Briefing Note

Maintaining international science dialogue in the Arctic: FORAS project experience

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The current worldwide geopolitical climate has dramatically changed the landscape of international communication in science, especially within the Arctic realm. This shift requires the scientific community to find flexible institutional frameworks and platforms to keep and foster a professional dialogue which, at its core, should be inclusive and holistic to avoid a fragmentary understanding of global and Arctic processes. Many approaches with a more or less free and inclusive nature have been applied, ranging from individual people-to-people communication to engagement within international organizations (for example, the International Arctic Science Committee), and global initiatives, such as United Nations' dedicated programs and international decades. In this paper, the authors examine a project endorsed and implemented within UNESCO's International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development 2024–2033 and evaluate its potential to become a viable platform for maintaining inclusive international science dialogue in the Arctic.

Introduction

Many authors have already discussed the increasingly fragmented state of current science dialogue in the Arctic and the consequences such a state might have for the future of the planet and generations to come (Büntgen & Rees, 2023; Gaffey et al., 2024; López-Blanco, Topp-Jørgensen, et al, 2024; Schuur, Pallandt & Göckede, 2024; Zaika & Lagutina, 2023; Zaika, Riabova & Sergunin, 2023). This is particularly alarming because climate change is taking an increasing toll, driving more frequent and intense weather-related natural disasters that appear at a rapid pace, especially in polar regions, which poses a high risk to populated Arctic areas. The recent Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) states that decisions made in this decade may affect the Earth for millennia (IPCC, 2023). This requires urgent political decisions and a

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balanced approach to inclusive scientific dialogue, especially in the Arctic region, to prevent a lack of data and misinterpretation of rapid changes, and thus to ensure a timely response.

Today, it has become highly challenging to conduct traditional international Arctic research involving Russian partners, especially from the Western side, and Arctic scientific cooperation is under threat. The current situation of the Western exclusion of Russian science creates a complex set of emerging controversies within the Arctic research community and brings challenges to the future sustainable development of the region. Out of all the Arctic states engaged in international scientific discourse, the Russian Arctic is the largest by territory. More importantly, it is the territory with the densest population in the Arctic region, the ancestral home of many Indigenous peoples and Northerners, and the area with the greatest diversity of habitats, ecoregions, and plant and animal species (Zaika, 2024).

Excluding Russian science and voices of Russian Arctic people from the international fora influences the ability to adequately describe conditions across the Arctic, thus biasing the view of Arctic changes in all spheres from environmental to socio-economic. Understanding the gaps and biases is a prerequisite to consider and address them, at least to some extent, and thereby improve the ability to make credible predictions.

Divided at times of global changes, the scientific community may face dramatic scenarios of future sustainability. Considering current climate challenges for the Arctic, there is a growing importance of international networking, which is crucial for collecting data and maintaining research credibility. Scholars have a responsibility to engage globally, ensuring their research remains relevant and well-informed. Cutting ties with Russia in the field of Arctic research risks producing weaker studies that fail to capture emerging trends and developments in the global Arctic. When quantifying the impact of excluding Russian Arctic research on the representation of data on carbon fluxes, permafrost thawing, and climate-induced ecosystem change, the Western scientific community anticipates a 25% to 50% loss of data, resulting in gaps and biases in scientific outcomes, decision-making, Arctic residents' living conditions, and humankind's sustainability (Zaika, 2025). In such a situation, individual scientists search for possible ways and platforms to communicate and cooperate with their colleagues, with whom, in most cases, they have worked for most of their professional careers.

Cooperative inclusivity in an exclusive world

There are different modes of cooperation that exist even in the current political situation and illuminate rather flexible approaches to the possibility of staying connected. The level, ability and strength of cooperation extend from the individual framework to international and global organizations and programs. While mostly unofficial individual cooperation can only be observed (and assessed) through joint publications and engagement in joint international meetings and conferences, international and global organizations provide diverse possibilities to build a dialogue.

