

# **FEELING THE CHILL: NAVIGATING ARCTIC GOVERNANCE AMID RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE**

**Joanna Hosa**

May 2023

---

## **SUMMARY**

- Russia's war on Ukraine has highlighted the strategic importance of the Arctic and upended structures of cooperation between the western Arctic states and Russia, including the Arctic Council.
- The Arctic Council includes six organisations of indigenous peoples alongside the eight Arctic states, providing a platform for inclusive governance and the recognition and representation of the Arctic's indigenous population.
- The participation of indigenous peoples in Arctic governance is key to upholding Europe's values-based foreign policy and effective governance in the region, particularly against the backdrop of Russia's values war with the West.
- The war has divided the Arctic into two camps – one including the Western Arctic states and the other comprising the Russian Arctic – with both sides exploring alternative avenues for cooperation.
- In this uncertain context, European governments need to preserve indigenous peoples' participation in existing and emerging forums of cooperation.

The motto ‘nothing about us without us’ has long been used by Ukrainians to demand that their voices are heard on issues that directly affect them, whether deciding on the Normandy Format – the grouping of states formed in an attempt to resolve the war in Donbas in 2014 – or building the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline. As Russia’s war on Ukraine brings more attention to the Arctic, its people have taken up the same refrain. With the region’s geopolitical importance growing, it is essential that they are involved in discussions about its future.

The effects of rapid climate change in the Arctic, its militarisation, and the hype surrounding its potential in natural resources have attracted international attention to the region in recent years. In this context, the inhabitants of the Arctic, particularly its indigenous peoples, often stress that it should not be considered as a future military base or the next target of unbridled resource exploitation. Instead, governments should work to protect it and preserve its nature. The Arctic’s indigenous communities – some of which are still reeling from a painful history of colonisation – have long fought to have their voices heard and be present at the decision-making table. Despite the long road ahead, they have made some progress, including growing recognition of their rights at the [United Nations](#), the [European Union](#), and at national levels.

Indigenous organisations have gained representation at the Arctic Council, which has become their most significant platform and crucial for sharing their perspectives on governance of the Arctic region. This leading forum for Arctic cooperation includes the eight Arctic states – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States – as well as six organisations of indigenous peoples of the Arctic as “permanent participants.” Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has upended structures of cooperation in the region, including the Arctic Council. In March 2022, it suspended its activities in response to Russia’s invasion, largely depriving the indigenous people of this key forum.

In May 2023, Norway successfully took over the chair of the Arctic Council from Russia, furthering hopes that Arctic cooperation can be revived. However, the future of the forum remains uncertain, and it is unclear to what extent the Arctic Council can include Russia in its work while the war in Ukraine continues. In this context, indigenous peoples are amplifying their demands for inclusion in other forms of cooperation and positioning themselves as indispensable partners in the region.

Involving indigenous people in policymaking can strengthen European foreign policy. As the Arctic’s global importance increases, European Arctic states will need robust relationships with the local population to govern effectively and champion European priorities in the turbulent times ahead. If they want to build strong partnerships with the indigenous communities in the region, they need to support their aspirations for recognition and

representation.

Such an approach would also uphold Europe's commitment to a values-based foreign policy and help it overcome its legacy of colonisation in the Arctic. This is particularly relevant in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, which Moscow frames as a war of values against the West. Russia's use of force in neighbouring countries, tight control of its own regions, and close relationships with authoritarian nations such as China – including in the Arctic – underline the contrast between Europe and Russia. In their relations with indigenous peoples of the Arctic, European states should uphold their core values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights. This is not only the right thing to do morally, it would also strengthen Europe's position vis-à-vis Russia, both on Arctic issues and beyond.

This paper examines how the people of the Arctic – the indigenous peoples and regional governments alike – have been involved in Arctic policymaking, how Russia's war on Ukraine has changed Arctic governance and indigenous participation therein, and how European policymakers can ensure that indigenous peoples' voices are heard and that they are involved in shaping the future of the region. It focuses on two Arctic entities: Greenland – which remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark – and the Canadian territory of Nunavut, which, though not in Europe, serves as a valuable case study of indigenous governance and reveals some of the challenges facing the people of the Arctic. Both these territories have majority indigenous populations: in Nunavut, the Inuit constitute 83.7 per cent of the total population, while in Greenland the population is 88 per cent Inuit.

## Arctic people and governance

### Different Arctics

Looking at a map, one could assume that the Arctic is one mostly homogeneous area, like Antarctica. But it differs from Antarctica in many ways. Antarctica is uninhabited and is governed by a comprehensive Antarctic Treaty that aims to ensure peaceful use and scientific cooperation on the continent. By contrast, the Arctic land is inhabited and is divided between eight sovereign states. Seven of the Arctic states are some of the world's most progressive democracies, while Russia has become a highly centralised authoritarian state under the rule of Vladimir Putin.

