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# 11 (UN)LINKING ACROSS THE BORDER: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, INDIGENOUS INITIATIVES, AND LOCAL POLITICS IN CHUKOTKA

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## Introduction

Although after 24 February 2022, the confrontation between the Russian Federation and the "collective West" escalated to a degree not seen since the fall of the "Iron Curtain" in the early 1990s, it has an extensive background in post-Soviet Russia. Even during the closest rapprochement between the two counterparts from the late 1980s to the early 2010s, this antagonism has never fully left the public sphere. The beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked the peak of isolationist and authoritarian tendencies in Russia, which had been developing for many years and influencing both civil society and international cooperation.

In this paper, I examine the case of Chukotka (the Chukchi Autonomous Area), a region of Russia bordering the United States at the Bering Strait that has always been directly affected by the dynamics of Russian-American relationships. This geographical position, amidst the kin and cultural ties between Indigenous people across the Bering Strait, contributed to the tangible presence of "America" in local public discourse. In Chukotka, American influence has always been a concern for the local authorities, as they have tried to prevent it.

For three months in summer-fall 2021, I conducted research in several coastal communities in Chukotka, where Indigenous people practice marine mammal hunting, namely the Chukchi and the Siberian Yupik. During my fieldwork, I was struck by the degree of governmental control, militarization, and the number of regulations over the freedom of movement in the region, that impacted not only foreign and domestic visitors but also local residents. Another confounding discovery of my 2021 fieldwork was the discernible suspicion the local authorities held towards international and even Russian research projects and cooperation initiatives. Distrust of researchers, especially among the border guard servicemen (in Russia they are part of the Federal Security Service), sometimes took paranoid and absurd forms. Even though I had an affiliation with a Russian university, I was interrogated several times to prevent, as I was told, "foreign hostile activity." The obstacles I encountered during my field research, as well as learning about the experience of other colleagues and the fate of many international projects in Chukotka, led me to see the cessation of inter-

national contacts after the beginning of full-scale war in Ukraine not as a sudden and unforeseen event, but as the culmination of a long-standing trend.

In this chapter, I elaborate on the role of international projects in environmental protection and in fostering Indigenous subsistence practices in Chukotka, the difficulties they have encountered in the past three decades, and the consequences of their discontinuation after 2022. In the 1990s and early 2000s, international cooperation had been essential to the viability of state-independent Indigenous initiatives and associations (see E. Zdor, *this volume – eds.*). It provided them with a means for moving toward self-determination and emancipation under the conditions of small, remote rural communities, lack of institutions to protect their interests, and almost total economic dependence on the state. However, these organizations eventually faced a strenuous and growing resistance from the regional administration. Chukotka's strive for national and regional "sovereignty" in the form of opposition to international cooperation is inextricably linked to the state's overall authoritarian course. Analyzing the unfolding dynamics of this development in specific localities provides us with material for understanding the situation that arose after 24 February 2022.

Fig. 1 Residents on the shore await the sharing of a whale harvested by the local hunting community.

## The Beringia region and cross-border relations during the Soviet era

Chukotka is a peculiar territory in terms of its location. Its easternmost point is only 86 kilometers from the United States at the western tip of Alaska and 6200 kilometers from Moscow. The local Indigenous population, mainly coastal Chukchi and Siberian Yupik, traditionally maintained kinship, cultural, and exchange ties with Indigenous peoples of Alaska, including its nearby islands. Since the mid-19th century, they also started actively trading with American whalers and entrepreneurs. These contacts eventually became a cause for concern, first for the Tsarist and later the Soviet administration. Soviet power was established in Chukotka by 1924; thereafter its representatives sought to limit foreign presence while trying to gain the loyalty of the local population.

The Soviets diligently positioned themselves as the "liberators" of Chukotka from the plundering American traders. Besides fulfilling ideological aspirations, Indigenous allegiance was used to enforce and justify territorial claims. For example, Siberian Yupik were the majority among the settlers brought on Wrangel Island in 1926 to secure Soviet rights to the island. However, the state initially did not prevent Soviet and American Indigenous people from contacting each other. The first regulations regarding cross-border movements were introduced by the Soviet authorities only in 1938, as they gained a solid foothold in the region. While allowing American Yupik and Inupiat visitors to travel more or less freely along the coast of the Chukchi Peninsula, it imposed limitations on the number of visitors, duration of visits, and the passage of certain goods (Krauss 1994: 368).

