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The Evolution of Russia's Civilian Presence on Svalbard: Soft Power in the Arctic

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Abstract. *Introduction.* Strategies for Russia's civilian presence in Svalbard are considered, with a focus on tourism and scientific cooperation as key instruments of soft power and geopolitical positioning.

Aim. Assess the significance of tourism and scientific cooperation for Russia's civilian presence on Svalbard.

Material and methods. Drawing on policy documents, official statements, and recent developments, a qualitative document analysis is combined with a case study approach.

Results. An analysis is provided of how Russia seeks to maintain and reconfigure its presence on the archipelago amidst economic constraints and Norwegian policy.

Conclusion. Tourism is becoming the central pillar of Russia's civilian presence on the archipelago, whereas scientific engagement with BRICS and other partners is more likely to unfold elsewhere in the broader Russian Arctic.

Keywords: Svalbard; Russia; security; tourism; scientific cooperation; civilian presence; Arctic; soft power

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Эволюция гражданского присутствия России на Шпицбергене: мягкая сила в Арктике

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Рассматриваются стратегии гражданского присутствия России на Шпицбергене с акцентом на туризм и научное сотрудничество как ключевые инструменты мягкой силы и геополитического позиционирования.

Цель. Оценить значимость туризма и научного сотрудничества для гражданского присутствия России на Шпицбергене.

Материалы и методы. Опираясь на программные документы, официальные заявления и недавние события качественный анализ документов сочетается с подходом тематического исследования.

Результаты. Проанализировано как Россия стремится сохранить и реконфигурировать свое присутствие на архипелаге в условиях экономических ограничений и норвежской политики.

Заключение. Туризм становится центральной опорой гражданского присутствия России на архипелаге, в то время как научное взаимодействие со странами БРИКС и другими партнерами, скорее всего, развернется в других регионах российской Арктики.

Ключевые слова: Шпицберген; Россия; безопасность; туризм; научное сотрудничество; гражданское присутствие; Арктика; мягкая сила

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INTRODUCTION

Civilian presence has emerged as a key vector of strategic competition in the Arctic, where non-military tools sustain influence amid demilitarisation norms [1, source 1]. Svalbard, under the 1920 Treaty granting Norway sovereignty alongside equal access for signatories, exemplifies this dynamic: a hub for global actors like China and India, yet dominated by Norwegian regulatory primacy and Russian settlements [2]. While Norway bolsters partnerships via Ny-Ålesund infrastructure [3], Russia's strategies remain underexplored amid post-2014 tensions [4].

METHODOLOGY

This article investigates Russia's civilian presence on Svalbard, focusing on tourism and scientific cooperation, as a strategic adaptation. Moscow prioritises tourism revival, exemplified by the 2025 Murmansk routes, over scientific expansion despite its BRICS ambitions. It reflects a short-term pivot for economic viability and soft power, laying foundations for sustained presence [source 2].

This article uses a qualitative case-study approach based on document analysis. It examines how Russia's civilian presence on Svalbard has evolved through tourism and scientific cooperation, with particular attention to international research links and soft power.

The material includes policy documents, institutional statements, company releases, and recent reports on Russian and Norwegian activity in the archipelago. The analysis focuses on the institutional conditions shaping civilian presence and on the limits of Russia's scientific cooperation in comparison with Norway's more developed research infrastructure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Legal and Political Framework

The Svalbard archipelago occupies a unique legal and geopolitical position, not only within the Arctic but also globally [5]. The *Svalbard Treaty*, signed in Paris in 1920 and entered into force in 1925, recognises Norway's full sovereignty over the islands while simultaneously imposing a number of obligations that make the territory a *suigeneris* entity within the Norwegian state [source 3]. In particular, the core provisions of the Treaty guarantee the other signatory states the right to access the archipelago, reside there and carry out economic and scientific activities without being subject to discriminatory treatment [6]. This combination of formal sovereignty on the one hand and equal rights on the other forms the legal foundation of the Svalbard regime [7].

Although all signatory states formally enjoy the same rights pertaining to commercial activity it is Norway that directly administers and regulates the archipelago [8]. The Sysselmeister, the Governor based in Longyearbyen, is the authority responsible for issuing permits related to scientific expeditions, tourism activities, environmental data collection and other operations conducted in the territory. The main logistical infrastructure of the archipelago — such as the Svalbard airport, main ports and digital communications — is managed by Norway. However, the Russian settlements maintain and operate their own local infrastructure, including a coal-fired power station and port facilities in Barentsburg [9].