There are significant geopolitical and economic differences between these Arctic territories. Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland are small countries with strong northern identities and

their Arctic territories are close to the centres of power. Due to the warm Gulf Stream ocean current that envelops northern Europe, the temperatures in these parts are higher than in the American Arctic, making it easier to develop and maintain settlements there. By contrast, the Arctic parts of Canada, the US, and Denmark are far from the national capitals; this distance and the resulting isolation is palpable and winter temperatures can drop well below minus 30 degrees Celsius. As a result, these regions have long lacked investment and sometimes even been neglected, as their central governments and businesses considered the cost of the cold too high to invest more in them.

The Russian Arctic is a world of its own. It is relatively heavily populated: of the around 4 million people that live in the Arctic, half are in Russia. This is because Russia has followed a consistent strategy of industrialisation of the Arctic, unlike other Arctic states. In pursuit of natural resources, the Soviet Union built industrial complexes and vast cities from scratch in the Arctic and conducted mass deportations to relocate people to the far north. Analysts have argued that this level of Arctic investment was unsustainable and, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, became the source of Russia's great economic weakness. Nevertheless, Russia has again gradually increased its Arctic investments over the last two decades – this time mostly focused on the development of the Northern Sea Route – and the number of military bases there, especially since it annexed Crimea.

Over the years, strategic documents of the different Arctic states have revealed these diverging priorities, with notable differences between the strategies of the seven democracies and that of Russia. While the democracies have prioritised the environment and sustainable development, Russia has focused on development above all, with very little interest in sustainability.

The people of the Arctic are equally diverse. The biggest indigenous group is the Inuit, whose population is estimated at over 180,000 people scattered across northern Canada, Denmark and Greenland, Alaska (a state of the US), and Russia. In Europe there are around 80,000 Sami – the only indigenous people in the EU – present in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Apart from the indigenous populations who have lived in the far north for thousands of years, there are also those who settled there much later, such as the Danes who arrived in Greenland with the missionary, Hans Egede, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or Europeans who followed the 16<sup>th</sup>-century English explorer, Martin Frobisher, to Baffin Island.

The Arctic states have taken different approaches to incorporating indigenous peoples into policymaking. In the democratic countries, after a long period of colonisation, indigenous peoples have increasingly gained more rights and representation. There is a patchwork of institutions that represent them, while some others, including the regional governments,

represent the public at large. By contrast, in Russia, the Arctic is divided into federal constituent territories, whose governors are appointed by Moscow. The territories have little autonomy, and indigenous peoples are not involved in policymaking.

## Arctic Council cooperation

Despite these differences, the Arctic states and communities of indigenous peoples have found a way to cooperate through the Arctic Council. Ironically given the effects of Russia's aggression on the organisation, it was the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1987 launched the Murmansk Initiative with the goal to 'de-securitise' the Arctic. During the cold war, both the US and the Soviet Union stored significant military arsenals in the area, including intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. When the conflict ended, the governments of the Arctic states decided to transform it from a military theatre into a zone of peace. Almost a decade later, in 1996, they established the Arctic Council. In the spirit of de-securitisation, its founding document, the Ottawa Declaration, explicitly states that the Arctic Council "should not deal with matters related to military security."

Instead, the Arctic Council aims to preserve the fragile environment in the region and foster sustainable development. It is structured around six working groups, which focus on contaminants, the monitoring and assessment of environmental change, conservation of flora and fauna, emergency prevention, the protection of the marine environment, and sustainable development. The Ottawa Declaration is not a treaty and so agreements made within the Arctic Council are not legally binding.

Moving away from a military focus was a big achievement and a notable change of course. However, the motivation to cooperate was always driven by the threat of confrontation that the Arctic had experienced during the cold war. Academics and analysts have held vivid discussions about whether the Arctic is a zone of cooperation or confrontation – and if the former, how long it can remain so. But diplomatic circles have mostly been determined for the Arctic to remain an exceptional sphere of cooperation. The seven democracies wanted to compartmentalise relations with Russia to keep the Arctic stable and peaceful. Indeed, the Arctic Council survived major upheavals, including Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Canada was the Arctic Council's chair at the time and suggested limited sanctions against Russia, such as boycotting meetings in Moscow, but was criticised by other member states for breaking the holy rule of not letting other conflicts spread into the Arctic.