As tensions in Soviet-American relations grew after WWII, the border became increasingly tight. In 1948 with the outbreak of the Cold War, it was closed completely, erecting an "Ice Curtain" between the two countries. The Bering Strait was seen by both sides as the site of a possible military confrontation. Previously frequent contacts among Indigenous people on both sides of the Bering Strait ceased, and they had to hide that they had relatives on the U.S. side so as not to raise suspicion.[1] The border closure primarily affected people on the Soviet Big Diomede Island, which lies only a few kilometers from the U.S.-owned Little Diomede Island. All of them were relocated to the Siberian Yupik village of Naukan, although by that time most of the islanders had already left for the U.S. side.

The community of Naukan, positioned at the narrowest part of the Bering Strait, was then also relocated in 1958. The official reasons were proclaimed to be an "inconvenient location" to deliver supplies and the unprofitable local collective farm, although it was one of the most successful in the area. Some of the locals still believe that the closure of Naukan was attributable to suspicions of spying and the unreliability of its inhabitants due to the alleged continuation of contacts on the other side

1 Dmitriy Oparin, interview with Ludmila Ainana, Siberian Yupik educator and activist, Bolshoi Gorod 2012, №303. https://issuu.com/big_city/docs/collect303l [accessed 14.11.2024]

of the border. Many other Indigenous settlements that were most likely considered similarly exposed to contact were also closed. At the same time, the military presence increased dramatically: border guard stations and military camps were established all along the coast, sometimes at the sites of resettled Indigenous villages, and nuclear weaponry was deployed. Beringia, which has always been a culturally and geographically interconnected region, was split in two and became a zone of geopolitical conflict for the next forty years.

The *Perestroika* ("restructuring") era and the policy of *glasnost'* ("openness") of the late 1980s stimulated a thaw in Soviet-American relations in the Arctic. Through the efforts and aspirations of scientists, ethnographers, Indigenous intellectuals, and other public figures on both sides of the strait, contacts were gradually resumed. After years of preparations, the famous "Friendship Flight" from Nome to Provideniya took place in 1988, with a delegation of Alaskan politicians, journalists, and Indigenous people from St. Lawrence Island on board (Ramseur 2017). This event, filled with excitement and big hopes on both sides, and the ensuing signing of the agreement on visa-free travel for the "Eskimos of Chukotka and Alaska" in 1990, initiated the resumption of the visits across the strait. The border finally became permeable again.[2] First by airplanes and ships, and later in small boats, people began to actively travel back and forth. Here's how two of my interlocutors from the coastal Indigenous community described this time:

> In '91 we were the first who went to Alaska in whaleboats. […] We stayed there for a few days and then went back. After that, we went there almost every summer.
>
> Under a red flag, sickle and hammer, we put it over our whaleboat [laughs]. When we arrived, the locals said: they told us that the Soviet Union was the enemy number one. But you are people just like us![3]

During this time, Indigenous rights organizations started to emerge in many regions across the Soviet Union. Such was possible with the liberalization of society and the introduction of new laws, such as the law "On Public Associations." As a part of the changing agenda and largely thanks to renewed contacts with the Alaskan Yupik and Inupiat, the Indigenous peoples of Chukotka established various organizations to represent their interests. In those years, the Association of Small-Numbered Peoples of Chukotka (1990), the Yupik Eskimo Society (1990), the Chukotka District Council for Promotion of National Revival, and other Indigenous associations were established (Ainana et al. 2000). In large part, they were inspired by the similar institutions in Alaska. During their visits to the other side of the Bering Strait, people from Chukotka learned from the experiences of Indigenous organizations there and

2 Later, all Indigenous peoples of the two districts with coastal settlements closest to the border were included in this agreement.

