# Outcome of the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group meeting

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# Introduction

The first meeting of the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG), chaired by Russia, took place from 26–28 October in a hybrid format in Moscow. The event was hosted by the Roscongress Foundation.

The Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group seeks opportunities to protect and improve the environment, economy, culture and health of indigenous peoples and Arctic communities. *"Sustainable development of the Arctic region requires a balanced approach and includes three integrative elements: environmental, social and economic development. The Arctic Council, and especially our Working Group, is where all these elements come together, which is why the Russian Federation attaches so much importance to our work", said Nikolai Korchunov, Ambassador-at-Large for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the first day of the meeting.*

More than 130 people participated in the three-day SDWG meeting. As is traditional, the meeting was attended by representatives of the Arctic Council member states (Russia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the USA) and its permanent participants, which are delegates from the Arctic Athabaskan Council, Aleutian International Association, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Saami Union and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East (RAIPON). In addition, the Arctic Council observer states were represented at the meeting, as well as three inter-parliamentary and seven non-governmental organizations with observer status and the European Union.

During the three-day meeting, participants discussed current and potential SDWG projects, as well as the organization of the future activities of the Arctic Council Sustainable Development Working Group itself. *"The capacity of the SDWG is increasing, the amount of work is increasing. And we have an obligation to respond adequately to this change and this responsibility", said Grigory Dukarev, RAIPON co-chair.*

# Main topics

## 1. Organizational changes in the work of the SDWG

The Arctic Council was established in 1996 as an intergovernmental forum to promote international cooperation in the high latitudes, and Russia is chairing the organization for the second time in its history and will remain in that capacity from 2021 to 2023. The cross-cutting priority of the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council will be 'Responsible Governance for a Sustainable Arctic'.

*"In our work, we must take into account the interests of the peoples and talk about their well-being, support and concrete results of initiatives and projects that are important for people and peoples. We see the Sustainable Development Working Group as a tool to support the linguistic and cultural heritage of small peoples", Korchunov said.* According to him, it is important for the Russian participants of the Arctic Council to implement concrete projects and take practical steps to preserve and promote indigenous knowledge, pass on their traditions, and support traditional economic activities.

Abidat Magomedova, Deputy Director of the Department of International Cooperation and Technological Development of the Russian Ministry for the Development of the Far East and Arctic, became the new Chair of SDWG. Opening the meeting, she noted that Russia's priorities in SDWG are human health, understanding and learning from the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic in the Arctic, and ensuring the sustainable socio-cultural development of the Arctic region and the well-being of indigenous peoples, promoting economic development along with environmental protection and adaptation to climate change.

*"Support in planning the activities of the Working Group and ensuring that its priorities are reflected in the discussions of the Arctic Council is crucial for us. <...> In this regard, Russia is clearly interested in working together effectively with SDWG members and partners to coordinate project activities in the field of sustainable development. During Russia's chairmanship, we have proposed a rather full agenda, and we believe that we need to continue our productive work through our Working Group", said Magomedova in her opening remarks.*

**Two-year work plan**

The SDWG work plan for the period of the Russian Chairmanship was presented at the meeting. According to Magomedova, it has been developed taking into account the guiding principles of the Arctic Council, is coordinated with the strategic plan of this organization and aims to support sustainable and harmonious development in the Arctic. In addition, as the new chair noted, its implementation should take into account the participation of indigenous peoples of the North, and all results should be long-term and accessible to local communities.

