs and SAO Anton Vasiliev noted: “In my view, we embarked on the path of turning the Arctic Council from a ‘forum’ into a full-fledged international organization, although we will move in this direction gradually, in stages, with full respect for the positions of all member states - after all, all decisions in the Council are taken by consensus» (Vasiliev, 2013). At the 2013 Kiruna AC Ministerial Meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that the Council is on the way to becoming a full-fledged international organization, referring to the fact that two binding agreements were concluded under its auspices (Lavrov, 2013).

Many Russian experts on Arctic geopolitics, law, environment, economy and humanitarian issues also believed (and still believe) that the lack of formal status and proper legal powers is a serious hindrance to further development of the Council as a key structural element of the regional governance system (Bekyashev, 2015; Inyakina, 2019; Konyshv and Sergunin, 2011; Konyshv et al., 2017; Levit, 2014; Sergunin and Konyshv, 2016; Tikhonov, 2018). In their view, the Council should be gradually, step by step, further institutionalized and finally transformed to a ‘normal’ international organization with a proper legal status.

However, with the outbreak of a ‘new Cold War’ in the East-West relations, both the Kremlin and the Russian expert community serving the government realized that any plans to make the AC an intergovernmental international organization seem unrealistic. All Council member states introduced economic sanctions against Russia. Five Arctic countries, being NATO member states, cancelled military-to-military contacts with Russia, initiated military build-up in the North and increased their military activities, including land and sea military exercises, air and sea patrolling in the Arctic region and so on. Generally, mutual trust between Russia and the rest of the AC member states was significantly undermined. As mentioned above, the Russian activities in the Council’s framework decreased in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. It took some time to identify some areas where cooperation between Moscow and other Arctic countries was still possible and delineate them from the conflictual issues.

For the above reasons, Russian diplomats and politicians stopped to speak about providing the AC with new legal powers and its transformation from a ‘discussion forum’ to a full-fledged international organization. For example, the 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept calls only for “strengthening interaction in the Arctic Council’s format” without suggesting any institutional changes in the AC (Putin, 2016). The new Russian Arctic strategy of 2020 favors “securing for the Arctic Council the role of a key regional institution coordinating international activities in the region” (Putin, 2020) but again does not propose any modifications in its organization and functions. In his speech at the 2019 Rovaniemi AC ministerial meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov approved the initiatives, such as continuation of the Project Support Instrument, drafting an AC Strategic Action Plan, better coordination between different Council’s units and with other regional and subregional institutions but did not insist on providing the AC with new legal powers (Lavrov, 2019).

There can be at least two explanations why Russian leaders changed their mind about the Council’s status. First, in the current – conflictual – situation it is unrealistic to expect that non-Russian AC member states (especially the U.S.) would agree to create a new full-fledged regional intergovernmental organization where Russia would have an equal standing with Western states. Second, as some Russian experts (Sboichakova, 2016; Voronkov, 2014; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017) believe, under the current circumstances, the AC, being an informal and flexible institution, can be more efficient and preferable cooperative platform than a formalized organization with rigid structure, rules and procedures. For example, as ‘classical’ international organizations (e.g. UN and OSCE) demonstrate, if there are antagonisms between member states in the turbulent times the whole work of these institutions can be blocked. In contrast with these ‘traditional’ institutions, the AC not only ‘survived’ the crisis in the Russian-Western relations but also made some progress in developing Arctic cooperation. Some Russian experts even called the AC a ‘new-type multilateral organization’ which is more powerful than just an intergovernmental forum but less institutionalized and formalized than ‘classical’ international organization (Voronkov, 2014; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017).

One more important change in Russia’s perceptions of the Council’s future prospects relates to its role as a regional security provider. In the pre-Ukrainian era, both official Moscow and expert community believed that with time the AC should include the military security problematic to its mandate and become a sort of an Arctic OSCE (Konyshv and Sergunin, 2011; Konyshv et al., 2017; Sergunin and Konyshv, 2016; Wilson, 2016). However, for the same reasons as in the case of plans to turn the Council into an international organization, Moscow had to abandon the idea of including military security issues on the agenda of this forum. According to the present-day Russian assessments, the Council should retain its role as an international body dealing only with the ‘soft’ security issues, such as socioeconomic problems, environment, conservation of biodiversity, climate change mitigation, maritime safety, search and rescue operations, local communities, connectivity and social cohesiveness of Arctic regions, Arctic research, etc. (Lyapchev, 2016; Sboichakova, 2016; Voronchikhina, 2019; Voronkov, 2014; Voronkov and Smirnova, 2017).

