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Obydenkova, Anastassia

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Arctic Regional Governance: Actors and Transformations

Anastassia Obydenkova 

Institute for Economic Analysis—Spanish National Research Council (IAE—CSIC), Spain

Correspondence: Anastassia Obydenkova (anastassia.obydenkova@iae.csic.es)

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Abstract

This thematic issue analyzes recent and ongoing changes in Arctic regional governance in new geopolitical, security, and socio-economic contexts. It places current challenges in the Arctic within a historical context, aspiring to identify solutions, and enhances our understanding of modern processes. It presents three perspectives on Arctic regional governance: the first focuses on the challenges to Arctic environmental governance (marine living resources and Arctic seals); the second looks at the role of large nation-states, such as Russia and China, in Arctic regional governance; and the third one analyses the challenges posed to Indigenous people—in Russia, Finland, and Canada. Many overlapping themes are developed in the articles: historical lessons (e.g., from the Cold War period), challenges to the inclusiveness of environmental governance, and the role of cross-border diffusion and learning. New challenges to Arctic regional governance in the context of the war in Ukraine affect environmental governance, international scientific collaboration, and the lives of Indigenous people. Yet we know little about the depth of these recent transformations. This thematic issue aims to fill in at least some of the outlined gaps.

Keywords

Arctic governance; Arctic transformations; environmental governance; Indigenous people

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, Arctic regional governance (ARG) has witnessed multiple changes involving various actors—international (regional) organizations, nation-states, Indigenous people (IP), local and subnational authorities, and non-governmental organizations. Studies on regional environmental governance have brought to our attention the importance of the variety of actors and their implications for the development of the field of area studies (e.g., Haas, 2016). The most well-known examples of these actors are the EU (e.g., Andonova, 2003; Mišić & Obydenkova, 2022; Nazarov & Obydenkova, 2022; Selin & VanDeveer,

2015), the UN (e.g., Conca et al., 2017; Dalmer, 2021), the Arctic Council (AC; e.g., Filimonova et al., 2023; Lavelle, 2022; Mavisakalyan et al., 2023), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), global forums (Ambrosio et al., 2022; Obydenkova et al., 2022; Tosun & Shyrokykh, 2022), banks, and IP (Buntaine & Parks, 2013; Kuyper & Bäckstrand, 2016; Tosun & Mišić, 2022; Vladimirova, 2023).

However, there are also relatively new actors in the Arctic and Eurasia, such as non-Arctic states, like China (e.g., Wang, 2023), as well as recently founded regional organizations led by Russia (e.g., the Eurasian Economic Union [EAEU], the Eurasian Development Bank); or those led by China (e.g., the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [AIIB], the Schanghai Cooperation Organization); as well as multilateral and national banks (see, e.g., Agostinis & Urdinez, 2022; Djalilov & Hartwell, 2022; Gutner, 2002; Hartwell, 2022; Libman & Obydenkova, 2018; Obydenkova, 2022a). Only recently, scholars have started to pay more attention to the different implications of these under-studied actors for sustainable development and climate governance, for socio-political and economic transformation, and security governance (Ambrosio et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2022; Hartwell, 2023; Obydenkova, 2022b). There are also emerging challenges to ARG in the context of the war in Ukraine, ongoing since 2022, affecting environmental governance, scientific international collaboration, and the lives of IP in the Arctic (e.g., Garbis et al., 2023; Stepanov & Makarov, 2022; Stepanov et al., 2023; Vladimirova, 2023). Yet we know little about the depth of these recent transformations in ARG. This special issue aims to fill in some of these gaps.

To this day, the Arctic remains a fragile diplomatic zone in which Russia owns a significant landmass and whose commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection is highly contested (Hartwell, 2022; Kochtcheeva, 2022; Obydenkova, 2022c). Moreover, China is becoming an important actor in Arctic governance as well as Eurasian states, through their involvement in various regional international organizations (see Agostinis & Urdinez, 2022; Hall et al., 2022; Lavelle, 2022; Wang, 2023). The combination of different actors within ARG may have multiple implications for both collaboration and confrontation.

The thematic issue analyzes changes in ARG in new geopolitical security, socio-economic, and historical contexts. It places current challenges in the Arctic within a historical context and enhances our understanding of modern processes.