While remaining within the general framework of the Treaty, Norway applies to the Svalbard archipelago its own body of domestic legislation, adapted to the geographic, environmental and political particularities of the territory. Formally, the

integration of Svalbard into the Norwegian legal system is established by the 1925 *Svalbard Act (Svalbardloven)* [source 4]. Over time, however, a more specific legal framework has been developed, with the 2001 *Svalbard Environmental Protection Act (Svalbardmiljøloven)* among its key instruments [source 5]. In addition to formal legislation, Norway has introduced a system of spatial planning and environmental zoning that further shapes civilian activity on the archipelago [10]. The *Svalbardmiljøloven* divides the territory into different management zones, with around 65 % of the archipelago designated as protected areas, national parks, nature reserves and bird sanctuaries. In these zones, access and activities such as construction, tourism and data collection are subject to strict regulation or absolute prohibition.

Permits for scientific expeditions, infrastructure development or commercial operations are issued by the Sysselmeister [source 6]. Applications are assessed not only on the basis of environmental impact but also considering broader policy objectives, such as the sustainability of tourism, public safety or consistency with Norway's Arctic goals [11]. This system grants Norwegian authorities significant discretion in deciding who can operate where and under what conditions.

As a result, while access to Svalbard remains legally open to all signatories of the Treaty, the ability to conduct meaningful activity on the ground is filtered through a framework that reflects national environmental and political priorities [12]. In this way, regulation functions not only as a technical instrument but also as a selective mechanism that conditions the form and visibility of foreign presence.

This does not entail a violation of international obligations, nor does it imply

any *a priori* exclusion of other countries. Nevertheless, it can give rise to differing interpretations and administrative friction [13]. Some actors have questioned the consistency between the application of certain Norwegian rules and the original spirit of the Treaty. At the centre of this debate lies the degree of discretion that Norway exercises when authorising civilian activities, particularly in the fields of science and tourism [14].

From the Russian perspective, the principle of non-discrimination established by the Treaty means not only having the same legal rights on paper but also having equal practical opportunities to carry out activities on the archipelago [2]. Administrative obstacles, permit delays and perceived imbalances in access to infrastructure are frequently cited as evidence of an excessively restrictive Norwegian approach. Moscow's position is that such implicit forms of selection conflict with the original spirit of the Treaty, which was intended to guarantee an open, non-preferential international regime [6].

This disagreement, though not new, has become more pronounced in recent years, especially following the geopolitical tensions that emerged after 2014 and again in 2022 [source 7]. It reflects a deeper divergence in how concepts such as legality, sovereignty and presence are understood in the Arctic context and in how legitimacy is constructed around civilian activity within a legally exceptional location [15].

On Svalbard, where full sovereignty belongs exclusively to one while the rights of "all others" are shared, the presence of a state is measured not only through legal entitlement, but also by its ability to influence what foreign actors can effectively carry out on the ground [8]. In this sense, Norway's regulatory system, although

formally neutral, assumes a filtering role, not so much in what it explicitly prohibits, but in what it allows, encourages or discourages through environmental, logistical and administrative criteria. Civilian presence thus becomes a form of concrete influence. Access is formally guaranteed, but the extent to which one can establish a meaningful presence on the archipelago depends, among other factors, on one's ability to align with a normative and symbolic order shaped by Norway [source 8]. By implementing more stringent environmental requirements for cruise ships and restricting access to protected areas via the *Svalbardmiljøloven*, Norway is exercising what has been termed "sovereignty through regulation" [16].

On the other hand, while Norway exercises this regulatory influence, Russia continues to assert its presence firmly within the available space. This presence manifests through a set of practices that serve as instruments of soft power: symbolic visibility, residential continuity, research and cultural institutions and autonomous tourism promotion. Russia does not openly challenge Norwegian sovereignty, but it acts as if its own role in the region were implicit, historical and not negotiable.

In the Arctic, where the prerogatives of sovereignty intersect with international obligations, forms of civilian presence take on a particular political significance. The issue is not merely who is allowed to be there, but how one is present and with what — perceived — legitimacy [5]. Regulation and persistence become, respectively, the instruments of Norway and Russia in a contest played out over visibility, permanence and the meaning attributed to one's presence.

It is in this context that tourism emerges as one of the most significant arenas for the

exercise of soft power. Depending on who promotes it, how it is organised and which narratives it conveys, tourism becomes not only an economic activity but a tool of strategic positioning.

Russia's transition toward economic efficiency

The 2025 Russian Arctic policy is focused not only on ensuring security but also on optimising government spending. In particular, based on the discussions held at the International Arctic Forum, the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, and the Arctic–Regions Forum, which serve as the primary platforms for articulating principles of Arctic development to a broad audience, a strategic shift has been made away from fully subsidising regional projects and toward a self-sufficient Arctic that follows free market rules and draws in private investments [17].

This trend is especially relevant in the case of Svalbard, where government mining trust Arktikugol relies heavily on government financial support. An analysis of the organisation's budget reveals that state assistance is limited to ensuring its basic survival and modest development, rather than enabling any substantial or sustained growth [2].