One prominent example of an international organization is the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) with its structural unit – the ISIRA Group (International Science Initiative in the Russian Arctic). The Russian Academy of Sciences (at the time of the IASC foundation – the Academy of Sciences of the USSR) was one of the founding bodies of the IASC and has its representatives in all organizational elements of the committee, such as the Council, Working Groups and the Secretariat (IASC, 2025). The ISIRA Group of the IASC has the potential to build

a platform for dialogue based on the international organization, but the major involvement of its membership is from the European countries with strict legislative regulations regarding cooperation with Russian institutions and vice versa, which also influences the decision-making and possibilities within the group itself.

The group was founded within the IASC as a consultative platform in early 1993 to share experience and opportunities for cooperation with Russian institutions regarding research and field campaigns in the Russian Arctic. Since that period, the group has existed and communicated in different modes within the official program of Arctic Science Summit Weeks (annual events of the IASC) and, apart from that, through non-regular intermediate meetings (Zaika, 2025). When the geopolitical context changed in 2022, the group had no official gatherings, and its first official joint meeting happened during ASSW2026 (Aarhus, Denmark). It was a remarkable gathering, where delegates from 9 countries came together at the open meeting to discuss the obstacles and opportunities to stay connected and maintain scientific dialogue with colleagues from Russia under the present political conditions. Even though the number of participants representing Russian institutions was very low, such a meeting is an important step towards building an inclusive dialogue in the Arctic.

In times of disrupted cooperation, another prominent example of existing connections and platforms for circumpolar dialogue is the Arctic Yearbook, which is open to contributions and discussions on the opportunities for dialogue between Western and Russian researchers on its pages. For instance, the 2022 volume, titled The Russian Arctic: Economics, Politics & Peoples (Arctic Yearbook, 2022), is structured around four overarching themes that cover a wide range of interrelated topics. These themes are: (1) People, Art, and Culture; (2) Climate, Society, and Development; (3) Chinese–Russian Cooperation; and (4) Russia and the World. It is also important to mention subsequent volumes, which offer additional perspectives and include reflections from Russian authors. These include AY2023: Arctic Indigenous Peoples: Climate, Science, Knowledge and Governance; AY2024: Arctic Relations: Transformations, Legacies and Futures; and AY2025: War and Peace in the Arctic (https://arcticyearbook.com/). Today, the Arctic Yearbook serves as an important inclusive platform where multiple and sometimes opposing views and opinions are welcomed, openly presented, thoroughly articulated, and debated.

Another notable example of cooperation is the Calotte Academy (https://calotte-academy.com/), which continues to organize dedicated sessions within its program in a long-standing partnership of nearly thirty-five years with the Luzin Institute for Economic Studies of the Kola Science Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Riabova & Ivanova, 2016). These sessions play a vital role in preserving previously established, trust-based cross-border relations even amid tense and destabilizing political circumstances.

A further significant opportunity to keep a holistic, inclusive dialogue is the upcoming International Polar Year 2032-2033, which is currently being actively prepared and planned by the international scientific community. There are no direct obstacles or constraints for the Russian national committee and Russian representatives to participate in this historic research initiative, which has already spanned a century and a half of polar research history.

The next level of possible cooperation, as mentioned earlier, exists within the global programs and organizations such as United Nations bodies. Specifically, UNESCO provides a framework for cooperation within its international days, international weeks, international years, and international

decades (UNESCO Decades, 2026). International days are annual observances that highlight specific issues or themes. Each year, a focus is selected to encourage global participation through events, campaigns, and policy discussions. International weeks are short-term campaigns designed to highlight a specific cause over several days. Less common than international days, they often include coordinated global events and activities. International years spotlight global issues to educate the public, mobilize political will, and enhance international cooperation, promoting global action and awareness on specific themes. International decades are ten-year commitments that focus on large-scale global challenges, requiring long-term efforts across multiple countries and organizations. These international decades often involve governments, the scientific community, and civil society.

Many of the campaigns listed above are dedicated to the poles – Arctic and Antarctic – and can serve as a foundation for joint activities and cooperation. Among those are, for example, the International Year of Glaciers' Preservation (IYGP) 2025, the Decade of Action for Cryospheric Sciences (2025–2034), the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022–2032), the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) ('the Ocean Decade'), the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development (2024–2033) and many others.

