The image of the Russian Arctic through strategic projects and international events

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Abstract. The article looks into the process of shaping of the Arctic region’s image as part of the policy of modern Russia from the perspective of strategic development projects and international meetings: major international forums, conferences as part of international cooperation. Special attention is being given to the economic activity of the Russian Federation in the Arctic region. While conducting research the author came to the key conclusion that the ongoing strategic development projects and international events are able to influence and form the unique image of the Arctic region and also that there is more than just one image being formed in the politics of modern Russia. The first one (internal) is formed to involve human capacity that can ensure the development of extracting, trade and military infrastructure. The second (external) is based on social sphere and sustainable development of the region which is not being a first priority in the Russian Federation’s policy.

1. Introduction
The Arctic is a unique region and its research is being carried out in many scientific fields such as ecological, historical, economic, geological, political, legal, meteorological, sociological, etc. This demonstrates the complexity and ‘multi-layeredness’ of the Arctic space. It is not possible to compose a single description and definition due to the fact that each industry and sphere forms its own separate image of the Arctic. This fragmentation often does not give a clear picture of things occurring in the region.

The relevance of the entire study is determined by two important interrelated factors: firstly, there is the global increase in the Arctic region’s role in the modern world. Secondly, it is the extremely low awareness of this circumpolar part among the overwhelming majority of the world's population. There is the lack of a complete and understandable image of the Arctic due to the lack of an interdisciplinary approach and explication of all interested actors: states, research centers, businesses, non-governmental organizations, indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North. The cooperation is the only way to undertake the comprehensive study on the region and to make it attractive not only politically and economically, but socially. In this research, the image of the Arctic will be studied and compiled through the analysis of strategic development projects and international events as factors of this image formation.

2. Strategic development projects of the Russian Arctic
One of the key documents Russia’s Arctic policy builds on is a public program ‘On Socio-economic development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation’ (2014) [1]. It contains three subprograms: the formation of support zones, the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and shipping in the Arctic, the creation of equipment and technologies for further development. The main emphasis is on the so-called focal development — the creation of support zones, which are supposed to enable enterprises, scientific and educational centers and factories to get involved in the process and increase scientific interest, as well as the industrial and human potential of the Arctic. Considering all the areas in which certain plans are envisaged or are already being implemented, there are about 145 different projects. Therefore, it is important to examine some examples and evaluate the effectiveness of an integrated approach as a whole. Having studied a number of large projects, the following areas can be distinguished:

1) Resource extraction and processing projects: due to established state goals these projects are the priority and involve simultaneous creation of transport and logistics systems, improvement of the socio-economic situation. There are the examples: Gazprom (Shtokman, Yamal), Gazprom Neft (Prirazlomnoye, Sakhalin, Novy Port, Messoyakha), NOVATEK (Yamal LNG), Rosneft (Vostok Oil), Norilsk Nickel (Southern Cluster) and others:

- The infrastructure component of the Yamal Megaproject (Gazprom) [2] is the construction of a power plant that supplies energy to production facilities, a shift camp and an industrial base. The transport component of the project could play a socio-economic role, but the constructed Obskaya-Bovanenkovo-Karskaya railway is focused exclusively on providing freight traffic and shift personnel. Gazprom even expressed its opinion that this project component was unprofitable. The cost of the railway is more than 113 billion rubles, and Russian Railways (RZhD) does not want to buy it, so there is no need to talk about additional ways to recover losses and further economic benefits [3];

- The once unfolded (now suspended) large offshore project Shtokman is also focused on raw materials production. The project focuses on the inaccessibility of the field and directs all funds at the creation of an offshore production complex. As mentioned on the website [4], the socio-economic function was to create new jobs and promote regional economy. Indeed, through Shtokman, the process of gasification of the Murmansk region was supposed to take place. According to its former governor, Marina Kevtun [5], this issue has not been resolved to this day and it reduces the overall drawing power of the region for new industries and investors;

- The project Yamal LNG (NOVATEK) can be distinguished. Despite the same focus on the mineral resource base, the project program includes and is successfully implementing the construction of a port, a plant, an airport, the village of Sabetta, which includes a hefty infrastructure for comfortable life. It is important that the Sabetta airport has international status and carries out passenger transportation;