3 For security reasons, I do not cite the names and other personal data of my interlocutors.

developed joint projects. In 1992, the Indigenous people of Chukotka joined the Inuit Circumpolar Council, bringing their voices to a whole new level of the international community, a situation unimaginable in the pre-Perestroika era. For the first time in the country's history, they obtained the right to represent themselves and build relationships with other Indigenous peoples with whom they shared similar experiences of oppression and cultural assimilation, outside of state ideological censorship.

The sphere around which the most fruitful and close cooperation began to develop across the Strait was marine mammal hunting. By the end of the 1980s, all economic activities, including traditional ones, such as hunting of marine animals (whales, walruses, and seals), were put under complete governmental control. Hunters were not allowed to hunt outside the state farm (*sovkhoz*). With the introduction of a new legal framework in the Perestroika era, the organization of private enterprises became possible, and a few marine mammal hunting collectives emerged on a cooperative basis. First among them was the Naukan Cooperative in the town of Lavrentia, named after the closed Yupik settlement. Led by local Indigenous rights activist Mikhail Zelensky, the Naukan collective of 26 hunters sought to begin hunting in the district center where people from closed settlements had been relocated, and where they had no access to traditional food (see E. Zdor, *this volume – eds*.). It also aimed to revitalize practices and cultural elements that had declined or disappeared during the Soviet period as a result of modernization.

Fig. 2 Members of the Naukan Cooperative transport a harvested whale to shore.

The main problem for the Naukan collective was the lack of resources. Since subsistence marine hunting could not be a successful commercial enterprise, hunters needed funds for technical equipment (boats, motors, fuel, etc.) and other expenses related to the work of the cooperative. Fortunately, thanks to the renewed contacts across the Bering Strait, Naukan was able to find means to operate. A joint project was developed with Alaskan research institutions to monitor the migration of bowhead whales, which provided technical and financial support to the cooperative. Besides Naukan members, hunters from other coastal communities were included in the project as observers and provided with wages and equipment. Later, other Chukotkan Indigenous organizations, such as the Yupik Society, joined the project.

Many hunters involved in the whale monitoring activities in those years visited Alaska for project meetings and saw how Indigenous Alaskans hunted and pursued their interests. They shared experiences and built contacts; Alaskan hunters also visited Chukotka regularly. Through international cooperation, Indigenous collectives were able to obtain material support, which was critical for their existence. But most importantly, the state-independent associations gave back a sense of community and offered a path to reclaim the agency taken away by decades of structural state violence that assigned subordinate, backward, and thus, passive role to Indigenous people.

Almost all organizations created then have long since ceased to exist (the reasons for this are discussed below). And yet, during that period, it was the Indigenous bonds and partnership that provided the foundation on which the U.S.-Russian relationships in the region were built.

## Post-Soviet times: Challenges to international cooperation and Indigenous initiatives

In the post-Soviet period, Chukotka's Indigenous communities continued to move towards self-organization and cultural revitalization. Various cultural initiatives were launched by Indigenous intelligentsia (Gray 2005); assemblies were frequently held, and Indigenous activists regularly participated in international conferences. In other words, Indigenous voices were gaining more and more space in the public sphere and an institutional infrastructure was built to protect Indigenous people's interests. The most successful organizations were those that managed to integrate into the international networks (such as the Naukan Cooperative and Yupik Society) and, with the material support they provided, functioned mostly independently from the state.

One of the most notable organizations that emerged in this period was the Union of Marine Mammal Hunters (UMMH). At that time, Chukotka was experiencing a deep economic crisis: many enterprises had been closed, and the employees of the remaining ones had not been paid for years, including hunters employed by the state farms. Hunters' frustration with their work in state enterprises and the need to protect their

interests became acute in the first post-Soviet years, and some of them saw a possible solution in the creation of an association of marine hunters. Those of them who went to Alaska had seen the examples of such organizations. Hunters who visited Barrow in Alaska (today's Utqiagvik – *eds.*) were "impressed by the meeting of one hundred and fifty bowhead whale hunters, members of the Alaskan Eskimo Whaling Commission, representing ten villages" (Zelensky et al. 1995: 60). Inspired by the perspective of the organization that could unite and represent hunters as a professional group, those who were participating in whale monitoring projects as observers proposed this idea in an appeal to other hunters from coastal villages. In 1997, 45 hunters assembled and decided to form UMMH. The meeting ended with a joint hunt and meat distribution on the shore for all comers (Ainana et. al 2002; Eduard Zdor, *this volume).*