*"The strategic framework of the SDWG is broad, and usually, we are not focused enough in our work. I think we need to sharpen our focus. To that end, we have identified four main areas for the current chairmanship: Arctic livelihoods, coronavirus, extinction of indigenous languages, sustainable development and governance", said Sarah Cox, Director of Circumpolar Affairs Canada, who chaired the sub-committee preparing the work plan.*

Her words were echoed by Steinar Lindberg from Norway, who also stressed the need to set clear priorities for the Working Group. *"Norway is in favour of us working on fewer projects, but with each one being bigger. <...> We are also hesitant to take on a new project if it does not meet the strategic goals of the SDWG", he said.*

As a result of the discussions, all participants in the Working Group supported the proposed document. *"The work plan will be a good input to the discussions that will take place not only in this Working Group, but in the entire Arctic Council", stressed US representative Matthew Kastrinsky.*

**Headquarters in Quebec**

An important role in the work of the SDWG is played by its secretariat. Its mandate is to provide logistical support, cooperation and communication between delegations, to disseminate information about the activities of the Working Group, to present it at various events and to prepare the necessary reports.

Earlier, the Canadian government proposed the establishment of a permanent headquarters for the Secretariat of the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group in Canada. It is planned to be located in Quebec, on the territory of Laval University. "The secretariat will be housed in a new building to be completed in two years. But we hope to have the secretariat staff in place as early as

spring 2022, as they will be accommodated in one of the existing buildings during construction", said Bridget Biguet, a representative of the institution, at the meeting.

The Canadian delegation noted that Laval University has a long history of research in the Arctic, and in 2014 established the Quebec Institute of the North, which, among other things, collaborates with various Arctic bodies, governmental and private organizations and provides a link between scientists and indigenous peoples of the North.

*"Once the [headquarters] of the secretariat is established, we will implement the three main tasks that have been agreed with the SDWG work plan 2021–2023. The main one is to support and enhance all the activities of the Working Group, the second one is to support the implementation of the Arctic Council 2030 plan, and the third one is to report at the highest level", added* Biguet*. The* university representatives and SDWG participants agreed that the establishment of a permanent headquarters for the secretariat would improve the operations of the entire Working Group.

## 2. SDWG projects from coronavirus to food culture

The work of the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group is supported by two subsidiary expert groups. The first (AHHEG) brings together experts on human health in the Arctic and is responsible for medical and health issues in the circumpolar region. The second (SECEG) deals with social, economic and cultural issues.

*A* key focus for the AHHEG experts was to study the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus in the Arctic and to develop measures to counteract the pandemic. *"Human health and the coronavirus pandemic is a priority area where more efforts are needed, and we plan to do this during the Russian Chairmanship. We need to find funding to support the work of the expert group and to bring in independent experts. This is a vital and urgent objective", said the head of this expert group, Head of the Arctic Medicine Research Laboratory at the North West State Medical University (NWSMU) named after I.I. Mechnikov, Maxim Chashchin.* However, he specified that the expert group is focusing separately on the impact of the pandemic on Arctic indigenous communities.

Yulia Zvorykina, Head of SECEG, Professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, said that the meeting of this expert group on 14 September approved its work plan for the next two years. Priority discussion topics include increasing the resilience of indigenous communities, cities and businesses in the Arctic, renewable energy development, the preservation and transfer of knowledge of the peoples of the North, and gender equality.

The topics dealt with by the expert groups are at the core of the current and potential SDWG projects. *"There is work on projects ranging from indigenous languages in the Arctic to food security and energy. We cover absolutely all topics. And I think everyone involved in developing these projects is making a huge contribution to the well-being of all Arctic regions and communities", said A. Magomedova, Chair of the Working Group.*

**Lessons from the pandemic**

In June this year, the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group endorsed the project *"Health Implications of COVID-19 for Arctic Communities". "We hope that this project will enable*

*communities in the Arctic to cope with the pandemic and prepare for viruses that may arise in the future", said Sarah Cox, Director of Circumpolar Affairs at Nordic Affairs Canada, when introducing the project. "We have already developed methods and a research plan and have started collecting data. <...> Canada will be launching the project in full shortly, and we will provide you with all the data for analysis".*