There are several reasons behind this policy direction. First, the current approach has historical roots extending back to the XX century. Government support for Arktikugol was maintained, and even increased, during periods of geopolitical tension, such as the early years of the Cold War. However, the strategic importance of Svalbard has diminished due to the existence of nuclear deterrence and the low likelihood of conventional armed conflict in the Arctic. As a result, while maintaining a physical presence in the region remains important

for Moscow, there is no strategic imperative to expand that presence significantly.

Secondly, the development of Arktikugol in the XX century was largely driven by economic considerations, specifically, the absence of well-developed transport infrastructure linking the central regions of European Russia with the Far North (particularly the Barents Sea coast), as well as the energy dependence of industrial enterprises on coal. As a result, the state support for Arktikugol was maintained throughout the XX century and it was primarily justified by the company's perceived indispensability to the energy security of the northern territories.

Thirdly, in contrast to other major Arctic projects implemented between 2000 and 2020 (such as Yamal LNG, Arctic LNG-2), which, from their inception, were either fully financed by the state or granted substantial tax incentives and government subsidies, Arktikugol has never constituted a significant expenditure within the federal budget. Given its long-standing record of financial self-sufficiency and actual profitability during the second half of the 20th century, a permanent departure from this *status quo* has not been incorporated into strategic planning frameworks.

Internal and external factors of strategic goal reconfiguration on Svalbard towards tourism

It is important to note that Arktikugol's mining activity has been declining due to natural economic causes, primarily a decrease in profitability. The expansion of protected areas [source 9] and nature reserves across the archipelago, progressively implemented by the Norwegian authorities, has restricted the potential for industrial development [source 10]. These protected zones are located in

close proximity to the operational Russian mine and the settlement of Barentsburg. Moreover, the opening of a new mine is a labour-intensive and knowledge-intensive endeavour — it is unlikely that such an expansion project would receive adequate financial support.

Furthermore, any new initiatives on Svalbard are subject to additional logistical and financial burdens. The Russian policy in the Arctic region, represented by state corporations and regional administrations, currently lacks a unified mechanism for attracting foreign investment. Following the International Arctic Forum in Murmansk in March 2025 President Vladimir Putin made a number of orders aimed at potential establishment of a mechanism that would allow for easier investor access [source 11]. In particular, they advocate for a greater involvement of the state development corporation VEB.RF into the Arctic projects. Despite the fact that the plans were outlined in 2025, as of 2026 this effort still lacks concrete steps and results. Therefore, although Russian authorities acknowledge the challenges associated with attracting investment to Arctic projects, creating and implementing successful solutions as well as attracting foreign investors will take a considerable amount of time.

Considering this, Arktikugol had to look for alternative projects to achieve economic viability. For example, ideas ranged from expanding mining activities and constructing the necessary infrastructure to modernising energy solutions for the Russian settlements on Svalbard. However, since most of the projects required considerable financial capital and did not promise financial stability in the short-term, tourism, as a sphere with a lower entry threshold offered the greatest potential.

The pivot to tourism proved fruitful: from 2016 to 2020 Arktikugol was able to generate

stable revenue from tourism-related activities, guided tours and hospitality business. Simultaneously Norway paid more attention to its tourist infrastructure within its Arctic policy, which contributed to the image of Svalbard as a touristic destination. Timely steps taken by Arktikugol, such as the establishment of the Grumant tourism initiative, along with the recruitment of tourism specialists, cooperation with the Svalbard authorities to mitigate logistical challenges further contributed to the attractiveness of tourism sector [18].

Despite initial successes the development of tourism was complicated by a number of global factors, not directly related to Svalbard, which include the decline in tourism as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened tensions between Russia and the Western countries. The latter partly resulted in visa restrictions for Russian tourists. Due to the fact that the Svalbard's airport lost its international status in 2017, the access to Svalbard by air was only possible from Norwegian airports, which further complicated the logistics for potential tourists coming from Russia. Additionally, the economic challenges brought by COVID-19 led to a significant decrease in the number of personnel involved in tourism.

However, since 2016 the main problems for Arktikugol's profitability have not changed, while the goal to reduce the dependence on the government's subsidies has remained. Thus, tourism keeps its place as a cost-effective way to increase revenue for the foreseeable future, provided the geopolitical situation allows for more cooperation. The actions undertaken by the Arktikugol's initiatives prove the relevance of the pivot to tourism that started in the middle of the 2010s.

For example, in summer of 2025 the Trust was able to launch a direct, visa-free route

by sea to Svalbard. Operated by a Russian company "Marine Practice" it connects Murmansk and Barentsburg [source 12]. By the end of 2025 five tours had been successfully conducted. Apart from Trust's employees and delegations from Russian think tanks, the route attracted around 250 tourists. Russian officials see the initiative as a long-term investment, with at least ten trips planned for 2026 [source 13]. At the same time, even though it marks a groundbreaking development for Russian tourists interested in Svalbard, it is important to note that this type of travel remains inaccessible to the average Russian tourist. The prices start at approximately USD 3000 [source 14], above a typical travel budget for Russian citizens [source 15, source 16].