However, the regional administration, which was largely made up of non-Indigenous people and headed by Governor Alexander Nazarov, who came to power in 1991, had little enthusiasm for Indigenous grassroots initiatives. This was largely due to the inherited paternalism, cultivated and prevalent during the Soviet time. There was no room in this paradigm for Indigenous state-independent action and self-determination. The creation of Indigenous organizations, such as the UMMH, came as a surprise to the local administration, which decided to actively oppose it. Because of the joint hunting that occurred after the UMMH meeting, the hunters were fined by the district's Department of Agriculture for allegedly hunting outside their assigned catch quotas, the "illegal" use of the quota belonging to the state, and for free distribution of meat that also belonged to a state enterprise. At that time, the hunters who were employed in state farms had not been paid for several years. A few months later, another meeting of hunters was convened in 1998, but this time with the participation of the governor and other administration representatives, which resulted in the establishment of an organization with an almost identical name – the Union of Marine Mammal Hunters of Chukotka (UMMHC) (Ainana et. al 2002: 297; see also Eduard Zdor, *this volume – eds.*). Many hunters attended both meetings and were certain that they were referring to the same organization (Eduard Zdor, *personal communication*).

Later, Governor Nazarov published an article in a local newspaper titled "Forcing Development," in which he accused the UMMH of pursuing American interests because of its active involvement in international sphere and close cooperation with Alaskan Indigenous NGOs,[4] and claimed that only the UMMHC was a "legitimate representative" of hunters' interests. Opposition to the activities of the UMMH was a part of the Nazarov administration's overall policy, which, as Gray pointed out, was aimed at consolidating power within a certain circle of trusted individuals and suppressing independent Indigenous initiatives that might challenge that monopoly (Gray 2005). In 1999, the Yupik Eskimo Society, which had been in active partnership with the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) and had worked with the Naukan

4 Among them are Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, Pacific Walrus Commission, and the Nanuuq Polar Bear Commission (Ainana et. al. 2002: 295).

Cooperative on monitoring whale migrations, was closed by the court decision. The society was charged that its activities "went beyond the authority of public associations" (Oparin 2015: 29).

For Nazarov, the emancipation of Indigenous peoples and the strengthening of their relations with Alaskan organizations was also part of a broader "American threat" to national sovereignty. Trying to secure Russia's easternmost "strategic" region, he strongly opposed the 1990 Bering Strait Demarcation Agreement between the USSR and the US, which established a maritime demarcation line based on the 1867 Treaty of the Alaska Purchase and granted visa-free travel to Indigenous people. He considered it contrary to the state's interests in the region and "illegitimate", since the agreement ceded a significant portion of the then-Soviet maritime zone to US jurisdiction. Related to this was Nazarov's other crucial stance – to oppose the creation of the Beringia International Park.

The idea to give Beringia a special protected status because of its exceptional ecological importance emerged in the late 1970s, but the possibility of its realization appeared only with the change in the political situation and the warming of relations between the countries during the Perestroika era. The park project was proposed in the late 1990s by the joint USSR-US group of scientists and ethnographers. It was unique in that it sought to protect not only the environment but also the cultural heritage of the Indigenous peoples who resided on this land. Traditional subsistence was allowed throughout the territory of the park and its promotion was declared as one of the principles of the park's concept. The project was developed with the involvement of the Indigenous peoples of Chukotka and initially received their enthusiastic support (Roe 2020). They were convinced that the creation of the park would prevent geological prospecting and mining, thus protecting local environment. Any natural resource use other than traditional and scientific ones was forbidden throughout the park, and tourism was to be the main source of income. People from some Indigenous villages (e.g., Vankarem and Uelkal) had even asked for the boundaries of the park's protection zone to be extended to include these villages (Vdovin 2016: 310).

