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Russian Media Coverage of Arctic Issues: Changes Since the Invasion of Ukraine

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Russian media coverage of Arctic issues has substantially changed since February 2022: it is now more inward-looking, referring less frequently to other countries. More importantly, the region is now predominantly framed as embroiled in both a race and a struggle, with other nations vying to steal Russian Arctic territories and access. This change occurred while Russian press agencies also operated a shift in coverage on Svalbard, by rarely referring to Norwegian presence or control over the territory. These three changes mark departures from Russian media coverage of the Arctic before the mass invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

The Arctic region has been unequivocally impacted by the Russia-Ukraine war. Relations between the West and Russia remain strained, with only a limited resumption of cooperation through the Arctic Council. As questions arise about resuming cooperation (is it desirable? If so, when, or how?), it seems relevant to look at how the Arctic region is portrayed in Russian discourses. The Observatory on Politics and Security in the Arctic (OPSA) brought together a team to analyze how the Arctic was described in Russian press agencies (Sputnik and TASS) from 2020 to the summer 2022 (Landriault et al., June 2022). This research aimed at analyzing Russian press agencies so as to gather intelligence on the types of stories and framing used in Russia to refer to the region. By focusing on English-language articles, we have gathered a sample of Arctic frames that Russia intended to promote to an international audience.

Although analyses extended to the summer of 2022, little movement was noticed in how Russia referred to the Arctic region after the invasion. This analysis was updated (albeit only looking at TASS) so as to highlight whether differences can be observed between how it was described before the invasion or in the immediate aftermath of the invasion and how it was portrayed during the first 5 months of 2024 (January 2024 to May 27 2024). Three key differences emerged, providing further empirical evidence of how Arctic relations have been impacted by global developments.

Emergence of a classic: the Arctic struggle / race frame

Two popular perceptions about the Arctic region have dominated headlines in popular media outlets since at least the early 2000s: the Arctic race and Arctic struggle perceptions. The former presents an unstoppable dash by both state and non-state actors to exploit Arctic resources and claim a piece of the region: this “race” is characterized by a feeling of urgency, as actors jockey for a position to hopefully seize a slice of the Arctic. This first frame is often presented alongside the second one: this is referred to as the Arctic race/struggle frame. In this view, this “race” will be dominated by competition and confrontation. The Arctic region is then presented as an arena of conflict. These pessimistic accounts were not solely observed in media outlets: they have been relayed at times by decision-makers. For example, former Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, promoted these frames in the second half of the 2000s when he insisted that Canada should “use it or lose it”, while referring to Canada’s Arctic sovereignty.

Before February 2022, mentions of the Arctic in Russian press agencies predominantly presented the Arctic region as one of peace and stability. Cooperation and partnerships dominated coverage, especially in relation to its commercial and scientific dimensions (Landriault et al., February 2022). After February 2022, Russian officials were also quick to promote these reassuring assessments but with caveats. For example, in October 2022, the commander of Russia’s Northern Fleet, Admiral Alexander Moiseyev, asserted that there was a “relative stability and absence of real challenges and threats to regional security in the Arctic” but that “the military-political situation in the region at the present stage is characterized by growing negative trends” (TASS, October 21, 2022). At the same time (October-November 2022), Russian users and allies on social media (Telegram, Twitter) were disseminating the idea that the U.S. was backing Ukraine in a nefarious plot to defeat Russia and to grab Russian Arctic resources and sea routes.

Upon analyzing articles published during the first 5 months of 2024, the tone has emerged as much darker and less ambivalent than Moiseyev’s previous assessment: the Arctic race/struggle is front and center and presented as obvious to readers, a position usually asserted by quoting Russian experts. First, the Arctic struggle is presented as natural, intemporal by TASS: “The Arctic has always been a zone of tense confrontation between various countries” (TASS, March 14 2024). In another instance, the proverbial Arctic pie is mentioned: “the interest in the Arctic is growing, all countries are trying to set foot, not to be late, when the pie is already cut” (TASS, March 4 2024). The Arctic race frame, as observed in other outlets, is mostly sketched as a race for resources: “Why has everyone rushed there? Arctic is a store of resources. Oil and gas, bio resources, ores, rare earth metals - lots of everything” (TASS, March 4, 2024).

In a classic victimization move, this confrontation is brought about by somebody else. Here, the United States is presented as the party responsible for this state of affairs, casting the region as a “possible future battlefield” (TASS, March 19 2024) or the “main arena for future confrontation” (TASS, March 7 2024). Giving intentions to the US dabbles in conspiracy theories as this posture is presented as solely “to benefit its defense-industrial complex” (TASS, March 19 2024) or that the war in Ukraine was just a pretext for the US to expand NATO in the North with the additions of Sweden and Finland (TASS, March 7 2024).

The language of the "special military operation" and the Arctic

The special vocabulary developed by the Kremlin as part of their war in Ukraine spilled over into how Arctic issues are addressed. Mentions of "anti-Russian" sanctions and the references to friendly and unfriendly countries were widespread in these articles.

The militarization of discourses was also commonplace as every Arctic development is explained through a military prism. In all cases, either the US or the West is presented using terms that are offensive in nature, while Russia portrays itself as a victim defending its interests against Western countries plotting to steal Arctic resources and territories. For example, the West is framed as holding a "traditional desire - to take away from everyone and divide among themselves. The Americans are all right (sic) with creativity. They have both grand conceptions to cover up their actions, and pirate-like approach: to rob everything that can be robbed" (TASS, February 15 2024). In yet another article, TASS reporters claim that "The US and its allies are driven by the desire to embroil Russia into a geopolitical confrontation, aimed at preventing Russia from obtaining leadership positions in polar regions, and to ensure unhindered access to resources and transportation routes in the region" (TASS, May 17 2024).

