

Are The Voices Of Arctic Citizens Heard And Empowered?

Anastasia O. Ljovkina¹

Scientific Center of Arctic Research

a.o.lyovkina@utmn.ru

Gennadij F. Detter²

Scientific Center of Arctic Research

detter@mail.ru

Abstract

The long-term prosperity of Arctic regions sufficiently depends on the involvement of Arctic communities and citizens in the sustainable development of their territories of residence. This task needs convenient and effective instruments providing social control and participation in decision-making processes. Considering the remoteness of Arctic territories, internet services of public involvement are crucially important for providing effective public involvement. In 2013, the Russian government launched the Russian Social Initiative internet platform (RSI) for citizens to create and promote initiatives on different levels: local, regional, and federal. However, the effectiveness of social activity at RSI is ambiguous. In this study, we made a descriptive analysis of Arctic citizens' social activity at RSI to understand the current level of their involvement and opportunities for the further development of participatory governance with the help of a national online platform. According to the research results, online instruments for participatory governing are necessary and convenient for arctic citizens as they produced a sufficient number of constructive social, economic, and environmental initiatives at RSI. Anyway, consideration of peoples' interests in the regional and municipal policies stays miserable as only one RSI initiative was implemented in the Russian Arctic. Thus, the problem of participatory decision-making is beyond just the need to increase social activeness and the use of online instruments. It needs further system analysis for identifying specific barriers for effective participatory public governance and ways of optimization decision-making processes supported by online technologies.

Keywords

Arctic, sustainable development, participatory governance, online platform

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Are the voices of arctic citizens heard and empowered?

The crucial importance of considering the interests of different social groups for sustainable social development is proved by empirical and theoretical anthropological findings (Fromm, 2011; Kropotkin, 2009; Larsen & Fondahl, 2015) and by mathematical modeling of the vitality of egoistic and collaborative societies (Ivanko, 2018). Thus, participatory governance is an essential condition of providing common prosperity and sustainable development. Effective participatory governance implies not so much the high level of social activeness as its quality, that is constructive social initiatives and their effective implementation. In the digital era, developing collaborative government implies using appropriate online instruments of public involvement.

The crisis of sustainable development increased common attention to the ecologically vulnerable Arctic which has a great importance to the world environmental balance. Arctic sustainable development requires changing traditional Arctic resource-oriented policy. One of the key points of the sustainable development of the Russian Arctic is increasing its attractiveness for living (Efremova et al., 2017). This point implies the shift of narratives of Arctic identity from owning (exploiting) the Arctic to being Arctic habitant Medby (2018) and requires a stronger embodiment of Arctic citizens in social life, their stronger effect on regional policy. At first sight, Arctic specifics, such as low population density, high cultural heterogeneity, and severe conditions of survival, do not favor social activeness and public involvement in the government processes in Arctic regions. Anyway, two critical factors for the Arctic sustainable development - population growth and the quality of their social activity for common prosperity - are interconnected (Larsen & Fondahl, 2015). The spreading of high-quality internet connections throughout remote Arctic territories created a necessary background for using modern internet-based services supporting different social activities.

In this study, we investigate the social activity of Arctic citizens at the Russian Social Initiative internet portal (RSI) launched on April 2, 2013. The main rules of using this instrument for public involvement were defined by the Russian government: every citizen can suggest a candidate solution to an actual problem; the level of problem/solution (local, regional or national) implies voting of the appropriate category of citizens: time for voting is limited (not more than a year). Depending on the level of initiative (federal, regional or municipal), the following values are set for the required number of votes FOR: Federal level - not less than 100,000 (one hundred thousand). Regional level - for regions with a population of over 2 million - 100,000 (one hundred thousand), for the rest - 5% of the region's population. Municipal level - 5% of the population of the municipality. When the quantity of votes exceeds the required number, the initiative goes to Expert Committee which should make an informed decision within two months: to realize the initiative or to decline it.