Understanding the urgency of the pandemic, the SDWG decided to go beyond that and endorsed another project in this area, prepared by Russia, Canada, the World Wildlife Fund, the Gwich'in Council International and the Aleutian International Association, the "Inclusion of COVID-19 in the Arctic assessment report". *"As the pandemic continues to rage around the world, this topic is particularly relevant. There is a need to develop [effective] measures and pay more attention to the problems related to COVID-19 in the Arctic", Maxim Chashchin stressed.*

As noted at the meeting, one of the project's outcomes will be recommendations to the Arctic Council leadership, which will reflect on how the pandemic has evolved in the Arctic and present security issues in the macro-region. *"Talking about the consequences of COVID-19 will help to increase the resilience of Arctic communities. The report will provide a platform for different communities to share their success stories and the challenges they faced during the pandemic", said Solrun Svandal of Iceland.*

Also during this project, experts will identify the main parameters of the spread of coronavirus in the Arctic, assess the effectiveness of measures applied both by the authorities and local communities, and consider age, psychological and gender aspects. *"This is not the last infection we will face, so it is important to accumulate data on how we use social distancing and other measures in the future and what psychological support we provide to those who have lost their loved ones. The well-being and survival of indigenous peoples is also important", stressed Devlin Fendandes, delegate of the International Gwich'in Council.*

**Arctic Snowflake**

Another important area of SDWG work relates to renewable energy projects and the transition to carbon neutrality. The relevance of these issues is related to climate change, which is most visible in the Arctic, where the rate of warming is twice as high as the global rate of warming. *"Such climate change is melting permafrost, which is releasing not only water but also alarming amounts of methane, carbon and other greenhouse gases, which in turn are accelerating the heating of the atmosphere. These challenges require us to come up with advanced integrated solutions", Aysen Nikolayev, Head of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), said at the meeting.*

*"Energy costs are still a huge part of the [Arctic residents'] household budget, which could be spent on other things. Furthermore, fossil energy sources are not only expensive, but they also kill our nature, contribute to global warming and prevent us from developing sustainably. We Gwich'in live in contact with the earth and have to adapt to changing climatic conditions. Together we advocate for energy in the region that is affordable and does not spoil the environment", said Devlin Fendandes, speaking about the Arctic Energy Project.*

The project focuses on improving energy efficiency and energy supply in Arctic communities, increasing local energy literacy and moving away from traditional energy sources. *"We Arctic peoples can and must become an example that living in harmony with nature is possible, and to do so we need to move away from fossil energy sources in favour of renewable ones. The toolkit created provides a clear plan on how to achieve this goal", added Fendandes.*

One of the most ambitious projects in this area involves the creation of the Snezhinka international Arctic station, a year-round, fully autonomous complex that will run on renewable energy sources and hydrogen power. Two sites for the station will be located in Yamal and Murmansk Oblast. They will be used to test environmentally friendly life support technologies, as well as robotics systems, telecommunications, medicine, biotechnology and new materials.

*"From a scientific point of view, the plants in Yamal and Murmansk Oblast will be different from each other. While in Yamal we will have a fully autonomous site based on wind generation, solar energy and, above all, the hydrogen cycle, in the Murmansk region we rely on hydrogen, which will be produced externally, in particular at an external wind farm and at a hydropower plant. <...> This is very important in terms of energy supply to remote, isolated Arctic settlements", said Yury Vasilyev, Executive Director of the Institute of Arctic Technologies at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology.*

The project has been approved by all member states of the Arctic Council and is supported by the Russian Government. Construction of the plants is scheduled to begin next autumn, with the goal of putting them into test operation in 2024. *"I believe that we have already achieved the main task. We are already showing with real materials that green energy in the Arctic is possible, and the authorities, major industrial and oil and gas companies have paid attention to it", emphasized Vasilyev.*

**Indigenous languages and cuisines**

Many of the projects of the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group aim to preserve and develop the cultures, traditions, languages and even the cuisines of the indigenous peoples of the North. *"The aim of our project is to preserve and promote the linguistic, linguistic and cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic by digitalizing them and creating an internet portal dedicated to various aspects of their culture. <...> This project involves Russia, Norway and RAIPON, it is implemented at the Northwest Federal University and is overseen by UNESCO and other partners", Mikhail Pogodaev, Special Ambassador of the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council on Indigenous Peoples and Regional Cooperation, presented one such project.*

