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## Arctic Tourism in the Barents Sea Region: Current Situation and Boundaries of the Possible\*

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**Abstract.** The article discusses current trends in the development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) and the peculiarities in the Arctic tourism organization. Over the past ten years, the geography of recreational nature management and international tourism in the Russian Arctic has significantly expanded. Among all the northern countries, Russia has the longest coastline in the Arctic and the largest sector of the adjacent shelf and waters of the seas of the Arctic Ocean (AO). So, its current economic and political interests in the polar zone are apparent. However, compared with neighboring Arctic countries, in the Russian Federation, for several reasons, the potential of Arctic tourism is far from being fully utilized. Natural and anthropogenic factors regulate its further development. On the example of actively developing cruise Arctic tourism in the Barents Sea region, the existing problems, and prospects of the possible development of tourism in the Arctic in current conditions are discussed. Based on the analysis of sources available on the modern development of Arctic tourism in general and in the Barents Sea basin, in particular, the author made conclusions about the factors limiting the growth of Arctic tourism in the Russian Federation.

**Keywords:** *Arctic, tourism, Barents Sea region, recreational nature management, icebreaking fleet, regulatory factors, sustainable development.*

### Introduction

The current decade was marked by a significant expansion of the geography of recreational nature management and international tourism in the Russian Arctic. In the polar regions of the Russian Federation, new protected natural areas (SPAs), i.e., reserves and national parks have appeared, ecological and cruise tourism in the polar latitudes has significantly intensified. Russia is the northern country that has the longest coastline in the Arctic seas (more than 20 thous. km) and the largest adjacent shelf and Arctic water area. Therefore, for Russia, the current economic and political interests in the polar zone are apparent. However, compared with neighboring Arctic countries, in the Russian Federation for several reasons, the potential of Arctic tourism is far from being fully utilized. Natural and anthropogenic factors regulate its further development.

### *AZRF in the strategic territorial development plans of the Russian Federation*

In 2014, the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation until 2020 was adopted. It sets the tasks for the comprehensive economic, defense, and social development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF). The strategic plans include “the development of a unified transport system as a national sea route focused on year-round functioning (incl. the Northern Sea Route and river and rail lines running to it, as well as a network of airports)”, “the development of Arctic tourism and the expansion of environmentally friendly tour-

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ism activities in the Arctic, ... promoting regional tourism clusters and Arctic tourism to national and international markets”<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, Russia faces a promising task of the integrated use of various natural resources of the Arctic, incl. tourism and recreation, with a view to the sustainable socio-economic development of the most important polar regions and the country as a whole.

The second no less important document was the state program established by the Government in 2014 on the “Socio-economic development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation for the period until 2020”. In the framework of the new edition of this state program, (No. 1064 of August 31, 2017), the list of subprograms, their primary tasks, and target indicators have been updated, the membership has been expanded, the state program implementation period has been extended until 2025. According to experts, this will create the conditions for accelerated socio-economic development of the Arctic zone, achieving strategic interests and ensuring Russia’s national security in the Arctic.

As a subprogram, the sphere “Development of Culture and Tourism for 2013–2020” was designated, which provides for the expansion of opportunities for tourists to visit marine areas on the northern coast of Russia and the creation of conditions for the reception of tourists in the island northern territories of the Russian Federation. The federal target programs “Culture of Russia (2012–2018)” and “Development of domestic and inbound tourism in the Russian Federation (2011–2018)” are integrated and extended into this state program.

However, according to experts, the adopted documents and the design of the regulatory framework for the organization of tourism in the Russian Arctic do not reflect a single economic conception of actions. Still, they offer only targeted solutions that, given the regional specifics and strategic position of the region, are insufficient to solve everything complex problems of the Arctic. It should be noted that, in general, there are favorable prospects for solving the tasks posed by the growing importance of the resource potential of the northern and Arctic regions for the Russian economy. It produces 72% of all oil and gas condensate, 93% natural gas, almost all diamonds, 37% of commercial timber, non-ferrous and rare metals, gold, platinum, and many other consequential types of products, which together provide up to 60% of the country’s exports. The North offers 15–20% of the total GRP, which is essential for the federal budget [1, Pavlenko V.I., p. 17].