However, the realities of the country transitioning to a market economy and going through a deep economic crisis challenged the ambitions of the park's advocates, as it was unclear where to get the money to implement the project. Moreover, local authorities turned out to be hostile to the idea of creating an international park because they were convinced that it posed a threat to regional and national sovereignty. Governor Nazarov saw the Beringia project as an attempt to "place half of Chukotka under the full control of the United States" and to limit the economic development of the region by prohibiting the mining of minerals on a large part of the land and shelf.[5] Rumors began to spread from his administration that traditional subsistence, such as hunting and fishing, would be banned in the park, manipulating the mistrust that the Indigen-

5 Nazarov once revealed how Shevardnadze and Gorbachev wanted to "give" the peninsula to the US, *Argumenty i facty* https://argumenti.ru/society/2021/08/736417 [accessed 20.11.2023]

ous people historically had for projects emanating from Moscow to transform their way of life (Roe 2020). The fact that many members of the Indigenous intelligentsia, including within the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka, were employed in administration at the regional or municipal level and therefore tended to share its agenda, also played in Nazarov's favor (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1999: 30).

In 1992, as a part of a general trend toward federalisation of Russia and through the efforts of the local administration, Chukotka seceded from the Magadan Oblast. It was a personal triumph for Nazarov. In addition to raising his status as a head of the federal jurisdiction and gaining direct access to the federal funding, he managed to get rid of the Magadan legislators, who supported the creation of the Beringia park. As a result of this rivalry, the Beringia Regional Nature Park was established in 1993 by a decision of the Chukotka administration, not Russia's federal government. With public opinion on his side, Nazarov put the issue of Beringia's jurisdiction to a referendum, asking residents of the districts where the park was to be located to decide whether the park would be federal, which was required for the creation of an international protected area, or regional. The overwhelming majority voted to keep the park under the jurisdiction of the Okrug, thus putting an end to the joint Russian-American project.

Through his decisions and statements, Nazarov reproduced the situation of geopolitical confrontation, framing Chukotka's relationship with the United States in these terms. In his post-governorship interviews, he claimed that he was the one who saved Chukotka from the "impending catastrophe" of the spread of American influence. While the status of a border zone, which implied special rules for visits, was removed from all other regions of the Far East, Nazarov succeeded in retaining such status for Chukotka. This made it possible to control both Russian and foreign citizens who entered the territory of the Okrug, which Nazarov actively used, for example, by revoking the visas of American missionaries who preached in Chukotka. The entry bans also affected researchers sympathetic to the Indigenous movement or critical of the local administration, such as French linguist Charles Weinstein and American anthropologist Patty Gray. In 1999, after a boat accident in which several people perished, Nazarov banned private maritime travel in the Bering Strait under the pretext of its danger. This made travel to Alaska and maintaining the cross-Beringian contacts for Indigenous people much more difficult and resulted in further isolation between the two sides of the strait.

## "Preventing foreign influence": The recent situation with international cooperation and Indigenous initiatives in Chukotka

In contrast to the 1990s, the first decade of this millennium was not marked by a suppression of non-state organizations and international projects. During this time Chu-

kotka was under the governorship of Roman Abramovich, a young oligarch focused on global engagement, and after 2008, under his former deputy Roman Kopin. However, enthusiasm for the opening of the U.S.-Russian border and cooperation on both sides had significantly declined compared to the late 1980s, and the field of Indigenous initiatives in large part had been already gutted under Nazarov so that there was no robust grassroots mobilization or emergence of notable Indigenous organizations during that time.

The situation changed significantly after 2014 when the rhetoric of confrontation with "the West" and the campaign against "foreign influence" became a part of the conservative turn at the national level. In Chukotka, after the adoption of the federal law "On Foreign Agents," the authorities' attention was drawn to the Union of Marine Mammal Hunters (UMMH), which by that time changed its name to Chukotka Association of Traditional Marine Mammal Hunting (ChAZTO) to distinguish itself from the organization affiliated with administration (UMMHC). The alleged reason for investigation was its cooperation with American research institutions in studying whales. In 2014, the organization was notified that it was going to be recognized as the first "foreign agent" in Chukotka, and a few criminal cases were initiated.[6] Soon after it ceased to exist (see Eduard Zdor, *this volume – eds.*).