- The situation with Norilsk Nickel company is rather different. As noted in official documents, the company's investments in its projects have a socio-economic effect, saving up to 2,000 jobs and increasing the freight traffic of the NSR. Company implements social policy and takes part in the process of renovation of Norilsk airport, the runway reconstruction, carrying out a fiber-optic communication line, etc. However, according to Ruslan Abdullaev, the head of the public organization ‘My House’ (Moy Dom), under the strong influence of the company on representatives of the state and municipal authorities the work of Rosprirodnadzor, the state labor inspection and the environmental prosecutor's office was de facto eliminated, which is detrimental to the level of well-being of citizens and workers. At the moment, the entire existing infrastructure is monopolized by Norilsk Nickel through subsidiaries in various spheres, and there are such phenomena as ignoring occupational diseases and an ‘information vacuum’ for all those who disagree or are dissatisfied with the existing situation in the work sphere. The interconnection between the developing industrial and social sphere is shown in the phrase: ‘all good such as social packages, guarantees of stability — this is Norilsk Nickel, but all bad is also it’ [6];

2) Transport projects: geographical remoteness of support zones from larger industrial centers requires the well-developed logistics: roads, aviation, railway, marine and riverine infrastructure.
Almost all of the projects mentioned in the first group are based on the Northern Sea Route, since the speed of transportation and the capacity of cargo traffic depend on this.

- Obskaya-Bovanenkovo-Karskaya railway (Yamal), Sabetta air and marine ports (Yamal LNG) have been mentioned before as components of larger resource extraction and processing projects. Those projects also include construction of multimodal hubs, the NSR port infrastructure, the creation of nuclear icebreakers and oil tankers. Throughout the Novoportovskoye and Prirazlomnoye fields (Gazprom Neft projects), Icebreaker 8 class icebreakers, ARC 7 class tankers are planned to be used, as well as ice-class oil tankers Mikhail Ulyanov and Kirill Lavrov to be created;

- There are also independent projects being implemented and focused on logistic development. Among them: Belkomur (White Sea-Komi-Ural), Northern latitudinal passage (railway in the Yamal-Nenets district), Murmansk transport hub (Kola Bay), Barentskomur (Barents Sea - Komi-Ural), which are aimed at the implementation of the ‘Polar Silk Road’, contributing to trade and economic interaction between Europe and Asia, also at the common development of Northeast China and the Far East of the Russian Federation [7]. While specialists of the Agency for Political and Economic Communications (APEC) make calculations and believe that projects are mostly unprofitable and usually duplicate existing ones [8], the authorities of the Komi Republic argue that the implementation of the Belkomur and Barentskomur projects will help expand the functionality of the North Latitudinal course and increase the cargo capacity of the NSR [9]. Recently, more and more positive arguments have been voiced in favor of the synergistic effect of the Belkomur project. The railway is planned to entail the creation of new enterprises, jobs, ensuring transport accessibility and, thus, medical and social assistance, the development of the timber industry and tourism activity [10]. This is the meaning of an integrated approach that can give impetus to resource-extracting sphere, but also have a beneficial effect on the socio-economic one;

- Another direction of transport infrastructure development is maintaining and renovating the icebreaker fleet that remained since the time of Soviet Union. Modern realities shows that it is the fleet that is able to defend the interests of the state in the Arctic. Due to the race among states, based on the economic value of the region and trade transit — ‘the winner ... is the one who builds seven nuclear icebreakers, not one aircraft carrier’ [11]. The largest actor in the implementation of this plan is the ROSATOM and its subsidiary company Rosatomflot, which implements such projects as: 22220 (icebreakers Ural, Arktika, Siberia) and 10510 (icebreaker Leader). Its significance lies in the fact that presence of an icebreaker fleet guarantees the prompt deployment of military bases in hard-to-reach and remote areas;

3) **Military projects:** are the third most important area due to the growing strategic importance of the region and the need to provide national security. Among these are the restoration of the underwater nuclear arsenal and the creation of military equipment that meets the climatic conditions of the Far North. Another trend in the military sphere is the projects for the construction of military bases (Arctic Trefoil, Northern Clover). It can be noted that a feature of military projects is a focus on ensuring national security without an emphasis on the socio-economic situation of the Russian Arctic, also the speed of its implementation. So, in 5 years (2012-2017) in the military sphere on the islands of Kotelny, the Land of Alexandra, Wrangel and Cape Schmidt, up to 425 strategic objects were built, including: bases for the accommodation of military personnel, equipment, weapons [12];