Under the Arctic climate warming recently observed and the decreasing ice cover of the Arctic Ocean, the NSR modernization plans are slowly but surely being implemented, incl. the reconstruction of the ports of Dudinka, Dikson, Tiksi, Pevek, and Provedeniya along the NSR. This route should connect European and Far Eastern Russian ports, and the mouths of navigable Siberian rivers into a single transport system to give a new impetus to the development of the eastern regions of Russia. Currently, there is a revival of economic activity in the Arctic sector of the Russian Federation and the active “re-development” of marine and coastal Arctic regions, especially in

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<sup>1</sup> Strategiya razvitiya Arkticheskoy zony Rossiyskoy Federatsii do 2020 g. [Development Strategy of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation until 2020]. URL: <http://government.ru/news/432/> (accessed 25 September 2019).

the western part of the Russian Arctic, where Russia is successfully mastering new technologies for offshore hydrocarbon production. In the course of the development of the Arctic and the territories of the Russian North, new territorial entities are formed: support zones based on the existing spots of the future socio-economic development of the Arctic [2, Andreeva E.N., p. 26]. It is planned for the support zones to function as integrated territorial units by 2025 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Support zones of the Arctic development <sup>2</sup>.

In the understanding of the President of the Russian Federation, support zones are not only territories but primarily the implementation of mutually complementary projects, as well as state support tools. Their main tasks are the development of mineral resource centers, attracting investments, and the NSR development. In the framework of the zones, other “territories with preferential conditions for conducting entrepreneurial activity” may be created, incl. tourist and recreational facilities.

The increase in oil and gas production at new fields (Shtokmanovskoye, Prirazlomnoye, etc.), the organization of the new port of Sabetta and a plant for the production of liquefied gas, necessitate the further development of not only the NSR transport services but measures to prevent related problems of environmental pollution [3, Dodin D.A., p. 8, 64].

According to the press, to develop the Arctic shipping along the NSR, the construction of 8 large new icebreakers is planned. In 2017, the most significant new nuclear icebreaker Ilya Muromets and the icebreaker Sibir were launched at the shipyards of St. Petersburg. Also, in October 2019, the Ivan Papanin icebreaker, the lead ship of the series for the Russian Navy, descended from the slipway, and the second, Nikolai Zubov, was under construction. These vessels are designed to organize the NSR patrols and to ensure Arctic shipping safety. Outstanding achievement in the energy supply of the eastern Arctic regions was the commissioning of the first Akademik Lomonosov floating nuclear atomic thermal power plant (FNPP) in 2019. It was delivered and in-

<sup>2</sup> Assotsiatsiya polyarnikov [Association of Polar Explorers]. URL: <http://aspolrf.ru/news/536/> (accessed 04 January 2020).

stalled in the port of Pevek in Chukotka. The plant was designed to produce electrical and thermal energy and to desalinate seawater. Of course, this plant will become a popular tourist destination when organizing cruises on the NSR.

It should be emphasized that the provision of shipping along the NSR and the large rivers of the Russian North opens up the possibility of expanding not only industrial transportation and boosting the economy of the remote regions of the north of Siberia, but also international cruise and ecological tourism in the polar and Arctic latitudes. All this should contribute to the development of related industries, the creation of new jobs, and the consolidation of people in the settlements of the North of the Russian Federation [4, Selin V.S., p. 7].

According to experts, recently, there has been a revival of the socio-economic sphere in some northern regions of Russia. First, this refers to the Barents Sea, the White Sea, and Kara basins of the Arctic Ocean, where the main areas of the existing and planned production of hydrocarbons, metallurgical raw materials, and forests are located. The western sector of the Russian Arctic is not only rich in natural resources. Also, it is the presence of many natural and cultural heritage sites (seids, labyrinths, petroglyphs, and remains of Pomor culture) associated with the ancient and modern stages of the economic development of seacoasts and islands in the Barents Sea region. There, on the northern coast of the Kola Peninsula, the most famous ice-free seaport of Murmansk and various natural, historical, and cultural tourism sites are located [5, 6].