Military language is predominant in these assessments. For example, Arctic geopolitics in general is described as a "war for resources, northern transport routes, territories, influence and so on" (TASS, March 7 2024). The focus on environmental threats that could emerge from the Russian Arctic is also couched as an aggression on Russia. A TASS article reacted to an article published in The Guardian: the British newspaper had reported that dangerous pathogens could surface from the Russian Arctic as a result of permafrost thaw. TASS then promptly proceeded to interview a Russian expert framing The Guardian' article as an "attempt to interfere with this country's internal affairs", highlighting that this was part of a broader struggle: "From a political point of view, we are currently fighting for the Arctic shelf and the Northern Sea Route. Therefore, as part of this struggle, they come up with all sorts of stories to take control of something or to limit someone" (TASS, January 26 2024).

These articles constitute a fascinating account as to how Western sanctions actively impact the Russian Arctic. On the one hand, Russian Northern communities have faced negative consequences from these sanctions, such as importing duties slapped on Russian goods, increased costs for Russian companies to reorient to new exporting markets, reduced demand on Russian LNG, barred access to Western laboratories to study artifacts and fossils, and lower numbers of tourists travelling the Russian Arctic. On the other hand, TASS has stressed that sanctions did not yield any significant impact on Russia and sanctions were actually beneficial, forcing the country to find alternatives and generating "potential for the further growth of exports" (TASS, January 17 2024). The abstract and often general nature of the latter claims can however be contrasted with the very specific ways in which Russian Arctic communities are negatively impacted: the former seems to outweigh the latter.

The evolution of the war in Ukraine and of Arctic relations can be reflected in the countries mentioned and the topics raised in these different articles. One can observe a diversity of countries mentioned as Russia attempts to divert its Arctic relations away from Western countries. Although the United States is still the most often mentioned country in these accounts, mentions of Arctic partnerships with India and China are more numerous than before the invasion. Further, unlikely countries are also involved: initiatives including Mongolia, Indonesia,

Myanmar and Vietnam are presented to readers so as to illustrate how Russia can strike collaboration agreements with new partners. In some instances, TASS went on to unveil the relevance of these new partnerships to readers: “It is obvious to us what a strong Arctic program China has got. India, in terms of the Himalayas, is interested in developing the “three poles” concept, in comprehensive studies of perennially frozen soils. Arab countries show interest in developing logistics routes” (TASS, February 13 2024). Western countries on the other hand were mostly mentioned in the context of sanctions or NATO and framed as obstacles or challenges to Russia. Overall, most stories did not reference any country other than Russia: about 66% of articles only referred to developments within Russia without mentioning the outside world. This last feature points towards Russian press agencies being more inward-looking than they were before the invasion, in the case of the Arctic anyway. However, a more problematic discursive shift can be observed on the issue of Svalbard.

A problematic discursive shift on Svalbard

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not immediately spur a change of tone in relation to Svalbard. Instead, subsequent sanctions highlighted this turning point, especially the inspection of a Russian cargo transiting through Norway before being sent to Svalbard. This event unfolded in late June 2022 and was resolved on July 6, with Norway agreeing to let the cargo go through after inspecting it.

By analyzing articles published by TASS on Svalbard from 2019 to May 2024, a rather significant difference in how Svalbard (or Spitsbergen) is described before and after this incident can be observed. Before this episode, Norwegian sovereignty and presence in Svalbard was often mentioned and at times emphasized. The territory was referred to as “Norway’s Svalbard”, “The Norwegian polar archipelago of Spitsbergen”, and it was hinted that Svalbard “is in Norway”. In more political stories, reports emphasized that Russia never questioned Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard. In total, before the June/July 2022 incident, 63% of TASS articles mentioning Svalbard acknowledged or recognized Norwegian sovereignty or presence in Svalbard. This number dropped to 53% for articles published between the 2022 inspection event and the rest of 2022, and to 21% for articles published from January 2023 to May 2024.

In articles published after 2023, the quasi-absence of mentions of Norwegian sovereignty or presence gave the impression that Norway was absent from the territory, with only Russia laying down plans and investing in the archipelago. At other times, articles were ambiguous about Norwegian presence, pointing that the “Spitsbergen Archipelago is located on the border between Russia and Norway” and that settlements inhabited by Russians in Svalbard are “in the Russian territory” (TASS, April 9 2024). This development must be monitored to figure out whether it is temporary or a sign of a more permanent shift in Russian rhetoric towards Norway.

Conclusion

The following briefing note aimed at providing evidence as to how Arctic discourses have recently shifted in Russia. TASS coverage is markedly influenced by the war in Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions: the Arctic region is not exceptional or isolated from these developments. More importantly, the most significant shift is in the support and promotion by Russia of the Arctic race/ struggle frame. This logic of confrontation is well established in TASS and usually supported by both the press agency and experts quoted in the articles. It is not

presented as a possibility but as fact, a reality: one against which Russia and Arctic states must prepare and react accordingly. It is difficult to envision cooperation between Arctic states emerging from this dark assessment of Arctic geopolitics; something to keep in mind as we assess the likelihood of reestablishing full circumpolar cooperation between the 8 Arctic states.

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