4) **Legislative projects:** further development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation directly depends on investments, hence there should be comfortable and profitable conditions to draw the attention. The main mechanism can be measures taken at the state level. The Russian Government’s decision was to create an attractive environment for businesses, namely through the federal laws ‘On the Development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation’ [13] and ‘On State Support of Entrepreneurial Activity in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation’ [14]. Along with this, there are some projects considering amendments to some federal laws, the Tax and Labor Codes. Different opinions are currently expressed about such changes. On the one hand, it can be a great breakthrough in supporting small and medium-sized businesses and economic growth of the region; on the other hand, there are a lot of gaps and shortcomings undermining all positive intentions of the Government.
and also leading to ‘social tensions and distrust of small and medium-sized businesses to such measures’ [15] and entail controversial legal consequences. On 18th of March, 2020, the federal law on first amendments of the Tax Code [16] was signed and was perceived as an obvious assistance to the oil and gas industry, capable of ‘bringing projects to the plus’ [17] due to their low profitability because of sanctions, falling oil prices and the previous tax regime. However, there is also a positive progress in actual assistance to new projects. On 7th of May, the Government of Russia supported a new package of amendments to the Tax Code [18] and thus shifted the priority from oil and gas giants to other residents engaged in the extraction of solid minerals;

5) **Sociocultural projects:** population exodus is one of the major problems, if not all, then most of the forces should be directed at solving this one. That is why previously mentioned projects have been studied with the strong emphasis on their impact on socio-economic development of the region. Migration entails such problems as a shortage of personnel, a decline in the quality of the medical and educational spheres, an increase in the cost of utilities due to the infrastructure designed for a larger number of people, etc. The authorities of the Russian Federation are currently trying to slow down this process by all available means and tools, including through the representation of the Arctic in Russian cinematography [19]. The experience of neighboring Norway is especially valuable in this regard [20]. However, migration also flows to the Arctic, which is increasingly called ‘substitutional’ migration. It has a pronounced Muslim character, which is already affecting the confessional and demographic situation in the Arctic regions [21] (there is a comparable situation in the Arctic zone of the Nordic countries [22]). This is quite worrisome for both regional and federal authorities. Some of the resource extraction and transport projects either way are aimed at the social effect (Yamal LNG, Belkomur, Norilsk Nickel). Some other projects should be mentioned here:

- The Arctic doctor program, an adapted version of another medical program Zemsky Doctor, aimed at eliminating the problem of a shortage of medical personnel in the region. The program needs to be improved, but even now it performs its functions of attracting qualified personnel who, during their stay, can simplify the process of receiving assistance that was previously unavailable;

- Floating nuclear thermal power plant ‘Akademik Lomonosov’, that is able to solve problems of stationary power units, its operation and further disposal (especially in the Far North) and also to create conditions for rapid socio-economic development of remote areas. Firstly, the implementation of such project shows the innovative approach to provide electricity to hard-to-reach territories. Secondly, it is an indicator of the process of modernization of outdated plants, built in Soviet times. The existing and operating in Chukotka Bilibino NPP began its work in 1974 [23].

The special attention should be drawn to [environmental project](#) — the Clean Arctic project, that is being the vivid example of changing priorities in the Arctic policy of modern Russia, since in the Soviet Union such issues were considered unprofitable and were not among the priorities. Purification of Arctic waters and territories from the consequences of more than a century of economic activity demonstrates a mature and responsible attitude towards the region as a unique ecosystem, not exclusively as a mineral resource base and object of use. Moreover, such measures, which are not aimed at obtaining economic benefits, and, moreover, implemented in the context of so-called global trends, have a strong impact on the image component of an actor. Thus, the project implemented by Russia to improve ecology in the Arctic is able to arouse respect from the world community and form a good reputation of a state concerned about the ecosystem, the consequences of being in the region and the future, the well-being of which depends on the attitude to the world around us in the present.