This polar region has the most significant tourist and recreational potential and is becoming increasingly popular as an area of international ecological and cruise tourism. On the Kola Peninsula, one can see traces of prehistoric human exploration of this territory (petroglyphs, seids, labyrinths, megalithic monuments) and heritage monuments of later historical eras [5, Grigoryev A.A. et al., p. 31].

On the border between the Murmansk Oblast, Norway, and Finland, an international transborder national park Paasvik-Inari was organized. In the waters of the Barents Sea, the Svalbard archipelago (Grumant) is located, where the tourist-recreational cluster, combining the Norwegian and Russian parts of the territory, is successfully developing. Annually, the Norwegian part of Svalbard, with the center in Longyearbyen, hosts up to 80 thousand tourists, mainly from Norway and other European countries. The Russian part of Svalbard and its settlements of Barentsburg and Pyramida lag far behind in terms of tourist infrastructure and transportation. However, recently, there has been a noticeable increase in the attendance of Barentsburg in the spring-summer period from April to August during short excursions (2.5–3 thousand people/year. Among them, Russian tourists are only 20–30 people) [6, Korostelev E.M. et al., p. 13].

In the White Sea, on the Solovetsky Islands, the well-known Solovetsky State Historical, Architectural, and Natural Museum-Reserve and the monastery complex are opened for guests. According to the Agency for the Development of the Solovetsky Archipelago, in 2015, the Islands got a special status of "Religious and historical place," which makes them even more attractive to visitors. According to local statistics, annually, this national shrine is visited by an average of 30 thou-

sand tourists and pilgrims. According to the press release of the Solovetsky Museum-Reserve, for the season of 2018, the Solovetsky Museum served 62 325 visitors, incl. 49 259 tourists with excursions. Compared to 2017, revenue from the entrance tickets sale increased by 7.4% due to the growth of the number of visitors. However, environmental experts note that restrictions on visiting the Solovetsky Islands are required, as the limit of the ecological capacity of this protected natural area (SPNA) has been reached<sup>3</sup>.

Organized in 2013 on the Onega Peninsula of the White Sea, the new National Park "Onezhskoe Pomor'e" has become a branch of the Kenozersky National Park since 2016. There, unique sea dunes and indigenous taiga forests that extend to the shores of the White Sea, rare sea animals, monuments of the coastal culture, and Christian wooden temple architecture are preserved. The expansion of the Kenozersky National Park at the expense of the Pomor territories of the Onega Peninsula will probably contribute to the reconstruction and preservation of northern wooden architecture.

Significant tourist potential can be represented by the island of Kiy in the Onega Bay of the White Sea, located 15 km from the city of Onega. In the summer, the Kiy Holiday House operates on the island. Up to 2,000 tourists annually relax there. On the island, one can see the Kia Cross Monastery, founded in 1656 by Patriarch Nikon and of interest for historical and cultural tourism, but requiring restoration.

Since 2011, at the northern end of Novaya Zemlya, the largest "Russian Arctic" national park has been operating since 2016, incl. Franz Josef Land archipelago (FJL). The islands of the "Russian Arctic" keep traces of the ancient sites of the sea and heroic expeditions associated with their discovery and exploration. The largest bird bazaars in the northern hemisphere are there as well as the numerous herds of walruses and other pinnipeds, large habitats of the polar bear, and other specially protected species of fauna and flora [7, Gavrilov M.V., p. 23].

South of Novaya Zemlya is Vaigach Island with its numerous attractive objects of the Arctic nature and monuments of the ancient culture of the Nenets people. Currently, the administration of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug is developing plans to organize a new National Park on the territory of Vaigach Island. This island is sacred for the peoples of the North. Its picturesque natural landscapes, lakes, canyons, and waterfalls are the unique historical and cultural heritage of the Nenets. The island provides opportunities for observing wild animals; it can become one of the best tourist brands of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug [8].