The authors of the project study best practices in language preservation, record examples of indigenous languages, customs and traditions and involve young people in this work in order to thereby pass on knowledge to the new generation. *"One of the tasks of the project is to develop special technologies, such as automatic translation of indigenous languages. A Sámi keyboard for mobile phones was presented in Murmansk. <...> It will be necessary to create such keyboards for [other] small languages of the North and integrate them into mobile devices and computers", added Steinar Lindberg of Norway.*

Another innovative project to promote Arctic indigenous culture is the food culture lab in Copenhagen. The portable laboratory includes a well-equipped kitchen in which traditional indigenous and nomadic dishes can be prepared. The format is particularly appealing to young people. *"This project helps to remove stereotypes about indigenous peoples by revealing the peculiarities of their traditional cuisine", said Anna Otke, Vice-President of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East and member of the Federation Council's International Cooperation Committee.*

Perhaps the main SDWG youth project is the Arctic Children: Pre-School and School Education, which Russia has been implementing with Canada and Finland since 2017 to make education accessible and preserve indigenous cultures and languages. *"The second phase of the project, from 2019 to 2021, resulted in a breakthrough decision to develop and publish 15 native language textbooks for indigenous children. Yamal was the pilot region, but the geography of the project has gradually expanded, with new*

*regions joining in", said Otke. "It is important to continue working on the study and teaching of native languages, on the development of textbooks, teaching aids and methodological materials for teachers".*

**Demographics and gender equality**

Issues of social well-being of Arctic residents were also of concern to SDWG participants. One of the highlights was the Arctic Demographic Index project, whose preliminary results were presented by the Russian delegation. It gathered statistical data for the past ten years from 19 Arctic regions in five countries: Russia, Canada, Norway, Finland and Sweden. The number in question is 4.5 million people, 2.5 million of whom live in Russia.

The resulting tool makes it possible to compare not only countries and regions, but also individual cities and municipalities according to pre-set criteria. Thanks to this tool, it is possible to track population trends in the Arctic, including indigenous peoples, and changes in population density. This, among other things, makes it possible to see the outflow or inflow of population. And it does so for specific age groups. At a new stage, the authors of the project plan to analyze the information collected and make forecasts about changes in the demographic situation in the Arctic.

*"Here we can see all the migration trends, demographic changes. This is very important for Canada. We support this research, and we aim to continue this work in cooperation with the Russian Federation. We hope that it will allow us to make informed decisions", commented Sarah Cox on the project presented.*

Other social projects include improving food security, indigenous suicide prevention and gender equality in the Arctic.

## 3. The future of the SDWG – new projects and ideas

Over the three days of work, the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group considered more than 20 projects, many of them initiated by the Russian delegation. Three new projects were approved. In addition to the COVID-19 inclusion in the Arctic assessment report described above, they were "Preserving Arctic architectural heritage" and "Enhancing resilience in the Arctic: Exploring resilience aspects in the Arctic related to the impact of permafrost thawing". They are all proposed by representatives of Russia.

*"There are now many initiatives unfolding in the circumpolar region that concern the SDWG. We [at the meeting] not only received new input on the projects that the Working Group is dealing with, but also got acquainted with new proposals for cooperation. <...> Certainly, none of the projects voiced will go unheeded", said A. Magomedova, Chairperson of the Working Group.*

At the same time, Special Ambassador Pogodaev stressed that one of the intentions of the Russian chairmanship of the Arctic Council is to implement projects aimed at helping indigenous peoples. "We must help improve the living standards of indigenous peoples and create new opportunities for them to develop and disseminate their culture, their knowledge", he said.