2. Perspectives on Arctic Regional Governance

This thematic issue presents three perspectives on Arctic governance. The first perspective focuses on challenges to environmental governance—e.g., the management of marine living resources (Stokke, 2024) and the governance of Arctic seals (Gehrke, 2024). The second perspective looks into the role of two large nation-states in the Arctic (China and Russia) and presents different viewpoints on their involvement in ARG (see Borozna, 2024; Pedersen & Steinberg, 2024; Wang & Ma, 2024). The third perspective focuses on the human rights of IP in Russia, Canada, and Finland and the socio-political transformations within these nation-states (see Rodrigues, 2024; Vladimirova, 2024).

2.1. Challenges in Environmental Governance

Stokke (2024) opens this thematic issue with a brilliant analysis of resource management institutions and environmental and geopolitical challenges triggered by the war in Ukraine. He frames his analysis within the

literature on institutional resilience and environmental and climate governance. As the article shows, resilience sometimes involves shielding regime operations from external challenges, such as geopolitical tensions. The Norwegian-Russian regime for managing fisheries in the Barents Sea illustrates the kind of pragmatic adjustment that may be necessary for collective problem-solving. On the one hand, Norway has joined the Western sanctions against Russia but, on the other hand, dialogue and scientific and regulatory cooperation with Russia on shared fish stocks is ongoing. Such cooperation across geopolitical divides is no novelty in the region: the Barents Sea fisheries regime emerged and deepened during some of the coolest periods of the Cold War. More importantly, the analysis emphasizes that whenever sustainable environmental management requires collective action among neighboring states, cooperation is not a retractable benefit comparable to market access under a trade agreement but rather a legal and moral responsibility that underpins ecological survival.

The second article, by Gehrke (2024), continues the analysis of environmental governance by focusing on Arctic seals. This author has analysed the discourse of multiple aspects of the governance of Arctic seals for over a century, from 1900 to 2020. This period covers the bipolar standing of the USA vis-a-vis the USSR for decades in the 20th century, as well as post-USSR developments for almost 30 years from 1990 to 2020. The study is based on a detailed analysis of printed mass media (local, regional, and international newspapers) and formal policy documents. The study singles out various threats to regional seal governance in the Arctic (e.g., commercial hunting, climate change, pollution) and identifies actors related to these threats. Somewhat echoing the above-discussed study by Stokke (2024), Gehrke (2024) also reminds us of the need for an inclusive approach to international environmental collaboration. Even within the hostile international bipolar world of the Cold War, environmental challenges were addressed by involving the USSR, among other ideological competitors for geopolitical dominance.

2.2. Nation States as Actors

Two articles focus on the role of Russia in the Arctic and one article examines the involvement of China in ARG.

Pedersen and Steinveg (2024) examine Russia's strategy regarding ARG and the institutional framework in the region before and after 2022. The article analyses official documents on Russia's strategies and the changes that took place shortly after February 2022. The authors argue that the Arctic is part of the international order and is not an autonomous part of it in terms of fundamental values and principles. Furthermore, Pedersen and Steinveg (2024) argue that Russia diminished its status as an Arctic power by isolating itself in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Borozna (2024) continues the analysis of the changes in Russia's strategy in the Arctic in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, through an analysis of official Russian documents. The article sheds light on Russia's perspective on the Arctic, driven by mainly military and security concerns, as well as by the strategic desire to maintain the image of a great power in ARG. The article argues that the isolation of Russia (e.g., through blocking the AC) is negative for international environmental cooperation in the Arctic.

Wang and Ma (2024) examine the importance of inclusive global environmental efforts and look into the role of China in ARG. They argue that China has decreased its investment in the exploration of natural resources in the Arctic, has increased its involvement in environmental initiatives, and has entered the AC as an observer state, signaling its willingness to comply with international environmental norms. The authors

recommend emphasizing environmental global inclusive cooperation among states to combat global warming and ecological challenges in the region. Moreover, they highlight the need to engage all actors in solving global environmental challenges (such as pollution and global warming) in the Arctic and elsewhere.