All the listed tourist and recreational territories of the Arctic, despite their inaccessibility, annually receive hundreds of tourists and become more and more popular among both domestic and foreign travelers. Development of the NSR transport infrastructure will contribute to their ac-

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<sup>3</sup> Agentstvo po razvitiyu Solovetskogo arhipelaga Arkhangel'skoy oblasti [Agency for the Development of the Solovetsky Archipelago of the Arkhangelsk Oblast]. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/2358304.html> (accessed 01 September 2018).

cessibility and help to create new jobs, improve local socio-economic conditions, and to increase the quality of life there.

It should be noted that in the neighboring Arctic countries, i.e., the United States, Canada, Iceland, Norway, and Denmark are developing tourism with significant public sector support, and it brings considerable profit. E.g., according to UNWTO, in 2010–2011, the US state of Alaska earned up to \$ 3.4 billion/year and Canada — \$ 6.5 billion/year. The significant increase in the number of tourists visiting Greenland attracts attention: in the early 1990s, only about 3,500 people arrived there per year, and in 2011 — nearly 65,000 people/year. In general, over the past 20 years, there has been an increase in the flow of tourists to the Arctic by more than 18 times, exceeding the number of residents living here — Inuit and Danes. Among the remaining regions of the Arctic, Iceland showed similar increased dynamics: the number of international visitors has grown by more than four times. Norwegian Svalbard got a three-time increase. In other regions of the foreign Arctic (Alaska and the Canadian Archipelago), tourism growth rates are like the world average and ranged from 42 to 84%. So, in 2015, the number of tourists visited the foreign Arctic and subpolar regions (not Russian) exceeded 700 thousand people [9, 10, 11].

#### ***Prospects and limits for the tourism development in the Barents Sea region***

It should be noted that because of the Arctic climate warming observed over the past 20 years, an ever-increasing area of polar ice in the summertime disappears and frees up the northern seas for navigation. Not only continental but also island territories become more accessible. The interest of representatives of different countries, especially China, is growing not only in the mineral and other natural resources of the northern polar territories and waters but also in cruises along the northern seas and the North Pole. In groups of tourists participating in cruises to the North Pole and in the Russian Arctic National Park, representatives of China make up 30%.

In recent years, China, and Japan, which have the most significant economic weight in Southeast Asia, have shown an increased interest in polar research, and the development of transport and cruise capabilities of the NSR. The largest Chinese research diesel icebreaker, Xue Long (Snow Dragon), has already completed several flights along the NSR from Shanghai to Svalbard and back. In China, the second, even more powerful, icebreaker “Xue Long-2” was launched for the future escort of transport caravans and cruise ships along the NSR. Currently, the advantages of using the NSR are apparent: this route is almost two times shorter than other sea routes from Europe to the Far East. E.g., the distance between St. Petersburg and Vladivostok is 14,280 km along the NSR, 23,200 km via the Suez Canal, and 29,400 km around the Cape of Good Hope. The sea route along the NSR between Murmansk and the port of Provideniya is about 7,100 km. However, the passage of vessels through the NSR, especially in the eastern sector, even under conditions of modern warming, without the escort of icebreakers, is still problematic [12, Lukin Yu.F.].

In the Barents Sea region, where the ice-free port of Murmansk is located, international marine cruise tourism has been actively developing in recent years. But so far, it has not received broad development and is carried out only by private firms and individual representatives of shipping companies and airlines.

According to the Minister of Economic Development of the Murmansk Oblast Yu. Efremov, cruise ship calls at the seaport of Murmansk have been carried out for the past 12 years. The Murmansk tour operator Nordmorservis Travel has been accepting 3 to 8 medium-sized cruise liners per season at the fishing port. Besides, the Moscow company Special Travel Club provides sea cruises to the Arctic, offering cruises to Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, and the North Pole, with a visit to Franz Joseph Land. But, unfortunately, still, in the port of Murmansk, there are no special deep-sea berths suitable for receiving large cruise liners, which could provide additional income to the local budget [13, Sevastyanov D.V. et al., p. 485].