The Arctic Council has taken steps to ensure the participation of indigenous peoples. The Ottawa Declaration opens by affirming its "commitment to the well-being of the inhabitants of the Arctic" and stresses the contribution of the indigenous peoples in particular, explicitly

stating that they will play a key role in the Arctic Council. To foster true cooperation, in an innovative step, the Arctic Council includes six organisations of indigenous peoples as equal partners: the Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Saami Council. These communities can fully participate in all working groups, actively shaping the agenda and development of this key institution for Arctic governance.

## Upheaval of Russia's war

### Suspension of the Arctic Council

Despite the Arctic Council's previous efforts to prevent conflicts elsewhere from affecting its work, it suspended its activities shortly after Russia's invasion in 2022. Russia had only assumed its two-year chairmanship of the organisation in May 2021. It had planned an ambitious programme of activities focusing on four areas: Arctic inhabitants and indigenous peoples, environmental protection and climate change, socio-economic development, and strengthening the Arctic Council. Despite tensions between Russia and the West reaching new heights, in 2021 experts and diplomats expected that Arctic cooperation would prevail, and that the Russian chairmanship would be fruitful. [1]

However, it was not to be. On 3 March 2022, the other seven Arctic states issued a statement condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They wanted to make a stand and, more pragmatically, they were no longer in a position to travel to Russia for meetings and decided to pause all Arctic Council cooperation until further notice. Russia considered this to be an irrational step and feigned surprise and incomprehension: after all, the Arctic was supposed to be the unique area where cooperation was possible regardless of what was happening elsewhere in the world. Moscow argued that the Arctic Council exists to foster environmental protection of this fragile region and socio-economic development and should therefore prevail despite confrontation elsewhere.

The pause might seem like a mild step – after all, Russia was not suspended or excluded, as it was from the Council of Europe, for example. However, by Arctic Council standards this was unprecedented and reflected the belief that without Russia – the biggest Arctic state – the organisation’s rationale is less apprehensible. Many Arctic stakeholders feared that decades of Arctic cooperation risked being lost, including numerous joint research projects, conservation work, environmental protection, and the achievement of such prominent inclusion of indigenous peoples in decision-making processes. This is why Norway, as the next chair holder, made it its priority to restart the work of the Arctic Council in May 2023.

## Greenland’s pitch for independence

Russia’s war has highlighted the strategic significance of the Arctic and brought to the fore issues ranging from environmental risks related to Russia’s non-cooperation in the region to the threat of military escalation. Amid this increased attention, Greenland has amplified its calls for recognition and participation in decision-making.

In recent years Greenland has been attracting more and more interest and gaining respect on the international scene. It made headlines when President Donald Trump proposed purchasing the island in 2019 for its strategic location. Worldwide, it had previously inspired investors who were struck by the promise of a natural resources rush. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, Greenland captured analysts’ imagination as an example of a country that had left the EU.

Greenland already enjoys a degree of self-government. It has had its own government since 1979, when it gained home rule after being a Danish colony since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, becoming an autonomous region within the Kingdom of Denmark. This was a long-held dream for the Inuit, who suffered from the destruction of their traditional communal life, forced Christianisation, and suppression of their language under colonisation. In Denmark many people treated them as second-class citizens and thought they were unable to govern themselves. Greenlanders living in Denmark have likewise faced discrimination. According to the UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people, discrimination and racism of Greenlanders by the Danish authorities is an ongoing problem.

In 2009, under the Self Rule Act, Greenland gained the right to declare full independence. At the same time, the government’s portfolio broadened to include trade, energy, and minerals, while foreign and security policy remain the responsibility of Copenhagen. The government has exercised this autonomy, taking a particularly strong stand in managing Greenland’s mineral resources. The latest government, led by the left-wing Inuit Ataqatigiit party, came to



power on an anti-mining platform and has so far managed to halt the development of a rare minerals mining project on Kvanefjeld mountain, in the agricultural region of south Greenland, which would have produced radioactive uranium and therefore prompted widespread protests.[2] Greenland already has a foreign ministry, but in order to gain full independence – which remains the goal of all major political parties in Greenland – it now needs to develop its own foreign and security policy.

Greenland has long been important for US security due to its strategic position in the Arctic, close to both north America and Europe. The US Thule Air Base, which includes a deep-sea port and an airfield, has been located in northern Greenland since 1943, after Denmark authorised the US to defend the island from potential German aggression. After the second world war, it remained an outpost to monitor Soviet military activity in the far north, then lost some of its relevance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ensuing distrust between Russia and the West made Greenland's strategic importance more evident again. As Russia increased its military presence in the Arctic, the US could monitor Russia's north or track possible intercontinental ballistic missiles from the Thule Air Base. As a result, the long-neglected Inuit government of Greenland began to gain more respect and recognition from Copenhagen, and the Danish government began sharing more information with Greenland.[3] Greenland also began to enjoy greater recognition at the Arctic Council – not yet as a separate entity, but leading the Danish delegation since 2021. In 2020, the US re-established a consulate in Greenland's capital city, Nuuk, and, in a sign of respect, renamed the Thule Air Base to Pituffik Space Base, to include its original Inuit name, in April 2023. The EU, keen to be more present in the Arctic, also began plans to set up its own office in Nuuk.