2.3. Challenges for IP

The last two articles scale down from the nation-state level to the level of IP, who are seen as important actors in ARG. Vladimirova (2024) analyses human security and IP through a detailed analysis of the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The study highlights dramatic challenges in the lives of people in Kola and their increasing militarization, triggered by the war in Ukraine. In line with Borozna (2024), Vladimirova (2024) shows the maintenance of Russia's traditional priority of security and economic benefits over human well-being in the Arctic. The article analyses the opinions and insights of Indigenous reindeer herders in the Kola Peninsula and provides a better understanding of the impact of war and militarization on the socio-economic changes in the lives of IPs and on the Arctic's environment.

Rodrigues (2024) continues the examination of IP (Inuit and Sámi) from the perspective of human security and examines Indigenous people's organizations (IPOs) in Canada and Finland. The study contributes to the understanding of the potential advantages of participative democracy and the improvement of the IP's human rights across the Arctic's borders. Despite the identification of differences across these two case studies, the importance of the IP's human rights is a recognized value in both states. The examples of Canada and Finland present a sharp contrast to the IP in the Russian Arctic, as described by Vladimirova (2024).

3. Conclusion

This thematic issue advances our understanding of the changes and challenges that have taken place in ARG, from historical and modern perspectives, by focusing on different aspects of environmental governance (e.g., the management of marine living resources and seal populations), IP, and nation-states (e.g., Russia and China), thus contributing to comparative environmental studies (Demchuk et al., 2022; Hanaček & Martinez-Alier, 2022; Libman & Obydenkova, 2014; Obydenkova, 2022d; Tosun & Shyrokykh, 2022). A few overlapping themes reappear across some of the articles: the role of historical lessons, the importance of inclusiveness in environmental governance, and the role of diffusion and learning across borders.

Some articles refer to the lessons learned during the Cold War in the 20th century when most forms of cooperation were non-existent, yet environmental collaboration developed slowly and steadily. Even during this tense period of a bipolar divided world on the verge of nuclear war, the protection of the environment was recognized as one of the few universal challenges uniting ideological and geopolitical hegemonic rivals. One of the best-known historical examples of international collaboration and dialogue relating to the Arctic during the Cold War was the Polar Bear Convention and fisheries governance. Another important example is the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution of 1979, in which the USSR actively participated (Victor et al., 1998).

In a way, continuing the themes developed in the book edited by Victor et al. (1998), some of the articles in this thematic issue restate the need for an inclusive approach to deal with environmental challenges (see Borozna, 2024; Wang & Ma, 2024; Vladimirova, 2024). According to experts, "the (Arctic) council's 130-odd

circumpolar projects—tackling issues from science, to shipping, to Indigenous youth suicide—have paid the price” of the events of 2022 (Simpson, 2023).

Moreover, some recent studies point to the diffusion of (democratic and environmental) values and principles through dialogue, contacts, negotiation, and membership in IOs—all of which are associated with the dissemination of values and norms diffusion and democratization in the long run (Kopstein & Reilly, 2000; Lankina et al., 2016; Simmons et al., 2006). Yet another example of the diffusion of human rights and democratic values is the development of IPOs in the AC and beyond it. The protection of IP in Canada and Finland could serve as a model for Russia to follow, should interaction across IPOs take place regularly. By contrast, membership in regional organizations associated with the consolidation of autocracies and regime survival diffuse the opposite values, such as prioritizing economic growth and extractive industries, militarization, and a security agenda (Agostinis & Urdinez, 2022; Ambrosio, 2008; Libman & Obydenkova, 2013; Obydenkova & Libman, 2019; Tansey, 2016).

To sum up, ARG is experiencing multiple transformations and new challenges at all levels—national, sub-national, cross-national, and international organizations—involving multiple actors and groups. It is beyond the scope of one thematic issue to assess all of the challenges and changes taking place in ARG, however, these articles present a variety of opinions, views, and perspectives to fill in some gaps. The topics and issues raised here will certainly stay on our ongoing and future research agenda.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Anastassia Obydenkova is a research scientist at the Institute for Economic Analysis—Spanish National Research Council (IAE—CSIC) and affiliated professor at the Barcelona School of Economics (Spain). Previously, she was an associated professor at Uppsala University (Sweden), and was awarded research fellowships at Yale, Harvard, and Princeton Universities. She specializes in the studies of political institutions and regimes, sustainable development, environmental politics, international organizations, and comparative regionalism with an area focus on Central Europe, the European Union, and Eurasia.