The new projects were supported by all SDWG participants, which, as noted at the end of the meeting, indicates the significance and relevance of the proposals developed by the Russian side. In addition, their implementation will strengthen the trend towards broad international cooperation beyond the Arctic Circle.

**Melting permafrost**

The project "Building Resilience in the Arctic: Exploring Resilience in the Arctic as Related to the Effects of Permafrost Melting" generated the most discussion in the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group. SDWG members unanimously agreed that such work is of paramount importance due to climate change. *"We see the impact of permafrost melting on the environment, on changing natural conditions. We see a threat to the infrastructure, the traditional trades and the traditional way of life of indigenous peoples. The [proposed] project should help create adaptation mechanisms to preserve traditional culture with the involvement of indigenous peoples and on the basis of their knowledge", said Otke, vice president of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East, a member of the Federation Council's international cooperation committee.*

Russia considers climate change in the Arctic and thawing of permafrost a priority, said Pogodaev, Special Ambassador of the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council for Indigenous Peoples and Regional Cooperation. *"These are important topics for indigenous peoples, which already have a serious impact on infrastructure, so it is very important to work together now. Russian regions will coordinate their efforts during Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council, we will work with the Permafrost Institute [of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences] and with all indigenous communities. During Russia's presidency in 2021–2023, we propose to hold the first summit in Yakutsk to discuss the first results of this work", he said.*

*"We have identified three activities for this project. The first is topics that are related to the resilience of northern communities, and together with the Arctic Council, the US and Iceland, we have already discussed how these structures will support these activities. The second is monitoring and the development of indicators, which is related to the work of experts in permafrost thawing and Arctic resilience. Indicators need to be developed that will be useful and important for Arctic communities. Third, in the autumn of 2022, we will hold a forum on Arctic resilience in Russia, where we can share information about the first activities and discuss the experience of Russian indigenous peoples", Pogodaev added.*

Matthew Kastrinsky from the USA also noted that an important component of the project could be the participation of representatives of the Arctic communities in trainings that simulate permafrost thawing. This would allow the organizers to use all available tools, explore possibilities for cooperation and exchange of experiences. In addition, a plan of action for Arctic communities in permafrost melt situations should be prepared. *"We hope to have the first simulation exercise soon. It will depend on how the pandemic situation develops", he said.*

Iceland will have a meteorological facility that will be responsible for monitoring and predicting the thawing of the permafrost. It will also be involved in work on the prevention of possible natural disasters. Delegations from other Arctic participating states have also indicated that their countries are ready to join in the practical implementation of the project.

**Architectural preservation**

Another proposal supported at the SDWG meeting was the preservation of the Arctic architectural heritage. It was presented by Maria Frolova, Head of the Department of Cultural Heritage of Northern and Arctic Territories of the Northern (Arctic) Federal University (NArFU). *"There is a need to find new solutions that should preserve the endangered heritage of the Arctic region. In addition, all professionals*

*from different fields should join forces to build up expertise at the national and international level to promote the Arctic architectural heritage", she said.*

Representatives from Norway, which was involved in preparing the project, stressed that due to climate change, a large number of architectural sites in the Arctic are in danger of disappearing, with many historic buildings already destroyed and lost. NArFU and the Norwegian University of the Arctic are working together on a project to preserve the architectural heritage and try to take into account the interests of the indigenous peoples who live in the area.

The project plans to digitally reconstruct various architectural monuments in the Arctic, identify best practices for the restoration, preservation and promotion of architectural heritage, and bring together specialists and organizations to apply these practices. *"There will also be a digital database with all the sites of architecture in the Arctic. 3D modelling will be used, which will make it possible to virtually visit these sites", added Frolova.*

With the help of modern technology, virtual tours of Arctic architectural sites are planned, which, according to the authors of the project, will also contribute to the preservation and popularization of the culture of the North. "We will develop recommendations on sustainable development and management of cultural heritage for research institutions, local communities, governments and all those interested in preserving this heritage", stressed the scientist. The Swedish Governmental Research Institute (RISE) has also offered its assistance with the project.