In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, Greenland has been seeking to capitalise on its increased strategic importance to further emancipate itself. Since the invasion, the Greenlandic government has taken steps to put its foreign policy into action and present itself as an important, responsible partner in the region. In an unprecedented step, right after 24 February 2022, Greenland's new prime minister, Mute Egede, announced that Greenland would join Western sanctions against Russia. His clear, outspoken position surprised experts and diplomats, who noted that Greenland was traditionally keen to keep good relations with Russia and others and therefore does not typically pick sides.[4]

The war in Ukraine might resonate particularly in Greenland because of its own colonial history. Western observers and Ukrainian activists often depict Russia's war as an anti-colonial struggle, in which Kyiv is fighting against an oppressor who believes that Ukrainians should not govern themselves. This narrative could also support Greenland's aspirations for independence. If Western states are defending the oppressed in Ukraine, they should apply



the same logic to the people that they once subjugated in the Arctic. As such, the cause of Greenlandic independence is likely to find more empathetic ears than ever before.

Greenland also wants to be part of security discussions. While some Greenlanders see the American-held Pituffik Space Base as a nuisance or yet another example of external interference on Greenland's territory, it now gives Greenland more status in discussions with both Denmark and the US.[5] The Greenlandic government has shown that the Inuit are not only interested in the environment and fisheries, but increasingly want a seat at the table when it comes to foreign policy and 'hard security' matters.[6]

## Nunavut's call for investment

Russia's invasion has also had repercussions for the far north of Canada, shining a light on its strategic importance and the need for investment in its infrastructure and people. Despite being Canada's biggest territory, Nunavut remains largely unknown, not only internationally, but also within Canada itself. When it comes to Arctic governance, its 38,780-strong population is not represented in the Arctic Council (unlike Greenland), with Ottawa representing Canada. The vocal Canadian chapter of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) – one of the six permanent participants of the Arctic Council – fills part of this gap. The ICC was formed in 1980 and aspires to be the “united voice of the Arctic,” with participation of the Inuit from Canada, the US, Greenland, and Russia. But although this group quickly gained recognition and then a seat in the Arctic Council, it remains a non-governmental organisation, with limited funding and powers.

Nunavut has a complicated relationship with the rest of Canada, marked by deep post-colonial trauma. Many Inuit in Nunavut see Canada as a colonial power that forced their nomadic ancestors to settle and abandon their traditions and livelihoods. Previously self-sufficient, the Inuit became disorientated and dependent on supplies from other parts of Canada. In a particularly damaging policy, the federal government forcibly took Inuit children away from their families and sent them to residential schools where they were assimilated into the dominant population. In recent decades, the realisation of the physical and sexual abuse committed between the 1870s and the 1990s in the mostly church-run, but government-sponsored, schools has shaken Canada and led to comprehensive truth and reconciliation efforts. Despite these efforts, many Nunavut families remain deeply traumatised by the residential school system.

Canada established Nunavut as its newest territory in 1999, in recognition of the Inuit will and right to govern themselves. Its founding acts, the Nunavut Act and the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act, allowed the people of Nunavut to set up their own government and manage

some of their land. This was a long-held dream for the Inuit, for which negotiations took decades.[7] The government renamed the colonial town of Frobisher Bay to Iqaluit (meaning “the place of many fish” in Inuktitut, the principal Inuit language in Canada) in 1987. Iqaluit became a booming capital which now hosts an array of territorial and national institutions, responsible for a wide variety of policies, including economic development, climate change, public health, transport, education, justice, culture, and finance. Its population has doubled since 1999 and today Iqaluit has 7,429 inhabitants; its inhabitants joke that half of them work in some kind of government institution. [8]

However, the Nunavut government does not own the land. The 1999 agreements established “Inuit-owned” lands, which are managed by the private Inuit company Nunavut Tunngavik Inc (NTI). Some argue that NTI has more say in Nunavut than the actual government. While the government is a public body that represents all citizens of Nunavut, NTI protects Inuit interests above all else. There are therefore regular arguments between the two bodies. The NTI is often distrustful of the government, regularly accusing it and even suing it for not doing enough for the Inuit, including not employing enough Inuit in the governmental departments.[9] The government and the NTI recently signed a Partnership Declaration, in which they pledge to work more closely together for the sake of Inuit prosperity, but divisions remain. The government is therefore often frustrated and does not have much influence, both within Canada and internationally. [10]

