The first results of Icelandic chairmanship over the Arctic Council

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Abstract. In the paper purposes and tasks of Iceland’s Arctic policy are analyzed. From 2002 to 2004 it had been the first time Iceland was the chairman of the Arctic Council (AC, the Council). In 2019, its second terms in office has begun and its will have expire by 2021. In the paper the current result of the new chairman’s activity is considered. In conclusions authors state that the country focuses on environmental protection in the polar region, preventing ocean contamination and acidification, preservation of biodiversity, besides, development of fishery is quite important for Iceland.

1. Introduction
According to the rules of the Arctic Council, chairmanship over the organization passes on in turn to every permanent member, which took part in the foundation of the Council in 1996, and it serves its power for two years. The first chairman of the Council was Canada (1996-1998) – the country where the foundation meeting had been held and the Ottawa declaration had been signed; after Canada chairmanship passed on to other permanent members and the last was Sweden. The next round started in 2013 and the order of the previous one remained [8]. Thus, in 2019, at the XI meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of the members of the Arctic Council Iceland succeeded Finland one more time.

2. Iceland’s Arctic policy and strategy
During Iceland’s first term in office one of its main aim was to improve relation between members in the Council and consolidation positions of the organizations. Besides, Iceland emphasized the importance of scientific and research cooperation in the region. Moreover, Iceland was developing cooperation between the Council and EU trying to encourage them to the participation in the project ‘Northern Dimension’ and to the preparation for the holding International Polar Year (2007-2008). Iceland was the first state concerned about developing information and communication technologies (ICT) in the Arctic [9]. For a long time in the AC there had been a problem of projects funding and it was solved during the chairmanship of Reykjavik – the Project Support Fund was created [1], [2].

After Iceland’s term in office had expired the need to design its own Arctic policy became relevant [3]. The designation started from promulgation of the paper “The ocean – Iceland’s policy’ which was prepared by Ministry of Fishery, Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The paper declared that the main issue for Iceland is environmental protection, also, there were preservation of biodiversity, climate change observation, development of tourism [10] and sea communication and
sustainable growth of the region [11]. In 2006, Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs published another paper called ‘The North meet with the North – the Arctic shipping and future’ which included analysis of shipping and environmental problems in the polar region. In 2009, the strategy was reformed one more time and the paper ‘Iceland in the Far North’ with a lot of goals and tasks was published. Development of research facilities, protection of indigenous people’s right [12], exploration and use of natural resources, providing with military and migration security [13], programs about the Arctic immigrants’ adjustment and social assimilation to Icelandic society [14] were added to environmental protection and development of sea communication.

Designation of its own Arctic policy was the main issue of the Althing session in 2011, so, the Resolution on Iceland’s Arctic Policy was passed on 28 March. In the Resolution 12 main tasks were formulated and there were following points:
- support and consolidation of the Arctic Council as the main organization devoted to the solving of the Arctic problems;
- consolidation the status of Iceland as the Arctic state the whole territory of which is located within the polar region;
- focus on the geographical features of the Arctic [15] which border both with Atlantic and Pacific Ocean – that position attracts China because it may be useful for its development projects [16].

Thus, Iceland claims the Arctic is not closed space, therefore, not only activity of the Arctic states but states located pretty far from the Polar Circle affect the Arctic environment;
- appeal to the United Nations Law of the Sea to resolve some disputes in the region;
- development and consolidation of cooperation between Iceland, Greenland and Faroe Islands;
- sustainable development of indigenous and small-numbered people’s areas and protection their rights, also, getting them to take part in discussions which are directly related to their habitat; general supports of the Far North development;
- consolidation and development of international cooperation on goals related to Icelandic interests;
- conducting activity in the region according to the tasks of sustainable development and preventing harmful effect of human activity;
- support the demilitarization of the Arctic and assurance its security. Cooperation between Iceland and other states on following issues: preserving of biodiversity, research conduction, coordination of search and rescue coverage, preventing contamination of the region.
- taking advantage of economic development of the region in order to develop relations with other Arctic states;
- development of the tourism [17];
- development of research facilities in the field of the Arctic research and consolidation position Iceland as a place where a lot of meetings, conferences and discussions to the different subjects related to the polar region are held;
- support discussion of the Arctic problems and challenges at the domestic level.

After the Resolution had been passed Iceland always follow its points [1] developing international cooperation, especially in the field of environmental protection, exploration of natural resources, development of sea communication, protection indigenous people’s rights and security assurance in the region. The feature of the Icelandic strategy was engaging states in cooperation in bilateral and multilateral form. Nowadays main Icelandic issues in the region are deepen of scientific and technological cooperation (EU [18], Russia and countries of the North America [19] do the same, so, Iceland makes efforts to avoid problems which these countries have already faced [20]), fishery development and using of renewable energy sources [21]. The state also focuses on the development of routes both sea and air. Moreover, Iceland seeks to prevent militarization of the Arctic, therefore, it is a member of some organization and it also has signed some agreements about the Arctic issues.

3. The main issues of Icelandic chairmanship
The purposes and tasks of Icelandic chairmanship were announced by its Minister of Foreign Affairs at the meeting in Rovaniemi in 2019, which has been already mentioned. A little bit earlier Iceland’s President Gudni Johannesson had done the same at the 5th International Arctic Forum ‘Arctic – territory of dialogue”. Both politicians stated Iceland was going to develop the region according to sustainable principles, improve its economic development, consolidate positions of the AC, protect indigenous and small-numbered people’s rights and, as usual, protect the environment. It has to be mentioned that the Arctic policy is of the particular importance in the domestic policy of Iceland.