The purpose of this research is to understand both the current level of the social activeness of arctic citizens at RSI and opportunities for the further development of participatory governance with the help of an RSI national online platform. This study will allow identifying general problems and perspectives of using Internet-based instruments for public involvement in the Arctic zone in general. The results of this study also will help to clarify further directions of research aimed at searching the reserves of increasing the level and quality of public involvement, the effectiveness of participatory governance instruments and processes.

Method

Information sources

We used the open database of RSI internet portal for getting the information about the initiatives in Arctic regions. We also used the data of Federal Government Statistical about the Arctic population as for January 1, 2021 (Russian Federation, 2018).

Methods and indicators

In this study, we made a descriptive analysis of Arctic citizens' social activity at RSI. To characterize the level of social activity of Arctic citizens at RSI we used two main statistical indicators: the number of initiatives (for the period from April, 2 till September 5, 2021) and coefficients of social activity (K1 and K2). The coefficient of general social activity K1 was counted as a number of all RSI initiatives per 100 000 citizens of the region. The coefficient of local social activity K2 was counted as a number of local and regional RSI initiatives per 100 000 citizens in the region. Additionally, we ranked Arctic regions by K1 and K2 to compare their level of social activity at RSI (Rank 1 and Rank 2). With the help of frequency analysis, we investigated the distribution of: 1) the share of voices "for" from the required minimum and 2) extent of agreement on the solution calculated as the ratio of voices "for" to the total quantity of voices. In the frequency analysis, we considered only local and regional initiatives with closed voting dates. Using visual analysis, in particular, scatter charts, we map Arctic regions on two axes: population and quantity of initiatives.

Results and Discussion

The greatest number of RSI initiatives (183) were generated by Krasnoyarsk citizens and the smallest (6) – by citizens of Chukotka autonomous okrug. Nevertheless, the rating of regions by social activeness at RSI sufficiently change if to consider their population. The highest score of K1 belongs to Nenets autonomous okrug, that is it has the highest value of relative social activeness (number of initiatives per 100 000 people) – 42,8 and, therefore, the highest potential for increasing public involvement through RSI while increasing population. Krasnoyarsk region, being the leader in the number of RSI initiatives, however, has a very low value of K1 (7,56) which is approximately 8 times less than the K1 value of one of the most remote and thinly populated regions - Nenets autonomous okrug.

However, citizens of Nenets autonomous okrug generate solutions and initiatives mostly for the problems of the national level. Thus, this region has a low value of K2 (2,25) which means relatively low social activeness at the local and regional levels. Yamal-Nenets autonomous okrug has the highest value of K2 (4,39) indicating its highest level of social activeness in solving local and regional problems among other Arctic regions.

It is a remarkable fact, that only one initiative got a solution and this initiative (its RSI number - 11M2671) had not required a minimal number of voices, moreover, it had more voices "against" than "for". The share of voices "for" from the required minimum in the case of this initiative was 0,01%, whereas six initiatives with a required minimum of voices "for" did not get official support or solution. Other initiatives had no even a chance to be examined by the appropriate Expert Committee because did not get enough voices. For example, a very important social and ecological problem formulated in the RSI initiative 11M11726 "Prohibit the construction of a radioactive waste disposal facility on the territory of ICDO Ukhta. Conserve radioactive waste in Vodny at the place of its generation" got 47,57% got the required voices "for", the voting was closed 03-04-2015 but this problem still did not get any official resolution despite the rules of RSI.

Table 1

General characteristics of social activeness of Arctic region at RSI

Russian Arctic regions	The quantity of RSI initiatives				In total	Populations for January 1, 2021	K1	Rank 1	K2	Rank 2
	Code	N	R	L						
Yamal-Nenets autonomous okrug	89	81	12	12	105	547010	19,20	4	4,39	1
Chukotka autonomous okrug	87	4	2	0	6	49527	12,11	6	4,04	2
Komi republic	11	103	10	10	123	813590	15,12	5	2,46	3
Nenets autonomous okrug	83	18	1	0	19	44389	42,80	1	2,25	4
Karelia Republic	10	115	5	6	126	609071	20,69	2	1,81	5
Murmansk oblast	51	133	7	5	145	732864	19,79	3	1,64	6
Arkhangelsk region (without Nenets autonomous okrug)	29	82	4	10	96	1082662	8,87	7	1,29	7
Sakha (Yakutia) Republic	14	55	7	5	67	981971	6,82	9	1,22	8
Krasnoyarsk region	24	183	16	17	216	2855899	7,56	8	1,16	9

Note. Codes L, R, N in Table 1 mean local, regional and national levels of RSI initiatives accordingly.