Fig. 3 Hunters observe whales in Lavrentia Bay through binoculars at their hunting base in the closed settlement of Nunyamo.

6 "You are the only ones who are any good as agents" – *Novaia Gazeta* 05.12.2014 https://novayagazeta.ru/society/66402.html [accessed 20.11.2023]

Since 2014, the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka has been virtually the only organization representing Indigenous interests. While not fully independent from its very beginning (see Gray 2005) and largely composed of employees of the administration or other budgetary institutions, by 2023 it has been fully co-opted by the local administration. Small grants from the state and resource extraction companies (or, as one official put it, "handouts") guaranteed its loyalty and reduced its activities to solving minor issues, such as material equipment for reindeer herders, vacation trips for schoolchildren, and cultural events. Even if the Association had wanted to, it would not have been able to influence the regional strategy of development or the extraction of minerals in the areas of traditional nature use, due to the lack of instruments for exerting political pressure. Although many people, both Indigenous and officials, were skeptical of the Association, quite accurately assessing it to be more of a formal structure without real power, the administration used the Association and its representatives in the communities to propagate its agenda. One such agenda supported and promoted by the Association was the confrontation with environmental organizations, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Beringia Park.

WWF began its work in Chukotka shortly after registering its Russian office in 2004. It provided grants to support Indigenous initiatives aimed at the study and development of traditional culture and subsistence, ecological education, and environmental protection. One of the first such projects was "Bear Patrol," in which initiative groups in coastal villages kept communities safe from polar bears and conducted data collection, as well as caring for walrus haulouts. The foundation provided teams with the necessary equipment (such as ATVs and snowmobiles), counseling, and training. It also cooperated with Beringia Park and in 2018 it signed a cooperation agreement with the Chukotka regional government. However, right after signing this agreement, the local authorities began to criticize the activities of the Foundation, which eventually made its work in Chukotka almost impossible.

This started with the discussion of a marine protection zone as part of Beringia Park: the WWF supported its creation and financed its project development. Before that, in 2013, by the decree of then-President Medvedev, Beringia was granted the status of a "national park," putting it under control of the Federal Ministry of Nature, i.e., beyond the management of regional government. This was the primary factor in the emerging conflict, because, in the eyes of the administration and local residents, it once again moved the decision-making to Moscow, 6000 kilometers away. The project of the marine protection zone implied the inclusion in Beringia National Park of a 12-mile strip along a large part of the Chukchi Peninsula coastline (Russia's territorial waters). In this zone, any economic activity, except for traditional subsistence and controlled tourism, was going to be prohibited to protect the unique marine fauna of the Bering Strait from impact. Russian oil giant Rosneft was about to start offshore exploration in 2014–2015, and the issue of environmental protection in this area was more relevant than ever.

People from the nearby villages did not participate in the development of the marine protection zone and public hearings held in 2016 revealed the dissatisfaction of many of them with this proposed extension to the park. They expressed concerns that the creation of such a protection zone would hinder hunting and fishing, reduce the size of catch quotas, and could also interfere with the supply of goods to the settlements by sea.[7] The negative responses to the project moreover exposed an already existing disenchantment with the National Park. Many locals and marine hunters did not see positive aspects of its existence, as it did not create any advantages for them. Instead, they saw it as one more layer of bureaucracy, administered by a governmental body that intended to make already confusing hunting and fishing regulations even more complicated and further tighten the existing rules. For local communities, the park managers prioritized tourism and nature conservation (the actual need for which they did not always understand) over their interests. The relationships between the park and the Indigenous people turned out to be far from what the authors of the International Beringia Park project in the 1990s envisioned and tried to implement.