Especially popular among foreign tourists are cruises from Murmansk across the Barents Sea on the Russian nuclear icebreaker “50 Let Pobedy” to the North Pole, via Franz Joseph Land Archipelago and the National Park “Russian Arctic”. Indicative is the statistics of cruise tourists visiting this new national park, presented on the site of the NP “Russian Arctic”. In 2011–2018, it was attended by more than 6.5 thous tourists from 70 countries. It is noteworthy that out of the total number of cruise tourists who visited the Russian Arctic during all these years, only about 5–8% were the citizens of the Russian Federation, and about 30% — Chinese tourists. In the summer of 2018, tourists from 41 countries were there. The share of tourists from China amounted to 33% (354 people). The second were tourists from Germany and Switzerland — 13% (144 and 143 people), and third — the US citizens: 12% (136 people). The dynamics of visits is in Table 1.

The tourist season 2019 in the Russian Arctic National Park was an anniversary. The park was ten years old. For the first time in ten years, Russian citizens took first place in terms of the number of visits. In 2019, 1 306 people visited this protected area, incl. 262 Russians<sup>4</sup>.

Table 1

*The dynamics of tourists visit the NP “Russian Arctic”*

Years	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number of tourists	865	1005	636	738	1225	954	1142	1079	1306

It can be noted that for Russian tourists, cruises to the North Pole and the FJL are not in great demand because of their high cost (up to 1.5–2 million rubles for 7–10 days cruise on a nuclear icebreaker). A slightly cheaper cost will be a sea cruise to Iceland or Svalbard, the price of which will be about 250 thous rubles, which is explained by the more developed infrastructure and the elaboration of these tourist destinations. Thus, for most Russian citizens, Arctic tourism is still difficult to reach.

<sup>4</sup> Turisticheskiy portal Arkhangel'skoy oblasti [Tourist portal of the Arkhangelsk Oblast]. URL: [www.pomorland.travel](http://www.pomorland.travel) (accessed 28 December 2019).

### Conclusion

Based on the analysis of materials characterizing the modern development of Arctic tourism in general and in the Barents Sea basin, the following conclusions can be drawn. At numerous international forums, where various problems of rational use of natural resources of the Arctic are discussed, it is invariably noted that the Russian Arctic is “a region of promising tourist development”. However, along with some successes in the development of tourism in the polar and Arctic regions of the Russian Federation, several restrictions do not allow us to hope for a significant expansion of the Arctic segment of tourist activity in the foreseeable future outside the Barents Sea.

1. First, the difficulties associated with the harsh climatic conditions of shipping at high latitudes are apparent: long, cold winters and heavy floating ice, which outside the Barents Sea do not entirely disappear even in the warmest months of the year. Existing popular forecasts for continued climate warming in the Arctic are controversial and may not be justified.

2. Passage of transport and cruise ships through the NSR through ice massifs is possible only with the help of icebreakers. The use of the nuclear icebreaker fleet is a complicated and expensive undertaking, which significantly increases transport costs and the cost of cruise tourism, which does not allow making it widespread.

3. According to the deputy head of the Federal Agency for Tourism of the Russian Federation R. Skoroy, not a single concept and strategy for the development of the Arctic zone adequately provides for a stable income from Arctic tourism. Currently, Arctic tourism is not considered an important factor and an integral part of the complex socio-economic development of the northern regions. Tourism exists in the Arctic, contrary to the organizing and regulatory role of the state.

4. With all the diversity and attractiveness of tourism facilities in the Arctic, the difficult accessibility of the Arctic regions and the high cost of travel even within the Barents Sea basin are the main regulatory factors for domestic tourism. The Arctic is entirely inaccessible to people with average incomes. Amid falling purchasing power of the main population of the Russian Federation, the number of tourists who can afford a trip to the Arctic is declining.

5. The attraction of foreign tourists to the Russian Arctic is fraught with several difficulties in the visa regime and border control; therefore, it is still challenging to guarantee constant demand for Arctic tourism and its mass character.

6. The necessary tourist infrastructure is still lacking in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation. There is always a low level of service and a lack of professional staff, and no possibility of developing mass international cruise tourism, even using the largest port of Murmansk.

7. Despite the adopted “Development Strategy of the Russian Arctic to 2025”, Arctic tourism is still not economically connected with plans and programs for the integrated, targeted socio-economic development of the polar regions. It explains the weak state support and inadequate funding of tourism projects, which limits its development prospects.

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