**Revive the mammoths**

The Head of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Aysen Nikolayev, presented information to SDWG about the creation of the World Mammoth Centre in the region, which is included in the Strategy for Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security for the Period to 2035. In addition, a decree of the Government of the Russian Federation included the creation of the centre in the action plan for implementing the foundations of Russia's state policy in the Arctic and in the development strategy for the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation.

According to Nikolaev, the project aims to increase the biodiversity of the planet by bringing extinct species back to nature and complicating the structure of ecosystems, as well as to preserve the world's cultural and scientific heritage. The choice of Yakutia is not accidental. Firstly, this region is the world leader in the presence of preserved mammoth fauna, with 90% of such finds in the world occurring on its territory. And, secondly, Yakutia is one of the leading centres of paleontological research, and the scientific potential of the region allows it to claim a global role in the study of mammoth fauna.

The centre's concept envisages the construction of five key infrastructure facilities to cover the entire cycle from the organization of mammoth fauna finds to the revival of this species. These facilities include a cryopreservoir, scientific laboratory and museum exhibit complexes, the 'Ice Age Park' research site and a network of stations for monitoring and collecting palaeontological materials.

*"The scientific and laboratory complex will consist of three sectors - a paleontology sector to organise traditional research, a radiographic and isotopic research sector for radiocarbon age determination and identification of ancient animal migration routes, and a paleogenomics sector to provide genetic research on ancient genomes, including the development of cloning methods. This complex will form the basis for realizing one of the main super-tasks of the World Mammoth Centre, which is the ambitious goal of mammoth revival in the context of biotechnology development", said the Head of Yakutia.*

The future centre, Nikolaev believes, will become a point of attraction and one of the symbols of the Arctic. In addition to scientific work, its staff will work with tourists. "The [Ice Age Park] polygon will not only attract the attention of scientific centres around the world engaged in the study of global climate change, but will also cause great interest in the world as a unique tourist site that recreates the mammoth age in natural conditions", shared the region's leader's vision.

*In* June 2022, Yakutsk will host the International Mammoth Forum, at which it is planned to sign an agreement to establish a mammoth consortium in the republic. It is designed to combine the resources of research and educational institutions that are involved in the study of mammoth fauna. *"The establishment of the World Mammoth Centre will make it possible to gain new knowledge about the climate and ecology of the late Pleistocene, to construct ancient genomes, cellular tissue structures, biocenoses, and to create conditions for promoting the Arctic", Nikolayev stressed.*

**Offers from Yakutia**

Representatives of Yakutia authored two more initiatives. The first one is related to the study of traditional medicine of indigenous peoples of the Arctic, which, according to Pogodaev, is especially relevant at the time of the coronavirus pandemic. Among the tasks of this project are collecting data on traditional medicine, sharing best practices and publications, organizing and conducting various educational events, and protecting the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

He recalled that for centuries the indigenous peoples of the North have been accumulating medical knowledge, developing methods and means of treatment, health prevention and diagnosis. Traditional medicine includes various types of phytotherapy, ways of using minerals and preparations of animal origin, spiritual practices and manual therapy. "The results of this project will bring together knowledge on the production of specific products in which raw materials traditionally created by different communities can be used", added the representative of the Russian delegation.

Another project from Yakutia concerns the development of creative industries in the Arctic regions and includes several areas. For example, support for designers who design clothes taking into account the traditions of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic and their knowledge of keeping warm in extremely low temperatures. Or a film training programme, which is now particularly popular in Yakutia, which has come third in Russia after Moscow and St. Petersburg in film production. The republic produces 8–10 films annually, which provide a full return on investment and receive awards at Russian and international festivals.

*"The Creative Arctic project can help not only to preserve the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, but also become a driver for developing the local economy and preserving and disseminating traditional knowledge", Pogodaev concluded.*