Russian Senior Arctic Official, Ambassador Nikolay Korchunov recently stated clearly that during its chairmanship of the Arctic Council (AC) “Russia will strive for strengthening Arctic cooperation and keeping the Arctic as an area of peace and constructive collaboration…”. The Arctic Council turns 25 this year as unquestionably one of the most successful multilateral regional and international bodies of our times. Its success is based on common interests and efforts of the Arctic States, clear agenda and the rules of the game, as well as reasonable flexibility to meet new challenges. Russia intends to build on this success, including the excellent outcome of the current Icelandic Chairmanship which had to overcome unprecedented pandemic-related difficulties, to lead the Council into its second quarter-century.

The Russian Chairmanship will also be motivated by the national Arctic Strategy updated in 2020 for the period up to 2035. It provides for a major step forward in development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and welcomes mutually beneficial cooperation of Russia with its Arctic partners and, besides, interested non-regional states.

The game plan conceived by Russia has many ideas, but no surprises. It proceeds from the understanding that the Arctic Council is a collective body operated by consensus. It treats in a balanced way the two designated areas of the Arctic Council mandate – environmental protection and sustainable development. Its cross-cutting topic, to quote Ambassador Korchunov again, is “a man in the Arctic”.

This article is a part of the Arctic Circle Journal Series which provides insight, understanding and new information. The material represents the opinions of the author but not those of the Arctic Circle.
The four priorities of the Russian Chairmanship are:

- the Arctic inhabitants, including indigenous peoples;
- environmental protection and climate change;
- social and economic growth;
- further strengthening the Arctic Council — the key framework of international Arctic cooperation.

Most of the ideas, proposals of research and practical projects, events and accents in this or other way serve not one, but several or all of these priorities.

We need to further enhance regional economic, including investment, cooperation on the basis of balance between economic growth and environmental protection. For this purpose the Arctic Council and the Arctic Economic Council should be synergized, and research and implementation of green technologies and innovations, especially in the energy sector, stimulated.

Investments in human capital are critical for providing better living conditions in the North and further economic and social development of the Arctic. Key points are building modern urban environments, accessibility of quality education, health care and healthy way of life, new technologies, public security, as well as drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Particular attention should be paid to the interests of indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Their traditional way of life, ethnic identity, cultural and historic heritage should be protected in the face of market economy, economic development, new industrial revolution, and climate change. This could be achieved by assuring better conditions for living and business, education, digitalization of remote areas, integration of traditional knowledge into the Arctic Council projects, ecosystem-based management, health care, food- and bio-security and closer regional cooperation.

Restoration of consensus in the Arctic Council on climate change allows to prioritize this subject matter again together with the issues of ecology of the region. An Arctic meteorological summit is planned for 2022. We have to intensify cooperation and undertake measures to protect, sustain and rehabilitate the fragile Arctic environment. Climate research should be enhanced, eco-safety strengthened and ecological emergencies prevented.

Rational use of natural resources of the Arctic should also be guaranteed in order to ensure ecological and socio-economic wellness of today’s and future generations. Among areas of practical cooperation are:
- location and elimination of environmental “hot spots”;
- biodiversity;
- marine litter and plastic pollution;
- green energy solutions and energy efficiency;
- limitation of black carbon emissions;
- effective functioning of the Project Support Instrument;
- circular economy;
- new materials and many others.

International scientific cooperation in the Arctic should serve to raise effectiveness and efficiency of scientific research and practical applicability of its results. It is important to fully realize the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation and to work out the legal mechanisms of its implementation. The meeting of Science Ministers of the Arctic states could be used to elaborate common approaches and principles of long-term coordinated programs of fundamental and applied research. Traditional and new research areas could include, inter alia:

- monitoring climate change and its consequences;
- prevention of irreversible anthropogenic impact on environment and climate;
- risk of expanding methane emissions by permafrost degradation;
- environmental pollution from various sources;
- bioresources of the central part of the Arctic Ocean, etc.

Sustainable Arctic shipping is becoming more important with the increased use of the Northern Sea Route. On the one hand, safe and beneficial all-season navigation must be assured. Creation of appropriate conditions and infrastructure, and, in a more general sense, building of the innovative maritime economy should proceed to prevent emergencies and protect the environment. On the other hand, attention to the environment and ecosystems of the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas should be increased. Research on bioremediation of the Arctic coast should be intensified, and amount to a comprehensive assessment of the long-term impact of increased Arctic shipping on the environment in a warming climate. Russia will support continued functioning of the SAO Marine Mechanism and relevant proposals.

Preventive actions and preparedness to deal with emergencies will be high on the agenda. Growth of economic and human activities, marine and air transportation in the Arctic require further enhancement of search and rescue capacities. Effective implementation of the two regional legally binding agreements – on cooperation on SAR, as well as on preparedness and response to marine oil pollution is also required. The Arctic Council could expand interaction with the Arctic Coast Guards Forum in this respect.
Last but not least, points of particular attention will be involvement of youth in Arctic Council activities, development of sustainable Arctic tourism and more active cooperation in culture and sports.

This brief overview, of course, intends only to illustrate and highlight the serious, holistic and constructive approach of Russia to its forthcoming Chairmanship. Preparations are in full swing. All the details are, obviously, to be discussed and considered in the Arctic Council itself. Russia bears special responsibility for the state of affairs in the Arctic and counts on support from its regional partners.

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