The paradox with the situation of a broken dialogue is that it can only be resolved through dialogue and the facilitation of scientific literacy. The levels of possible cooperation presented above offer to bridge the existing and currently widening gap in today's Arctic science through science diplomacy and common interests.

Under the auspices of UNESCO: FORAS project

On August 25, 2023, at the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly, a Resolution (UN GA Resolution, 2023) was adopted that proclaimed 2024–2033 as the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development and called for its implementation within the framework of existing structures and available resources in order to provide humanity with a unique opportunity to utilize the crucial role that science plays in ensuring sustainable development and in solving the complex problems of our time. The Decade aims to integrate science into the sustainable development process, promoting scientific knowledge, innovation and technologies needed to solve environmental, social and economic problems (IDSSD, 2024).

Initiatives supported under the Decade include: 1) programmes which aim to contribute to achieving one or more expected outcomes of the Decade and support the realization of at least two objectives, with a duration of at least two years; 2) projects – more specific initiatives, typically smaller in scope and scale compared to a programme, which can be associated with a programme or implemented as an independent initiative; 3) events – standalone initiatives (such as a science popularisation campaign, a scientific workshop, or a training course) that may support a programme or project.

The FORAS project, which is the focus of this paper, has been submitted and lately accepted and endorsed as the initiative within the framework of the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development, held under the auspices of UNESCO in 2024–2033. It was approved and received UNESCO project status in the mid-2025.

FORAS stands for "From the Arctic for the Arctic: Science Diplomacy for Sustainable Future of the Region and Its People" under its core slogan "For Arctic Science", and proposes a series of

international webinars and open-dialogue expert sessions centered around the scientific community to promote knowledge on Arctic-related issues for Arctic stakeholders by Arctic stakeholders. The project put efforts into keeping the international Arctic research community well-informed and connected, and strives to prevent global Arctic science from fragmentation. It also aims to facilitate and disseminate actionable scientific knowledge to local communities and practitioners to achieve sustainable development goals through global research collaborative initiatives and open science for a safe and prosperous future for everyone in the Arctic and beyond (FORAS project, 2025).

The project is implemented at the organizational level by two scientific institutions – the Federal Research Centre "Kola Science Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences" (FRC KSC RAS), specifically its International Department, and the Luzin Institute for Economic Studies of KSC RAS. The core team of the project consists of three people (the authors of this publication) who operate on a voluntary basis. The team represents the generational lens of the project. This approach is proclaimed as one of the flagship features and includes three generations of scientists (senior, mid-career and early-career researchers) who have observed and applied different paradigms of international scientific circumpolar cooperation and dialogue. Such an approach helps the team and the project preserve institutional memory and use accumulated experience, stay flexible and up-to-date, and maintain the project's legacy for the future of scientific dialogue in the Arctic.

FORAS aims to organize and has already organized several online sessions with scientists, experts, and residents of the Arctic region to discuss the most important development issues in the Arctic through the prism of science diplomacy, as well as scientific, expert, and local knowledge. The project promotes the expansion of international and interregional dialogue among Arctic scientists, experts, and residents, and facilitates the involvement of non-regional participants in the Arctic dialogue from CIS, BRICS, and SCO member states, and other countries.

The thematic outline of the project includes but is not limited to the various topics related to the Arctic region and international cooperation in the Arctic, such as discussions on the International Decade of Sciences and sustainable development itself, the Decade of Ocean Science, and the International Polar Year, as well as topical sessions on "People of the Arctic", "Arctic Biodiversity", "Marine research in the Arctic" and more.

By being an inclusive project by its nature, FORAS proposes that all participants become partners in the project and suggest critical topics to discuss via its open feedback form posted and shared online.

Intermediate successes and constraints of FORAS

By being a UNESCO endorsed project, FORAS should accommodate and follow the certain objectives and anticipate both short-term and long-term impacts. Some of the declared objectives might be seen as too ambitious but in the long term and with a common effort, they can certainly be achieved (FORAS IDSSD, 2026). These are:

- to engage a wide range of societal actors in a science-based dialogue on a sustainable Arctic future;

- to empower the global Arctic community through science diplomacy and scientific literacy regarding the most critical Arctic challenges, including climate change, and to facilitate this dialogue;
- to advance the achievement of sustainable development goals in the Arctic and beyond through the sharing of scientific knowledge;
- to foster a global Arctic collaborative science diplomacy initiative;
- to democratize the scientific process in the Arctic and ensure access to scientific knowledge on the region;
- to disseminate and share knowledge about the major UN activities and decades dedicated to science and the Arctic;
- to better respond to the scientific and societal needs of the Arctic and its people by providing a platform for communication at times of global changes.