Summarizing everything above, it can be seen that in the infrastructure projects implementation involving the socio-economic development of the Arctic there should be a balance. In this case it will be possible to eliminate dependance on the resource extraction infrastructure and to avoid the population outflow typical for 90’s when the resource extraction had stopped.

3. **International events and the impact on the image of the Arctic**

There are events held around the world to draw attention to Arctic issues, bring together experts in the fields of politics, economics, science, culture, environmental safety, business representatives, state
federal and regional authorities of different countries, journalists and simply interested listeners. They become a universal platform for a multi-level and thorough studying of the Arctic region, exchanging of views and experience, forging cooperation in certain areas, submitting reports on the work done, projects implemented or for initiating new ones. These events perform not only a specific task of lobbying and promoting ideas and projects, but also work on its image component. That is why these events act as independent political entities, capable of forming their own unique image of the Arctic, different from the image of a single state.

The picture and development priorities formed by the events can be analyzed, considering the topics of large meetings undertaken at the Russian initiative and on its territory, including participation of government representatives:

1) **International Arctic Forum ‘Arctic — Territory of Dialogue’** [24] is ‘a key platform for discussing topical issues of socio-economic development’, the period from 2010 to 2019 had 5 conferences held. Moreover, the event has a ‘high’ level and is divided into the following topics: ‘Sustainable Development of the Arctic’, ‘Science and Technology’, ‘Economic Development’ and ‘Human Capital’ in 2017; ‘Sustainable Development’, ‘Coastal Areas’, ‘Open Ocean’ — in 2019. It is worth noting that the topics of the sections are very broad and cover all areas from industrial and commercial to climatic and social. During the last forum 11 out of 31 sessions were dedicated to the improvement of living standards of people in the Arctic region, which is a good indicator: the image of the Arctic formed by the largest international Arctic forum focuses not only on mineral extraction and the NSR development, but also a third of it consists of discussion of problems and projects in social sphere [25]. However, upon a detailed examination of the participants it can be deduced that the sessions on sustainable development of the Arctic are mostly focused on international partners, whose positions expressed at the plenary session differ markedly in their focus on the issues of CO₂ emissions, climate and energy-saving solutions, ‘green thinking’ [26], marine habitat and infrastructure development for people living in the Arctic. In general, the forum acts as a platform not only for discussions, but also for signing agreements: for example, in 2019, according to official data, 45 documents were signed for a total of 69.8 billion rubles [27];

2) **Forum ‘The Arctic: present and future’** is held once a year. The forum is organized by Interregional public organization ‘Association of Polar Explorers’ headed by A. Chilingarov. The directions of the program sections of the forum are defined more precisely and substantively, namely: 1) resources; 2) transport and communication; 3) innovation and technology; 4) ecology; 5) science, education, personnel; 6) economics; 7) international relations; 8) security; 9) accommodation in the Arctic. Despite this is the lower-level event, it reveals the capacity of the Arctic from different angles and forms a more significant and multi-level image. Another distinguishing factor is the ‘dialogue with civil society’ [28] which is implemented through the annual signing of the final resolution, which serves as a communication tool between participants, ideological initiators and state authorized bodies. So, 173 initiators contributed to the creation of the Final Public Resolution of 2019, having fixed 512 proposals in the document. It is interesting that among the proposed ideas, the leading place was taken by ‘improvement of the quality of life’ followed by ‘development of human capital’ and ‘economic development’. The list of initiators consists of Administrations, Legislative Assemblies and Governments of various regions, large industrial companies, educational institutions and research centers;