After we have analyzed political programs and statements of Icelandic senior officials, we have made a conclusion that Iceland in its current activity is going to place high emphasis on the following issues:

- environmental protection in the Arctic, preventing ocean contamination and acidification including contamination with microplastics.
- Designation of Regional plan about reduction the amount of litter and plastics in the ocean, holding an international symposium in April 2020 devoted to these problems;
- preventing the global warming and climate change.

The reformed report about the process of the climate change in the Arctic will have presented at the ministerial meeting in Iceland in 2021;
- using and distribution of renewable energy sources;
- quality improvement of the Arctic weather forecasts;
- conducting research about opportunity of more effective using of sea resources;
- development of fishery;
- sustainable development of indigenous people community by means of the improvement of living conditions, providing with social well-being, development of cultural and learning exchanges, support discussions about gender equality;
- consolidation the Arctic Council as the most effective organization for international cooperation, deepening cooperation between the Arctic economic council and observers.

These tasks of Icelandic chairmanship were listed at the official website of the Arctic Council [6]. Ambassador Arctic Affairs of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Incoming Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials of the Arctic Council Einar Gunnarsson is responsible for the implementation of the program.

Assistance in preparation the 3rd Global Fishery Forum and International Exhibition of Fish Industry, which took place in Saint Petersburg on 10-12 July 2019, was one of the first tasks for Iceland as a chairman [7]. Iceland also designed its own stand. More than 6 thousand people, including representatives of more than 250 companies from 38 countries, attended the events. The highlight of the events was plenary session to the subject ‘The ocean of opportunities: nature, economy, human’. There were also several panel discussions to the relevant and important subjects such as ‘Digital transformation as a way to improve fishery’, ‘How to sell fish more effective’, ‘The Arctic and the Antarctic: resources stocks, prohibition or fishery, points of contract’, ‘Aquaculture facilities in Russia and all over the world: administration, resources, markets’, ‘Value of fishery: how to estimate the trade of national resources?’, ‘The economy of the fish market: catch, processing, logistics, retail’, ‘Fishery: society as a factor of territory development’.

Russia also took part in events that were listed above, so, it needs to be mentioned that cooperation and competition with Iceland in the field of fishery is highly relevant for Russia [22]. In global fishery structure Russia has 4th place and its accounts for 5.5%. In 2018, catch of Russian fishermen amounted 5 million tons, so, the last year figure had been overdrawn by 5% and it was the record for the last 25 years [8].

In the middle of June 2019, the conference of Senior Arctic Officials of the Arctic Council was held. Not only the Arctic states but also indigenous people communities (the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Aleut International Association, the Saami Council, RAIPON, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich’in Council International) took place in the session.

During the meeting there were discussed ways to reduce the risk of contamination of the Arctic ocean and seas and the amount of existent litter. It is of particular importance that every spring, since 2016, Northern European countries have been cleaning up their coast – in 2019, there were collected more
than 19 tons of litter on the Icelandic coast. This event is supported by the public organization ‘Ocean Conservancy’ which have been organizing events devoted to cleaning up water areas for more than 30 years in 150 countries all over the world. This global event is called International Coastal Cleanup and it has already engaged more than 14 million volunteers.

During the discussions participants has confirmed that the issue is highly relevant and planned how to resolve it: advancing population’s knowledge about water contamination and its consequences; motivation of society to take part in resolving of the problem; identification of the pollution source; cleaning up coast and water areas of the Arctic states.

Senior Officials has resolved that cleaning up the Arctic territories will be the teamwork of the Arctic states, local public organizations and volunteers. During the conference representatives of the ‘Ocean Conservancy’ proposed to assign local public organizations which would be responsible for the cleaning up coasts. They also emphasized the lack of equipment for the cleaning up materials. International Coastal Cleanup meets the purposes of Icelandic chairmanship and may be a great way to join people in order to prevent environmental pollution. Moreover, at the conference there was made a proposal to hold a global event ‘Cleaning up of the Arctic coasts’ in 2020.

4. Conclusion
Activity of the previous chairman – Finland, was highly appreciated by the members of the Council. After its terms in office had expired Finland supported its successor.

According to our analysis Iceland took responsible approach in reformation its Arctic policy and took resolute approach in its implementation. Iceland emphasizes environmental protection including preserving of biodiversity and preventing ocean contamination and acidification, also development of fishery is of particular importance for the state.

Nowadays Iceland has good relations with every member of the Arctic Council what is pretty uncommon [23]. Besides, other members can be sure that Iceland will not take advantage of its current position to lobby Chinese interest what has happened in 2008-2014. Relations between Iceland and its neighbors are getting well after financial crisis 2008-2011 [24].

Nevertheless, Iceland does not have abundant resources, developed economy and international forefront position what make it depends on the USA, Norway and Canada. Common European problems like increasing of protectionism and nationalism also give no chance to be supported by EU where the idea about the end of ‘well-known Europe’ is widely discussed [25]. Russia is very concerned of this fact; the chairmanship will pass on it in 2021 [26]. Some Russian action towards Iceland related to interests of any of listed countries may get relations between Russia and Europe or America both better and worse – so, Russia will have to chair the Council in such conditions.

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