The short-term impact of FORAS is another valuable characteristic that reflects adherence and commitment to the common goals and values of international science. Such impact is formulated as: a) fostering cooperative strategies at times of global challenges; b) discussing current urgent issue of importance to Arctic residents and scientists at times of rapid climate change; c) providing recommendations by the Arctic residents themselves to decision-making stakeholders in order to foster the science dialogue and improve community living; d) maintaining existing individual connections and building new prospective ones; e) disseminating information of the importance of UNESCO as a global platform for developing and strengthening collaborations.

FORAS quality objectives and impacts can hardly be measured in numerical terms; therefore, one can only experience its effects when participating or after the project is completed, within the period of active influence and subsequent societal relevance. This period usually refers to the legacy period of different international initiatives, such as the International Polar Year, for example (IPY-5, 2023).

However, some quantitative (measurable) indicators can be used, and they show that during the first nine months of the project, FORAS was able to attract more than 2,500 individuals (scientists, experts, local residents and decision-makers) to its activities, engaging them in various capacities – as key experts and speakers, discussion experts, active participants, and engaged listeners. Six online sessions and five onsite sessions were organized under the umbrella of or jointly with the FORAS project (Table 1).

Table 1. List of FORAS project activities in 2025 and 2026

Date and Format of the Session	Title
March 26, 2025 Hybrid (pre-project activity mentioned in proposal)	Conference session entitled "International Arctic Science Collaborations: ISIRA Case Study as IASC's Platform for Dialogue" (Arctic Science Summit Week 2025, Boulder, Colorado)

October 6, 2025 Online	Expert session: "UNESCO's International Decade of Sciences, and the Challenges of Developing the Russian Arctic in a Changing World"
November 10, 2025 Hybrid	Russia-Cameroon scientific seminar on cooperation opportunities: "Where the Arctic Meets Africa"
November 28, 2025 Online	Expert session: "Rational Nature Management in the Arctic – Dream or Reality?"
December 18, 2025 Online	Expert session: "Evolution of Drifting Measuring Platforms for Studying the Arctic Ocean"
January 20, 2026 Online	Expert session: "Development of the Trans-Arctic Transport Corridor Based on the Northern Sea Route – Economic and Legal Aspects"
February 19, 2026 Online	Expert session: "International Polar Year – 150 Years of Science Empowerment at the Poles"
March 29, 2026 Hybrid	Joint conference meeting International Science Initiative in the Russian Arctic (ISIRA) (Arctic Science Summit Week 2026, Aarhus, Denmark)
April 24, 2026 Hybrid	Round table: "International Scientific Dialogue in the Arctic in an Era of Change" within the Luzin Readings conference 2026
June 5, 2026 Online	Expert session: "Creative Industries of the Arctic Region: Dynamics and Development Prospects"
June 9, 2026 Hybrid	Joint session of FORAS and the Calotte Academy. Theme of the Calotte Academy 2026: "Intelligence"

As shown in Table 1, the sessions are grouped into two categories: (1) project expert sessions, each focusing on a preplanned theme of particular importance to Arctic stakeholders; and (2) activities and meetings associated with the project and organized in conjunction with other initiatives, such as the Calotte Academy, Arctic Science Summit Week sessions and meetings, the Luzin Readings conference, and others.

The expert sessions are preplanned and address the most critical and urgent issues related to the Arctic, its people and environment. These sessions serve to consolidate knowledge, expertise, and strategic priorities, thereby forming the foundation for the subsequent FORAS2E phase (discussed below).

