



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The Arctic Council is dying - time for a new model



Norway has taken on the thankless duty of chairing the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental body for cooperation in the region, for the next 2 years.

Norway's presidency could easily turn into the last 2 years of the Arctic Council, at least in the form it has existed so far.

The two-year presidency was handed over to Norway by Russia, which, with its aggression against Ukraine, has caused a blockade of this organisation since March last year.

The remaining seven members - the US, Canada, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, considered it impossible to cooperate with Russia in any international format due to its attack on Ukraine and have "paused" their membership for more than a year.

The handover took place as befits an organisation on life support - at an online meeting and with the participation of ambassadors, not ministers, of member states, as was once customary.

Norway's modest expectations

Norway is aware that it has taken over a hot potato and that major changes will take place during its "shift". That is why Norway's expectations regarding the leadership, but also the organisation itself, are modest and cautious.

"Probably, the most important outcome of our time as chair will be that we make sure that the Arctic Council survives", said Norwegian diplomat Morten Hoglund, the new Chair of senior Arctic officials, after taking office.

The Arctic Council has been in a bizarre, frozen atmosphere for the past year. The organisation was formally chaired by Russia, although none of the remaining members wanted to cooperate with it.

Expelling Russia from the Arctic Council, as was the case with some other international organisations, would not make much sense because Russia occupies half of the Arctic coast, and about half of the total 4 million people in the region live on its territory.

Established in 1996 as a mechanism for cooperation in areas such as sustainable development, environmental protection, research, and support for indigenous people, the Arctic Council was a successful post-Cold War platform whose goals were not hindered by geopolitics until Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Even though the task seems almost impossible, Norway believes it can keep the Arctic Council's mission alive.

Russia has already excluded itself

One of the options for the Arctic Council to continue to exist is joint work on those projects where Russia is not involved, which is 60-70% of about 130 current projects.

However, it would then be a completely new organisation based on different foundations and with a different scope than the previous Arctic Council.

While Norway has not lost hope, and with it some experts who care about the continuation of the Arctic Council's mission, Russia no longer feels part of this regional organisation

and has set itself other goals. Russia has already excluded itself.

Last February, Russia redefined the state's 2020 Arctic strategy by removing any multilateralism from it, the mention of the Arctic Council, and emphasised the protection of national interests in the Arctic area.

Russia's national interests in the Arctic are placed before cooperation in the areas of economy, science, technology, and culture, and they will be implemented on a "bilateral basis", no longer within the framework of regional organisations.

This strategy is a reflection of the overall Russian policy, which, in the conditions of the invasion of Ukraine and sanctions by the West, is looking for a way out by turning towards its partners in the East, primarily China.

It sees the Arctic as a great resource for the transport and exploitation of its main export assets - hydrocarbons and raw materials.

Russia abandoned the once-shared ambition to protect and improve the Arctic area as a sensitive and important global eco-unit, and instead puts its semi-monopoly on the surface and places the population into the function of industry and probably military capacities.

Russia is rapidly investing in ports and infrastructure for the exploitation and transportation of oil and gas on its Arctic coast, hoping that this region will be an important hub for its reorientation to eastern markets, particularly to China.

Last January, for example, the Russian government allocated \$60 million to improve navigation conditions through the Northern Sea Route, which it sees as its main alternative for exporting oil, gas, and raw materials.

Russia's goal is not to protect the Arctic

There are not many rational reasons for keeping the Arctic Council in the form it has existed until now.

It won't exist in such a form as long as the Russian aggression against Ukraine continues, but even after it ends, it is hard to imagine that it could return to its original mission.

"Russia's actions have forced upon us an unfortunate new reality, but they have not changed our commitment to the Arctic, Arctic communities, or Arctic cooperation", said Derek Chollet, Counsellor to the US Secretary of State last March, and announced that the US will continue to fund projects that have already begun.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine destroyed the Arctic Council's exclusivity regarding geopolitics and security issues, to which it had been immune since its establishment.

With its practical self-exclusion from the Council, Russia is paving the way to a separate Arctic alliance, in which friendly, non-Arctic countries, such as China, will also have access to the region.

"Even before the Ukraine war, Russia was at times concerned about being overly reliant on China", said Elana Wilson Rowe, a research professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo.

The goals of such an organisation will not be primarily focused on the research and protection of this area but on its economic and even military exploitation.

The response of the other Arctic Council's members should not include any Russian participation in the future.

Instead of trying to find a balance between excluding Russia and maintaining the

semblance of the Council's regular work, it is time for a new model of cooperation in the Arctic between those who care about it.