The people of Nunavut want to take more responsibility for their own affairs, gain more power, and ultimately change Nunavut from a territory to a province. But these ambitions are complicated by many factors, including a lack of healthcare, deep trauma from the history of the residential schools, as well as the mental health and social problems they created, high unemployment, a housing shortage, and a distrust in education (in large part due the destruction of the former Inuit way of life through modern education). The territory also has much less well-developed infrastructure than Greenland does and needs much more investment. What is more, there is an insufficient workforce to address these problems. While incomers are needed and welcome, they are often referred to or even self-identify as “settlers”, suggesting their separateness and perhaps temporary status.

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has provided an impetus to change this dynamic, improve cooperation between Ottawa and Nunavut, and propel the Canadian government to invest more funds and energy into the territory’s development. The war has brought international attention to Nunavut. In August 2022 NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg visited Cambridge Bay in Nunavut to assess the state of NATO’s northern defences. With the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, he discussed how Canada can assert its sovereignty and protect the area and the north American continent at large. A few months earlier, Canada pledged

to invest 4.9 billion Canadian dollars in the modernisation of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), the binational military command that the US and Canada established in 1958 that has radars and other facilities located in Nunavut. The visit also highlighted the importance of the indigenous peoples in Nunavut. In Cambridge Bay Trudeau noted, “We can never forget that sovereignty doesn’t come through soldiers or scientists. Sovereignty comes through the people who’ve lived here for millennia.”

This attention has amplified the Nunavut government’s appeals for change. Along with the premiers of two other Canadian northern territories (Yukon and Northwest Territories), the premier of Nunavut, PJ Akeeagok, has condemned Russia’s war in Ukraine. The three premiers have also argued that to assert its sovereignty, Canada needs a resilient population in the north. They maintain that if Canada is to continue to own the land and increasingly use it for NATO’s northern defence, it has a responsibility to prioritise the well-being and needs of the people who live there. Projects like the NORAD modernisation help strengthen the overall security of north America, but the inhabitants of Nunavut want additional attention and investment on areas that are more important to them, including critical infrastructure, healthcare, housing, food security, and education.

## Russia’s muted north

While the Inuit in Denmark and Canada have been moving towards more self-government and attempting to overcome their colonial legacy, their counterparts in Russia are in a very different position. In Russia, indigenous peoples – the Inuit, the Sami, and other less populous peoples – have long been minorities that are assimilated into Russian society and do not have a say on governance, despite an official rhetoric that indigenous populations matter. While the Sami have a parliament in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, they do not have one in Russia.

In Russia, even indigenous associations are not free. The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) is an ostensibly non-governmental organisation with a seat in the Arctic Council but has in fact long been an arm of the government. In 2012 it was taken over by new leadership that is fully aligned with the Russian government. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, it published a letter expressing its full support for Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine.

A new organisation, the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, whose representatives now live outside Russia, have made statements against the war, expressed outrage at the position of RAIPON, and appealed that it should no longer be considered a legitimate representative of Russia’s indigenous peoples. However, it is RAIPON that has a

seat at the Arctic Council – there are currently no efforts to exclude it. [11]

Russia's war on Ukraine has had a strong negative impact on the indigenous peoples of Russia. They have little choice but to support the war as they could otherwise face persecution or, if they openly oppose it, prison. Many have been drafted into the army (reliable figures are not available). Moscow seems to have no qualms about wasting the lives of its soldiers and of minorities in particular. Many indigenous citizens, who are generally worse off than ethnic Russians, have voluntarily joined the army due to their difficult socio-economic situation.

## Paths forward

Despite the war and the differences between the Arctic states that have come to the fore, Arctic diplomats, scientists, and the ICC agree that the Arctic Council can only serve its purpose with the involvement of Russia. [12] In order to make progress on environmental protection or search and rescue operations, Russia's contribution is essential. Norway was determined to restart the work of the Arctic Council under its chairmanship for 2023-2025, and managed to organise an orderly takeover meeting from the Russian leadership in May 2023.