At the same time, Moscow believes that discussion of soft and hard security issues between the Arctic states can be resumed in other formats, such as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, Arctic Chiefs of Defense Staff Conferences, and Arctic Security Forces Roundtable which slowed down or froze their activities in the aftermath of the Ukrainian and other international crises (Arctic Council, 2021).

As for Russia’s AC presidential agenda President Vladimir Putin was the first who tried to identify its main priorities. At the 5th International Arctic Forum “The Arctic – a Territory of Dialogue” in St. Petersburg (April 9, 2019) he noted: “Priorities for our chairmanship include vitally important themes for the Arctic development: the development of environmentally safe technologies in the spheres, such as industry, transport and energy” (International Arctic Forum, 2019).

One month later, at the 11th AC Ministerial Meeting (Rovaniemi, May 7, 2019) Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, on the one hand, emphasized Moscow's intention to ensure continuity between the Icelandic and Russian chairmanships: "We will ensure the continuity of the general Arctic agenda when the council chairmanship is transferred to Russia in 2021. We will pursue the implementation of all the initiatives originated under Reykjavik's chairmanship" (Lavrov, 2019).

On the other hand, Lavrov explained what specific priorities are planned for the Russian presidency agenda for 2021–2023: (1) sustainable socioeconomic development of the Arctic region on the basis of environmentally clean technologies; (2) development of renewable sources of energy; (3) promoting a circular economy; (4) environment protection; (4) climate change mitigation; (5) social cohesiveness and connectivity in the region; (6) improving the well-being of the people living in the Arctic, especially the indigenous peoples, preserving their languages, cultures and traditions; (7) science diplomacy, and (8) joint educational projects, including further support for the University of the Arctic (Lavrov, 2019).

In the course of Moscow's preparatory work, Russian top-ranking officials' clarified Moscow's specific priorities for the Russian AC chairmanship: (1) further development of Arctic shipping, including the NSR; (2) development of telecommunications in the region; (3) conservation of biodiversity; (4) increasing bio-security (anti-epidemic measures); (5) nuclear waste treatment; (6) organization of the Arctic indigenous peoples' summit; (7) Arctic cruise and coastal tourism; (8) establishment of an international Arctic Hydrogen Energy Applications and Demonstrations station 'Snowflake' (in the polar Ural), and (9) creation of an International Arctic Development Fund (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

According to the presidential advisor Anton Kobayakov, during the Russian chairmanship 38 various events will be organized under the Council's auspices. In addition, 50 other events are scheduled in Russia itself. 17 federal agencies, 11 members of the Russian Federation, and 12 universities and NGOs will take part in organization of these events (The Government of the Russian Federation, 2021).

At the May 2021 AC ministerial meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov identified four main priorities for the Russian AC chairmanship: 1. People of the Arctic, including indigenous peoples. 2. Environment protection, including climate change. 3. Sustainable socioeconomic development. 4. Strengthening of the Arctic Council (Arctic Council, 2021).

Rather lively discussions take place both in the Russian and foreign expert communities regarding the possible AC institutional reform under the Russian chairmanship. The moderate versions of these speculations suggest certain changes, including:

- Improvement of coordination of the Council's structural elements and implementation process.
- Better coordination of the AC activities with other regional and subregional institutions (Arctic Economic Council, Arctic Coast Guard Forum, BEAC, Nordic institutions, Northern Forum, etc.).
- Streamlining the secretariat system. Perhaps Moscow will try to implement David Balton's (former U.S. SAO and Senior Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Polar Institute) proposals which boil down to the idea of subordinating working groups' and task forces' secretariats to the Council's permanent secretariat (Balton, 2019). This plan, however, can provoke resistance not only from AC working groups and task forces but also from some SAOs who dislike the idea of making the Council's secretarial system more centralized because it could make the AC too bureaucratic (such accusations have been already made by some permanent participants, observers and international NGOs).
- Moscow welcomed the Icelandic chairmanship's successful efforts to adopt the AC Strategic Plan which was approved by the Council's member states at the May 2021 ministerial meeting in Reykjavik. Mr.