In turn, the activities associated with the FORAS project convene expert panels to explore concrete opportunities for open science. They focus on long-standing areas, including monitoring, data sharing, publications, the use of other communication platforms, navigation through existing narratives, and coordination of initiatives. This also allows for expanding the Arctic dialogue to new geographies, including contributions from the African continent.

It is important to note that experts, speakers, as well as other participants take part in the FORAS sessions and related activities as volunteers driven by scientific enthusiasm and a shared commitment to advancing and disseminating knowledge about the Arctic, fostering interest in the region, and promoting its sustainable development. The sessions regularly spark lively discussions and extend beyond their scheduled time, demonstrating a genuine interest in and demand for a platform dedicated to inclusive Arctic science dialogue.

All these results reflect the high interest of the international scientific community in continuing and keeping the dialogue in the Arctic. Nevertheless, there are also some constraints that can be observed or anticipated. For example, one of these is the deep dependence on external factors and the environment (political, economic, and reputational). Specifically, any "unpopular" decisions or

actions that go against the political discourse of national governments may downgrade the reputation of the platform, as well as reduce the value and importance of the efforts already made. Furthermore, tightening and more restrictive policies for communication at different levels – and within different groups and actors directly or indirectly involved – may influence the course of the project. The other obstacle might be the lack of funding which has both a positive and a negative influence. The FORAS project is an initiative organized by enthusiastic individuals with no funding involved. This financial situation allows the project to freely make decisions on its management and partnerships with minimal to no influence only framed by the legislative environment of the country where it is implemented, Russia. On the other hand, the lack of finances limits the scaling and development of the project and the engagement of social and human capital in its active implementation in the long term.

Nevertheless, the FORAS project authors and its implementing team consider the continuity of scientific knowledge as one of the major factors in sustaining international dialogue in the Arctic. This is reflected not only in the structure of the implementing team, which represents different generations of scientists, but also within the main implementation strategy, characterized by the openness and inclusion of interested partners. This led to the development of the second phase of the project as its logical evolution – FORAS2E.

Future of the project

Inspired by the support and development of FORAS, the core team of the project decided in July 2025 to submit an application to UNESCO's second call for activities within the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development. The second application aimed to strengthen the current project and to ensure the continuity of the Arctic knowledge exchange and international scientific dialogue. It was titled "FORAS2E – From the Arctic for the Arctic: Science Diplomacy for Sustainable Future of the Region and its People. Educating a New Generation (2028–2031)". The main goal of the project's second phase is to create an open-access international online educational resource focusing on issues related to sustainable development in the Arctic. On December 28, 2025, the application was approved by the Secretariat of UNESCO's International Decade of Sciences, and the project was officially endorsed (IDSSD, 2024).

With the initial FORAS project, the authors aim to create an information base for its second stage. The second phase – FORAS2E (For Arctic Science to Education) aims at the organization of an online school and potentially a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) with live sessions and discussionshttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course for young and early-career researchers from different geographies. Both projects seek to use science diplomacy to bridge the existing and widening gap in today's Arctic science, to facilitate and disseminate actionable scientific knowledge to local communities and practitioners, as well as to use local and practitioners' expertise for knowledge co-production. Ultimately, these efforts aim to achieve sustainable development goals through global research collaborative initiatives and open science, contributing to a safe and prosperous future for the Arctic region and beyond. This second phase of the project highlights the significance of the continuity of knowledge, science and education for future generations (FORAS2E IDSSD, 2026).

Conclusions

The FORAS and FORAS2E initiatives are purely enthusiasm-driven projects implemented only through the individual motivation and resources of those involved. With these projects, the authors aim to apply a humanistic approach to Arctic cooperation, which is mostly built upon different aims and agendas in an uncertain political realm today. The FORAS project framework is seen as a platform that can ensure the continuation of Arctic stakeholder knowledge both at present and in the future, promote support for long-lasting scientific cooperation strategies currently at risk, and practice individual solutions to the current challenges of the Arctic science dialogue as the basis for future scientifically correct findings, especially amid rapid climate change.

Considering the current geopolitical situation and the disintegrated state of the Arctic science dialogue, the FORAS project invites new interested partners, regardless of geography, to help foster and empower the Arctic dialogue among people, on the basis of and with the endorsement from UNESCO's Science Decade.

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