The handover meeting was low key and held online. After the handover, all eight Arctic states published a joint statement that expressed their commitment to safeguard and strengthen the Arctic Council. As the first common statement made since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this was a noteworthy development. However, the document was otherwise rather vague and the future of cooperation with Russia remains unclear. The other Arctic states do not envisage high-level political cooperation with Moscow, planning to simply resume low-level and scientific cooperation. The Norwegian senior Arctic official, Morten Høglund, stated that Norway's main priority is to make sure the Arctic Council survives. Meanwhile, Russia asserts that it wants to be a member of the organisation. Following the handover meeting, the Russian senior Arctic official, Nikolai Korchnov, said that Russia will stay in the Arctic Council as long as it serves its interests. But a few days later he claimed that if Russia is not invited to meetings in Norway, Moscow would consider this a violation of its rights and would withdraw from the organisation. Keeping the Arctic Council whole is therefore bound to be a challenge.

Some analysts believe that if multilateral cooperation cannot continue, bilateral cooperation with Russia would still be possible in the far north in fields where both sides have a strong interest. Norway's latest fisheries agreement with Russia is a case in point. Despite tensions, the Joint Norwegian-Russian Fisheries Commission has continued its work and in October 2022 managed to agree on fishing quotas for the Barents Sea, with the goal of maintaining it as

a sustainable fishing area. However, bilateral cooperation risks limiting the exchanges to national capitals and excluding the people of the Arctic in the process. And many will be reluctant to cooperate bilaterally with Russia. Indeed, Greenland took a different approach to fisheries from Norway, informing Moscow in December 2022 that no Russian ships would have access to its waters.

On a municipal level, prospects for cooperation also look grim. Western Arctic cities have been cutting twinning agreements with Russian cities, especially with Murmansk, where the mayor, Andrei Chibis, was particularly vocal in his support for the war and very active in looking for new recruits, promising extra monetary rewards to “patriots of the Arctic.” And when it comes to cooperation between indigenous NGOs, the ICC no longer works with its Russian chapter. Sami organisations have also been divided, as some Sami leaders in Russia made pro-war statements, and in April 2022 the Saami Council suspended relations with Russian Sami organisations.

## Turning inwards

Cooperation with Russia is now difficult, if not impossible, both within the Arctic Council and bilaterally. As a result, the Arctic has divided into two major parts, which are mainly turning inwards. The Western Arctic states are strengthening their camp, while Russia is focused on internal cooperation within the Russian Arctic. Russia is also looking for new external partnerships with non-Arctic states, particularly with China and India. There are rumours that Russia is thinking of setting up a new Arctic organisation with these two countries.

Since the covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, major Arctic conferences, such as the Arctic Circle or Arctic Frontiers, have grown, welcoming more participants for a wider range of discussions that connected scientists, policymakers, businesses, academia, and indigenous peoples. Some diplomats and analysts believe that these platforms could be the beginning of a new type of organisation with a more agile form of cooperation than the Arctic Council. The conferences are not constrained by strict agreements, fixed workgroups, or regular participants, and they do not happen behind closed doors. Instead, they provide an opportunity for various actors to network and set up events, putting the priorities of the many stakeholders on the agenda. In Nunavut, some see the increasing popularity of the Arctic Circle conference as an opportunity for greater visibility and a way to have their voices heard. [13] In this spirit, the three Canadian Arctic premiers used the 2022 Arctic Circle Forum in Greenland as a platform to voice their pleas for more investment. The indigenous peoples of the Arctic have also regularly spoken there, raising the profile of the issues that most concern them and advocating for more inclusion.

However, the Arctic Circle insists it has no ambitions to replace the Arctic Council. It intends to be an agile conference that can foster inclusive discussion, but maintains that the Arctic Council should prevail and remain the key forum for cooperation in the region. [14] The 2022 edition of the Arctic Circle conference was indeed inclusive in its participants, including for example a notable exchange between a NATO general and Chinese ambassador – not about the Arctic, but about Ukraine. But this spirit of inclusivity currently stops at Russia: in 2022, no Russian delegates were invited to Reykjavik for the event.

Meanwhile, despite the official pause of the Arctic Council, Russia organised multiple meetings under the banner of the organisation. Alexei Chekunkhov, the minister of development of Russia's far east, argued that this makes sense as “half of the global Arctic is in Russia.” Summing up Russia's chairmanship, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov reported that Russia organised over a hundred events. With the other Arctic Council members absent, these meetings have mostly aimed at internal coordination of Arctic activities within Russia. However, Russia has also been involving international partners from everywhere but the West. Moscow claimed that at one of the biggest Arctic events, its International Forum in St Petersburg, participants joined from over 80 countries. Moreover, in July 2022, Putin approved Russia's new naval doctrine, which stresses the importance of the Arctic for Russia's security, identifies NATO and the US as a threat, and foresees the development of the region as a “strategic resource base” in line with Russia's national interests. Following the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been keen to reiterate its Arctic ambitions and determination to pursue its Arctic policies, regardless of what the West makes of them.