Lavrov promised that the Russian presidency will do the best in terms of implementation of this plan.

- Making the role of permanent participants and observers more visible. As Foreign Minister Lavrov underlined in his 2019 Rovaniemi statement: "We are interested in an effective, value-added mainstreaming of observers into the Arctic Council's activities. This status carries much responsibility" (Lavrov, 2019). As mentioned above, he was very positive about the 2018 SAO separate session with observers, where they presented measures undertaken to fight pollution in the Arctic and maintain its biodiversity. He promised to continue the practice of a more active involvement of permanent participants and observers not only to the working groups' and task forces' activities but also to the work of other AC units and structures. The Russian AC presidential program has confirmed Moscow's plans to encourage "the dialogue and interaction with the Observers to provide their meaningful and balanced engagement in the Council's activities" (Arctic Council, 2021).
- Some AC budget reform can be expected under the Russian presidency as well. Foreign Minister Lavrov (2019) has already promised to continue and further expand the AC Project Support Instrument where Russia is the major donor since this institution's very inception (Voronchikhina, 2019). Further AC budget's centralization, streamlining and increasing transparency are possible as well.

Some experts suggest a more radical version of the Council's institutional reform. For example, an international team of WWF (Dubois et al., 2016) proposed to distinguish between three type of the AC bodies:

- Knowledge-related bodies: working groups, task forces, expert groups and Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs). This group would be responsible for conducting all assessments, coordinating early warning work (identifying new and emerging issues), producing technical reports, coordinating science and research agendas, and ensuring use of traditional knowledge for co-production of new knowledge coming through the AC.
- Policy-related bodies: SAO and ministerial meetings. This group would develop and recommend policy options and actions based on the scientific assessments/reports and scientific recommendations submitted by the knowledge bodies.
- A newly created implementation body would consider decisions and recommendations as provided by ministers and operationalize them through developing general implementation plans. These plans would guide joint implementation through the Council and include clear timelines and measures to guide and support Arctic states in developing national implementation plans. The standards for implementation established by this body would constitute the benchmarks against which the effectiveness of national or other actions regarding implementation would be measured and reported on.

These experts believe that possible structural changes could strengthen the AC role in asserting regional stewardship by responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing Arctic and the increasingly more integrated policy frameworks from local to global scales. The problem is, however, whether the Russian presidency would have enough political will, authority and resources to implement such a radical institutional reform of the Council.

#### 4. Conclusions

Several conclusions emerge from the above analysis:

Moscow supported all major Council's endeavors in areas, such as sustainable development, energy security, environment protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation, conservation of biodiversity, maritime safety, SAR operations, connectivity of Arctic regions, telecommunications, sustainable fisheries, well-being of local communities

(including indigenous peoples) and so on. Russia favored further Council's institutionalization and strengthening its role in the regional governance system. In other words, Russia has a rather impressive record of being the Council's "good citizen".

At the same time, there were serious changes in Russia's thinking about the AC in the post-Ukrainian era. Moscow does not want any more to transform the Council into a full-fledged international organization preferring to keep the AC as an informal and flexible intergovernmental mechanism which is better designed for difficult times than 'classical' international organizations. Russia has also abandoned its previous plans to bring hard (military) security problematique onto the Council's agenda and currently it favors retaining the AC's competencies only in the soft security sphere.

As regards Russia's AC presidency for 2021-2023, on the one hand, it will ensure continuity of the Finnish and Icelandic chairmanship agendas and, on the other hand, it will focus on sustainable development of the Arctic region based on the use of environmentally safe technologies. Moscow will try to implement the newly born Council's Strategic Plan and streamline the AC's organizational structure. At the same time, it is unlikely that the Russian chairmanship will initiate any radical institutional reforms.

In general, Russia will likely use its AC presidency both to promote its national interests in the High North and increase the Council's role in an emerging regional governance system.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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