Regional and local authorities who were also not involved in the project were even more critical. During public hearings, a local administration official argued that the ban on exploration and mining on the continental shelf would be a blockade on the region's economic development, drawing on a discourse long adopted by many pro-extractivist agents in Russia, that environmental protection is contrary to national interests and promoted by foreign parties to constrain the country's development. As part of this trend, the attempt to undermine the interests of the Chukotka region through nature conservation was also attributed to foreign interference, represented by WWF.

When I discussed WWF initiatives with a representative of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka in one of the villages in 2021, she expressed a belief that all of the Fund's support for Indigenous initiatives is aimed at "dictating its terms," which "come from the other side, from America." At the Association meeting, she had been told that through WWF, America was pursuing its interests, although she had a very vague idea of what these interests are and where this information came from ("it must have gotten out somehow that they have some plans. I don't know, maybe there are facts, they just don't tell us. But they probably know better there, in the Okrug"). She was convinced that the creation of the Beringia Park marine zone is also an "American directive" through which "they probably want to ban marine hunting."

For several years Okrug authorities have been looking for a way to get rid of environmentalists and the threat to the regional economy in the form of possible restrictions on natural resource exploitation. In 2021, Chukotka deputies appealed to the Ministry of Defense, the prosecutor's office and other federal agencies to prevent "the conquest of Russian lands as part of the 'green' agenda," but their appeals were

7 Discussion on the Marine Protected Area and Community Council, Beringia National Park https://park-beringia.ru/news/tpost/e4gtxuh4on-obsuzhdenie-morskoi-ohrannoi-zoni-i-obsc [accessed 29.11.2023]

not granted.[8] After 24 February 2022, an opportunity to eliminate WWF arose. In the wake of the disruption of international ties, just a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, Chukotka deputies demanded that WWF cease its work in Chukotka and that the Foundation be recognized as an "undesirable organization." They argued that WWF's activities "threaten Russia's national security and infringe on the interests of Chukotka's inhabitants" because "WWF strives in every possible way to create protected natural territories in Chukotka. In fact, the creation of such territories is nothing more than the tearing away the land from the state under the guise of doing good for wildlife."[9] Chukotkan deputies stated that "the activists of the conservation organization sought the loyalty of local residents by involving them in various projects and financing joint activities" and warned that "seizure of the state by another state is often carried out with the help of its own population."[10] Eventually, in the spring of 2023, WWF was recognized first as a "foreign agent" and then as an "undesirable organization," making impossible for it to operate officially in Russia.

## Conclusion

As I have illustrated using the examples of projects in environmental protection and Indigenous subsistence in the 1990s and early 2000s, problems with international cooperation in Chukotka began long before it was completely halted in 2022. Like any border region, Chukotka is receptive to fluctuations in international relations; proximity to the United States makes its social landscape even more idiosyncratic, directly influencing local discourses and politics. Local authorities are constantly working to secure the farthest frontier of the country from foreign influence and to ensure the loyalty of its Indigenous people, because, as in the Soviet era, they are considered potentially "unreliable subjects." As one official remarked in our private conversation, not hiding his mockery of the claims that Indigenous peoples sometimes make about sharing profits from resources extracted in Chukotka: "They want it here like in America!," referring to the well-known Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. Since the comparison of the living standards and civil rights is not in Chukotka's favor, local officials have tried to limit contacts across Bering Strait by all means. The

8 The Government of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug canceled its agreement with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Association of Indigenous Small-numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation (RAIPON). https://raipon.info/press-tsentr/novosti/pravitelstvo-chukotskogo-avtonomnogo-okruga-rastorglo-soglashenie-s-vsemirnym-fondom-dikoy-prirody-w/ [accessed 02.12.2023]

9 WWF ceased operations in Chukotka, Chukotka Duma. https://dumachukotki.ru/news/wwf-prekratil-deyatelnost-na-chukotke.html [accessed 02.12.2023]

10 World Wildlife Fund (WWF) work in Chukotka should be stopped, Chukotka Duma. https://dumachukotki.ru/news/duma-rabota-vsemirnogo-fonda-dikoy-prirody-wwf-na-chukotke-dolzhna-byt-prekrashcena.html [accessed 02.12.2023]

border regime and the cooling of relations between the countries served this purpose perfectly. The residents of one coastal village who has been actively traveling to Alaska since the 1990s complained:

> They prevent people from communicating. We used to go to Alaska all the time until they banned it. Because it's like propaganda, to see how they live, as we could live like that too. Now we have ATVs, but they had them a long time ago. Motors, private boats, snowmobiles, everywhere, in every house.
>
> When I got back from Alaska, I went on a heavy drinking binge. I was a drinker at the time. I went outside, and I saw all this difference.

