



Russia denounces its exclusion from some Arctic Council work

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Foreign Ministers attend the Arctic Council summit at the Lappi Areena in Rovaniemi, Finland May 7

Russia on Thursday criticized a move by the seven other Arctic nations to continue the work of the Arctic Council without it.

Any decisions the intergovernmental forum makes without Russia “will be deprived of legitimacy,” warned Anatoly Antonov, Russia’s ambassador to the U.S., [according](#) to RIA Novosti, a Russian state-owned news agency.

Antonov said that “decisions within the framework of the Arctic Council without the participation of Russia are illegitimate and violate the principle of consensus provided for by its governing documents,” RIA Novosti reported.

The seven nations except Russia on the Arctic Council announced on Wednesday they would [resume work](#) on any projects without prior Russian involvement.

The Arctic Council is an informal forum operating on consensus, not a membership organization, so Russia cannot be expelled from it.

But there is nothing in the council’s rules that prevent representatives from the seven other Arctic states from continuing to work on existing projects that didn’t include Russia without Russian input, said Julie Gourley, who served as the senior Arctic official for the United States from 2005 to 2019.

Russia does have some ways it could try to complicate such work. It could demand to participate in projects it wasn’t previously involved with, for example, or insist that projects continue reporting to all SAOs, including Russia’s. “So it remains to be seen whether this plan as released yesterday will come to fruition,” Gourley said.

The exclusion will likely continue for as long as necessary, Gourley said. The cooperation was first paused in March as the other seven Arctic nations [condemned](#) Russia’s “unprovoked” [invasion of Ukraine](#) as a “flagrant violation” of international law.

Russia currently holds the two-year rotating chair of the council until May 2023, when Norway will assume the leadership.

Norway is likely well into its planning for assuming the chair, “with or without Russia,” Gourley said. “Again, Russia could block the council from going ahead. If that happens, then all work and operations would stop.”

But it is unlikely that Russia will block the limited resumption of work, she said, because presumably it will want to return to the table once its war with Ukraine has ended and normal relations are reestablished, as typically happens after international crises.

“I think that while no one wants to collaborate with Russia right now, most countries will want to resume normal relations with Russia eventually,” Gourley said. “But that could be quite far into the future, perhaps until after Mr. Putin is gone.”

Resuming work now, even on only some projects, will “ensure that the region is not neglected at such a critical time when climate change is so dramatically altering it,” she said. “I don’t necessarily think the

point is to piss off Russia — though that almost certainly will happen — as much as to keep the focus on the horrors of what is and will happen to the planet as the Arctic thaws and melts.”

Perhaps no group is more affected by changes in the Arctic than its Indigenous residents, who are represented by six Indigenous groups that are permanent participants on the council.

The Gwich'in International Council, one such group, said in a [statement](#) on Thursday that they are “gravely concerned about the suspension of work under the Arctic Council,” especially cooperation on better understanding climate change, wildfires, food security, mental health, and the safety and security of Arctic peoples.

The organization also pointed to the necessity of involving permanent participants in decisions, such as the initial pause and the limited resumption announced this week.

“As Arctic states consider the future of the Arctic Council, we demand to be a part of discussions on the resumption and continuation of Arctic Council work as well as the different modalities that are being considered,” the group said.

Without insight from permanent participants, “the Arctic Council will cease to be the voice of the Circumpolar North,” the statement said.

While Russia has objected to the limited resumption, Moscow has so far not tried to block any of the council’s work.

The seven other Arctic nations continuing some collaboration without Russia under the aegis of the council is “very far from the idea of setting up an alternative Arctic format without Russia. The idea that they want Russia back eventually is still very much alive in there,” said Elana Wilson Rowe, research professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

The U.S. State Department contends that it is “taking this step now to continue the important work that the Council’s subsidiary bodies perform,” a spokesperson told ArcticToday in an email.

“We remain hopeful that there will be a time to cooperate with all eight Arctic States in the Council in the future,” the spokesperson said, before adding, “This is not that time.”

Russia’s response that continuing work would be “illegitimate” puzzled Rowe, since the council is bound informally by consensus, not by law.

“Maybe they find it offensive, or it’s not their preferred policy outcome, but this language of legitimacy or illegitimacy, I think, is kind of exaggerated.”

Pausing the work of the council in March was “an important signal” to rebuke Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and the resumption of some collaboration shows that the other Arctic nations are not letting Russia set the tone of cooperation in the North, Rowe said.

But even once the pause on cooperation ends, it may be difficult to pick back up where the council left off.

“Either things will be very different in Russia, and we’ll be facing some sort of change of leadership in Russia, which is a very remote possibility, or I think Arctic cooperation will also be significantly changed

at the political level," Rowe said.

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