In this climate of dissociation and distrust, NATO is becoming an increasingly important actor. Finland is now a NATO member, and once Sweden joins, Russia will be the only Arctic state that is not part of the alliance. With its non-security focus and as the key institution in the Arctic, the Arctic Council managed to set a cooperative agenda, which then dominated debates in the region, largely overshadowing security discussions. If the Arctic Council becomes less prominent, and especially if NATO becomes more important, this focus is likely to shift, and security considerations could soon dominate Western approaches to the Arctic. If this becomes the case, indigenous peoples will likely be excluded, as defence is still strictly the domain of national capitals. NATO and its member states need to prevent this and find a way to include the indigenous peoples in security and defence discussions, by ensuring they are represented in meetings and liaising with local governments.

As the Western Arctic works together more closely, there is much more room for transatlantic cooperation beyond NATO. European Arctic states run many projects together, focusing on culture, education, research, and business, and the EU's growing interest in the region is



likely to give birth to even more initiatives. However, there is significantly less cooperation between the north American and the European Arctic.

Nunavut is also looking for new forms of cooperation with Greenland. Discussions with the people of Nunavut reveal their desire to work more closely with Greenland, increase opportunities for cultural and business partnerships, and strengthen their common Inuit identity. However, an invisible wall runs through Baffin Bay. There are no regular transport connections between Nunavut and Greenland, apart from the occasional charter flight. While Nunavut has developed its institutions and policies in line with those from other parts of Canada, some say that it has more in common with Greenland than it does with any other part of Canada.[15] Culturally this is perhaps true and some cultural projects exist between the two, but otherwise there are few political or societal exchanges. Nunavut is rooted in the Canadian system and Greenland has fixed links to Europe.

There seems to be a will to change this on the part of the political leadership too: in August 2022, Nunavut and Greenland signed a new memorandum of understanding. The prime minister of Greenland emphasised the need for cooperation, saying “Our Inuit voice, our traditions and our modern Arctic technical knowledge should be shared among us, ensuring our right to development”. Although some analysts worry that this memorandum is just a symbolic step, there are now plans to establish a regular commercial flight connection between Greenland and north America. This was attempted before but failed, as there was not a strong business case for it.[16] If the connection endures, it could stimulate Inuit relations and encourage tourist travel, helping both economies. If Nunavut and Greenland work more closely together, it could also strengthen the position of the Inuit on the international stage and the foreign policy of the regional governments.

## Turning a negative into a positive

The war in Ukraine has shaken Arctic governance. It has highlighted the strategic importance of the region and the value of its people. Previously all sides were determined to maintain the Arctic as an exceptional zone of peace and the Arctic Council existed to steer energy towards cooperation. The inclusion of the indigenous peoples in this endeavour was both an innovation and an achievement, no doubt contributing to the cooperative spirit. With the future of the Arctic Council now uncertain, a paradoxical situation has emerged where despite their growing importance in the strategically important Arctic region, the indigenous peoples risk losing their most effective platform.

Even if the Arctic Council manages to work with Russia in some form, cooperation is unlikely to be smooth in the years to come. The West and Russia are now divided by such a deep rift of



interests and values that it is difficult to imagine constructive cooperation in any domain.

However, these new circumstances do present certain opportunities. Local, northern governments such as those in Greenland and Nunavut have the chance to gain more recognition and space to act and develop. Western Arctic countries can work even more closely together and involve indigenous peoples more than ever before. While it is easy to fear that the coming years are set to be wasted when it comes to Arctic cooperation, doubling down on the involvement of and investment in indigenous peoples and regional governments is the best way to turn a negative into a positive, strengthening Europe's unity and values-based foreign policy in the region. To do so, European Arctic states should consider pursuing the following recommendations.

## 'Nothing about us without us': Involve indigenous peoples in policymaking

By adopting the motto 'nothing about us without us', Arctic communities are demanding their right to be equal partners in shaping their region. So far, the Arctic Council was the key forum for their involvement. Regardless of the future of the Arctic Council and whether it remains the key Arctic organisation, European Arctic states should work with the US and Canada to ensure that indigenous peoples and local governments are represented in discussions about Arctic governance and support their involvement in policymaking, including on increasingly relevant security issues. They should ensure indigenous participation in any emerging Arctic formats and encourage bilateral meetings between regional and central governments. Given that NATO is likely to play a greater role in the region, it will be particularly important to involve the local populations in security and defence discussions, even if they have not been involved before.