These sentiments have nothing to do with political sympathies but are just an expression of frustration by impoverished communities and their aspiration for a decent quality of life. Yet they are contested by official discourse in the rhetoric of geopolitical rivalry and resentment. This discourse was used as early as in the 1990s by the former Governor Nazarov and later, by the Chukotkan legislators as an excuse to ban international cooperation that threatened to "spread foreign influence" among locals through material support of Indigenous initiatives. In Chukotka, where the main sphere of employment is state budgetary institutions, it was the availability of external funding that allowed Indigenous organizations independent of the state to persist. However, they were eventually shut down, one by one, as a part of the larger trend to suppress grassroots mobilization. The cessation of international contacts after 24 February 2022 was used by local authorities to settle scores with the last organization providing financial support to independent Indigenous initiatives, WWF.

The history of Indigenous organizations and international cooperation discussed here can serve as a contribution to resolving the analytical quandary that anthropologists and other social scientists have confronted since 24 February 2022. For many researchers, as well as for a wider audience in Russia and abroad, the large-scale participation in the invasion of Ukraine and its alleged support among the majority of the population has raised questions about the social causes of authoritarian regime's resilience. In popular discourse, much of this debate has invoked the notions of state ideology and propaganda, which are often seen as playing the key role in securing popular approval of the ongoing war.

This approach, which points to ideology as a primary factor in support of the regime and the war it started, tends to ignore the institutional and other material constraints that influence individuals' choices and attitudes. Among them are the risks people will face in case of resistance, the absence of institutions that protect their rights and help organize for collective action, the economic motives (e.g., the enticement of significant government payments for joining the army). In Chukotka, all independent Indigenous initiatives faced resistance from the authorities and were closed long before the war, even though their activities were far from politics. This

created a situation with no platforms independent of the state available for the joint pursuit of interests. The high unemployment and the predominance of unskilled labor among men, particularly Indigenous men, push them to participate in the war to improve their poor financial situation, gain prestige, and perform masculine role. The employment of the majority of the working population in the budgetary-paid spheres, directly controlled by the state, influences the loyalties they tend to express and imposes serious consequences for voicing an opposing opinion. Censored sources of information and many other factors also contribute to the situation when resistance is an option too risky and unlikely to undertake.

During the discussion about new challenges that emerged after 24 February 2022 one of my colleagues who also conducted fieldwork in Chukotka argued that the view that Indigenous peoples are oppressed and therefore deprived of freedom of choice is problematic. Rather, he argued that the vast majority of his interlocutors supported and participated in the war as their way to actively exercise and assert agency. While I fully agree that a discourse of victimization of the Indigenous peoples is not relevant, such statements, as well as the widespread references to the role of propaganda and ideology, tend to overlook the role of the institutional and structural factors outlined above. Moreover, it is prudent to avoid conflating the perspectives our interlocutors provide us with explanatory models (anthropologically speaking, emic and ethic categories). To analyze the motivations, interests, and constraints of people supporting and participating in the war requires subtle social analysis based on careful and detailed ethnography – which is, however, almost impossible to conduct today.

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## Figures

1 Residents on the shore await the sharing of a whale harvested by the local hunting community. Photo: N. Naumova, 2021.
2 Members of the Naukan Cooperative transport a harvested whale to shore. Photo courtesy of Gennady Zelensky, 2001.
3 Hunters observe whales in Lavrentia Bay through binoculars at their hunting base in the liquidated settlement of Nunyamo. Photo: N. Naumova, 2021.