Table 2

Distribution of the share of votes FOR from the required minimum (local and regional initiatives of all Arctic regions)

Bins	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Pctage.
0	3	2,32%	2,32%
0 To 5	120	93,02%	95,34%
5 To 10	5	3,87%	99,21%
45 To 50	1	0,78%	100,0%

Table 3

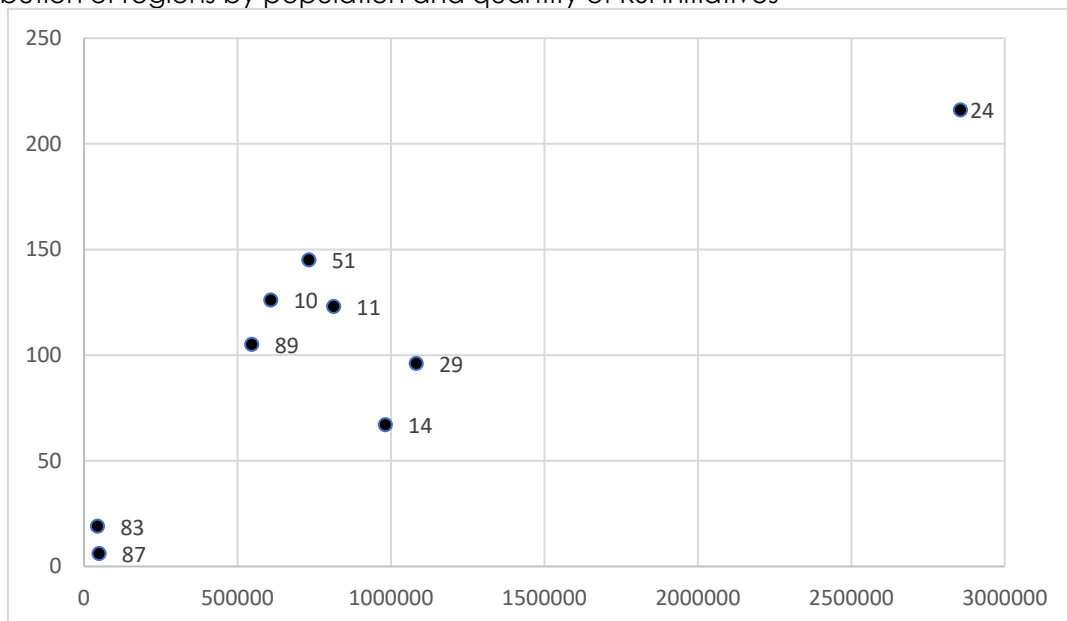
Frequency distribution of the share of voted FOR in total number of voted (as for local and regional initiatives of Arctic regions)

Bins	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Pctage.
0,1 To 0,2	1	0,8%	0,8%
0,2 To 0,3	1	0,8%	1,6%
0,3 To 0,4	1	0,8%	2,4%
0,4 To 0,5	1	0,8%	3,1%
0,5 To 0,6	1	0,8%	3,9%
0,6 To 0,7	2	1,6%	5,5%
0,7 To 0,8	8	6,3%	11,8%
0,8 To 0,9	12	9,4%	21,3%
0,9 To 1	101	78,7%	100,0%

Practically all local and regional initiatives in Arctic regions (97%) got more voices “for” than “against”. Only four initiatives got more numbers of negative voices than positive ones. Only one initiative (11M2671) with a negative ratio of votes “for” to votes “against” got an official resolution.