## Overcome the legacy of colonisation and discrimination

Colonisation still weighs on relations between the people of the Arctic and national governments, and the latter are in some cases still responsible for continued institutional discrimination against indigenous peoples. Increased focus on the Arctic combined with Western support for Ukraine's anti-colonial fight are an opportunity for Western governments to overcome this. Increasing investment, improving healthcare, promoting education and indigenous languages, and continuing reconciliation efforts would all be important steps in this direction. Increasing the involvement of indigenous peoples in decision-making processes at all levels, as well as granting them greater powers in self-governance, will be key. In the case of Greenland, this could lead to full independence, once it

is financially capable.

## Invest in the north

Arctic territories of Western states have long suffered from under-investment which, alongside other colonial policies, puts the indigenous peoples at a disadvantage. Today, investing in the Arctic is crucial for the region's development and the well-being of its people. This must not be limited to updates in military installations, but rather focus on creating new economic opportunities and promoting sustainable development. The Arctic is a region with vast potential, and investments in sectors such as renewable energy, tourism, transport and shipping, housing, and food security can help create new jobs and protect the population from the worst disruptions resulting from climate change.

## Strengthen cooperation between the European and the American Arctic

There is room for much more cooperation among the Western Arctic states, especially between the north American and the European Arctic. There is also a clear willingness to do so among the indigenous population, notably in Nunavut and Greenland. In order to strengthen cooperation, European governments and the EU should focus on pursuing and incentivising new cultural, research, and investment projects across Baffin Bay and the Atlantic. They should also support efforts to establish a flight connection between Greenland and Canada, which would help boost relations between the territories. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, European states pursued numerous partnerships with Russia. This energy and investment can now be directed towards other Western Arctic states.

## Acknowledgments

As the Arctic gains more attention in discussions on geopolitics, I wanted to shine a light on the experiences and perspectives of its inhabitants, particularly the indigenous peoples and local governments. I had the privilege of travelling to the vibrant Arctic capitals of Iqaluit and Nuuk, meeting its residents, experts, and policymakers, and discussing issues as varied as reviving the culture of dog-sledding teams, the mental health crisis, challenges of self-governance, and dreams of independence. I am very grateful for the rich conversations we held. Discussions in Copenhagen and Ottawa helped me to further understand relations between national capitals and the far north. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Nordic and Canadian diplomats who shared their insights with me. Given the sensitivity of

issues discussed, they preferred to remain anonymous. Finally, I extend a big thank you to my ECFR colleagues, especially Marie Dumoulin, Tefta Kelmendi, and Gabriele Valodskaitė from the Wider Europe programme for their support and encouragement throughout the project. I am also very grateful to Flora Bell for her invaluable and thoughtful editing.

## About the author

Joanna Hosa is a policy fellow with the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her main areas of interest include security, conflict resolution, the Arctic, Russian foreign policy, and Ukrainian foreign policy.

[1] ECFR online discussion with policymakers and experts from Russia and European Arctic states, May 2021.

[2] ECFR online interview with one of the leaders of the protests, December 2022.

[3] ECFR interviews with Arctic diplomats and experts in Copenhagen and Nuuk, November 2022.

[4] ECFR interview with Arctic diplomats in Copenhagen and Nuuk, November 2022.

[5] ECFR interview with a policy expert in Nuuk, November 2022.

[6] Participant of the ECFR online Arctic Discussion, 12 December 2022 (held under the Chatham House rule).

[7] ECFR interview with a policy analyst at the Nunavut government, Iqaluit, October 2022.

[8] ECFR interviews with inhabitants of Iqaluit, October 2022.

[9] ECFR interviews in Iqaluit, October 2022.

[10] ECFR interviews with inhabitants of Iqaluit, October 2022.

[11] ECFR online interviews with Arctic diplomats, November and December 2022.

[12] ECFR online interviews Arctic diplomats and experts, November and December 2022.

[13] Interview with Nunavut government representative, Iqaluit, October 2022.

[14] Interview with Arctic Council staff, Reykjavik, November 2022.

[15] ECFR interviews with a local politician and a member of the Nunavut Assembly in Iqaluit, October 2022.

[16] ECFR online interview with an Arctic diplomat, December 2022.

## ABOUT ECFR

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- A pan-European Council. ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU’s member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR’s activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Lykke Friis, and Norbert Röttgen.
- A physical presence in the main EU member states. ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- Developing contagious ideas that get people talking. ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to carry out innovative research and policy development projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR produces original research; publishes policy reports; hosts private meetings, public debates, and “friends of ECFR” gatherings in EU capitals; and reaches out to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions. [ecfr.eu](http://ecfr.eu)

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors. Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations. © ECFR May 2023. ISBN: 978-1-914572-96-8. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.