3) **The St. Petersburg Economic Forum (SPIEF)** [29] is the largest platform in the field of business and economics with the direct involvement of the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin and all interested parties and is one of the events influencing the development of the Arctic. The key motives behind the SPIEF are not just coverage, attraction of attention and discussion of pressing issues, but also the conclusion of profitable economic deals, contracts and agreements. In this regard, the International Arctic and St. Petersburg Economic Forums act together: usually draft agreements are negotiated within the framework of one event and find its continuation and implementation at another one. These particular forums mostly shape the image of the Arctic more as a mineral resource base and transport artery, which coincides with the priorities of the state. In addition to the main
program events, the SPIEF structure also includes additional offsite sessions that focus on the development of Russian regions as ‘new growth points’. The sessions have a wide geography, but only one session in Murmansk in 2017 was devoted to the topic of the Arctic, held on the basis of another regional event - VI Murmansk International Business Week [30]. The session also became a platform for a meeting between government officials and large regional businesses. Among the main guests of the plenary session, there was a noticeable preponderance towards representatives of large well-known industrial companies — Gazprom Neft, NOVATEK, Norilsk Nickel and others, which was also reflected in the topics of the reports. However, not only economic, but also social issues were paid attention to, generally, by the representative of the authorities — the former governor of the Murmansk region — Marina Kovtun. The focus on international partners manifested itself in a strong contrast between the announced priorities for action. Thus, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation declared in his report the foundations which the policy of Russia is based on in the Council of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAC), namely: sustainable development, the use of scientific and innovative potential, ecology, indigenous peoples — which, as we understand, differs from the approaches to the development of regions within the country;

Moving on to international events within the framework of international cooperation between Russia and other countries involved in the developing process, namely: the Arctic Council, BEAC. It could be assumed that politically the most powerful platform is the United Nations, but its role is limited — the UN acts as a governing and controlling force, which does not form a certain image of the region, but directly regulates relations between the parties.

1) **The Arctic Council** is the largest and one of the major communication mechanism between Arctic countries. The composition of the council is not limited to the ‘Arctic Eight’, it also includes permanent members (organizations representing indigenous peoples) and observers (non-Arctic states, intergovernmental, inter-parliamentary, non-governmental organizations). At the moment there are disputes about the competence of the Arctic Council: every year the forum is being gradually institutionalized and its powers expanded and it leads to the issues of regulation and security. As mentioned earlier, the Nordic countries that support the idea of collective policy are in favor of expanding the competence of the Council to maintain stability. What remains unchanged and untouchable are the priorities that all members of the region adhere to: biodiversity, pollutants / emissions, Arctic peoples, climate, ocean and arising emergencies [31]. From 2004 to 2006, Russia chaired the council and has seen the need to create a transport infrastructure with the prospect of integrating the NSR into the global transport system as part of its strategic plan. However, the notion of sustainable development includes not only economic issues, the key point still falls on social and environmental ones. Therefore, important projects in the implementation of the plan were: 1) health protection of people living and working in the Arctic, 2) development of social infrastructure, 3) management of natural resources and wider use of renewable energy sources [32]. All the chair countries adhere to this direction. This shows an idea ingrained and promoted since the creation of the Arctic Council, of prioritizing sustainable development issues over others.

2) **Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC)** has a smaller geography but a longer history. The Council was established in 1993 and focuses on the consideration of bilateral and multilateral interaction between Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Russia and the European Commission. Sustainable development is also a priority of BEAC. There is a wide range of spheres of cooperation in the Council such as economics, transport infrastructure, science, technology, trade and tourism. From 2015 to 2017, Russia chaired the BEAC and outlined the following priorities for its activities: 1) transport and logistics, 2) environment and climate, 3) culture and tourism, 4) other areas for cooperation [33].

As we can see, in the field of international relations and cooperation with other federal Arctic states, the Russian Federation prioritizes areas that are different from national strategic interests, which forms two completely different image regions: national and international.

4. **Conclusion**
The analysis of strategic projects showed that social issues remain at the peripheral level. Thus, the image of the Arctic for an ordinary Russian citizen is formed in the following way: the Arctic is a state territory which is rich in its resources and has an advantageous geographical position for the development of trade flow, where such industrial giants as Gazprom, Rosneft, NOVATEK, Norilsk Nickel, Rosatom operate and state military bases are located. However, due to the harsh natural conditions and poorly developed infrastructure, the region is not the most attractive place to live in.

International events are full-fledged political entities performing the task of both lobbying for ideas and shaping the image of the Arctic region. Analysis of the events showed that more than one single image has been formed in Russian politics. The first (internal) one reflects the existing state approach to the Arctic as a resource base, trade flow and an object of military-strategic importance capable of attracting specialists from the relevant highly specialized areas. The second (external) demonstrates the social orientation of the policy being pursued, which in reality is not a priority and is not so functional, as evidenced by the lack of adequate infrastructure and the continuous depopulation of the region.

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