Figure 1

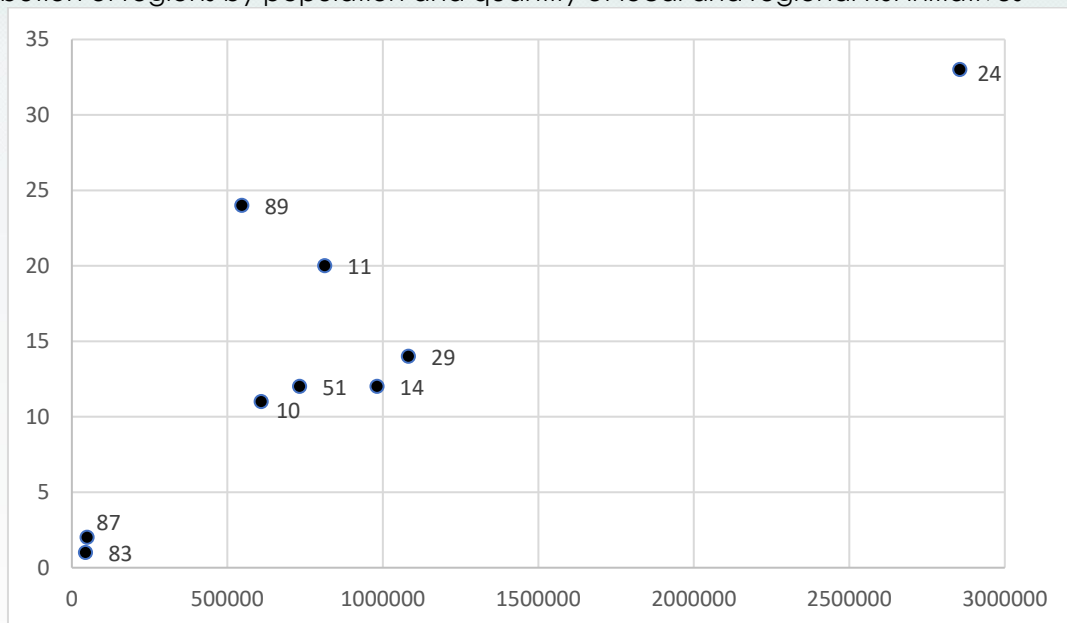
Distribution of regions by population and quantity of RSI initiatives



Note. data signatures at a scatter plot depict federal codes of Arctic regions (see Table one).

Figure 2

Distribution of regions by population and quantity of local and regional RSI initiatives



Note: data signatures at a scatter plot depict federal codes of Arctic regions (see Table one). Visual analysis shows a positive correlation between the population size and the number of initiatives. However, we can observe a comparable high level of social activeness in some Arctic regions with low population size - Murmansk oblast, Komi Republic, Karelia Republic, and Yamal-Nenets autonomous okrug. This situation needs further research of common and specific factors influencing social activeness of Arctic regions, in particular using RSI.

Conclusion

Today, the online social activity of Arctic citizens using official instruments of public involvement is at an extremely low level. At the same time, since 2013 Arctic citizens generated a sufficient number of useful initiatives which were not examined and implemented by local and regional governments, most of the initiatives were denied for formal reasons - these initiatives did not get enough voices. To our opinion, these initiatives are underused resources of the public governance. These initiatives should be discussed and considered in the appropriate programs of development of Arctic territories. Besides, consideration of all reasonable ROI initiatives will strengthen the power of Arctic "voices" that is the involvement of arctic citizens in local and regional decision-making processes. Besides, effective processes of considering public initiatives will increase trust in official instruments of participatory governance, motivate creating initiatives, and voting for solutions initiated by others.

We should take into account the relatively high RSI activeness of the citizens of the most little-inhabited and remote regions (Nenets autonomous okrug and Chukotka autonomous okrug) where internet-based instruments of public involvement have high importance for involving Arctic citizens in political and social life. However, today's low level of public involvement in Arctic regions stipulates a strong need for further research of the reserves of increasing the level of public involvement of Arctic citizens using internet-based technologies. The model of public involvement using governmental internet-based instruments should be revised. Presently, RSI's potential is highly underused because of other system problems in the governance decision-making hindering the development of participatory public governance in Russian Arctic.

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