Arktikugol's leadership has taken additional steps to advance tourism by increasing the Trust's media and social networks presence. Arktikugol brought back the magazine "Russian Bulletin of Svalbard" (*Russkiy vestnik Shpitsbergena* (RVS)), which had been discontinued in 2019 due to limited funding [source 17]. The magazine does not limit itself to scientific topics and is aimed at professionals, researchers and individuals interested in the Russian presence in the archipelago of Svalbard.

New infrastructure projects also influence tourism. One example is the establishment of the Russian Geographical Society (RGS) Svalbard centre in 2025. The centre works as a part of a larger RGS network, thus attracting more attention to Svalbard. Arktikugol has also opened a museum of rare minerals in Pyramiden [source 18].

Another important development came from Russian business presence. In 2025 Wildberries, which is the largest digital trading platform in Russia, opened a pick-up point in Barentsburg, enabling Svalbard residents to receive goods from

the mainland [source 19]. Although it was aimed at improving living conditions of the Trust's employees, the news of the "northern pick-up point" served as a message of Russian interest in the archipelago and a successful media stunt. Additionally, a modern *Beryozka* supermarket opened in Barentsburg, accepting payments in Russian roubles and foreign currencies [source 20]. These at first sight minor developments play a greater role because they represent a step further from all the actions undertaken in 2016–2020.

The initiatives proved fruitful, since the Trust reported a 50 % increase in tourism revenue by the end of 2025. More importantly, the Trust's tourism centre results reached the pre-sanctions levels [source 20]. Although these gains are not sufficient to bring big changes to the Trust's budget, they prove that tourism sector has enough potential even under the current geopolitical impediments.

The introduction of a direct sea route from Murmansk supports the Arktikugol's plans for short-term tourism development without requiring visa rules changes from Norway. Despite high prices, it sets a precedent of continued Russian tourist presence on the archipelago. More broadly, the existence of the project serves as an indicator of Russia's confidence in the potential for tourism to be the primary source of Arktikugol's budget in the future.

It is also important to add that Norway began viewing tourism as the primary sector for Svalbard's development even earlier. A change from resource extraction and mining to service industries supporting tourism has already taken place. The 2024 White Paper on Svalbard (*Svalbardmeldingen*) reaffirms that a stable tourism sector is essential for maintaining a Norwegian community, which, in its turn, serves as an important

element for Norwegian sovereignty [source 21]. This idea can be seen in public statements of Norwegian officials, such as those by Minister of Justice and Public Security Emilie Enger Mehl [source 22]. This Norwegian ambition is also evidenced by recent development plans for Longyearbyen, which prioritise "destination management" as a tool for environmental protection and strategic planning [19].

Thus, Russia and Norway see tourism as the main way to strengthen their presence on the archipelago. While for Russia it is a question of maintaining the Arktikugol's budget, for Norway it goes further and constitutes an issue of national sovereignty.

Scientific cooperation: the Russian perspective

The Arctic serves as a unique example of cooperation. The "Arctic Five", which includes Russia, the United States, Denmark, Canada, and Norway, maintains a shared understanding that key regional issues should be addressed at the regional level through multilateral dialogue, intergovernmental agreements and international law [20]. Non-Arctic states wishing to establish their presence in the region have to cooperate with the Arctic states on issues that do not touch on national sovereignty, such as research activities and environmental issues [21]. In this context, the Svalbard archipelago offers a particularly advantageous location for scientific activity due to its geographical location and unique legal status.

Russia actively conducts research in the Arctic within the natural and social sciences. Scientific exploration of the Far North holds significance for the country and its citizens living above the Arctic circle. Russia has a unique geographical position, with 53 % of the Arctic coastline and nearly half of the population living in the Far North belonging

to Russia [source 23]. More importantly, the Russian Arctic contributes approximately 10-15 % of Russia's total GDP every year, which makes the development of the Arctic, scientific development in particular, way more important to Russia than to some of the other Arctic nations. For example, Alaska and the Canadian Arctic, contribute only 0.24 % and 0.51 % of their respective national GDPs [source 24, source 25, source 26].

Considering the need to develop the Arctic regions, scientific initiatives primarily support economic projects. For example, Russia views cargo traffic on the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a priority for domestic policy, including the supply of goods to the Arctic settlements. Russia has been taking steps to improve the infrastructure and management for the NSR navigation [source 27].

To provide scientific grounds for the increase in cargo traffic in the Arctic, from 2021 to 2023 Marine Research Centre of Moscow State University (MSU) and the State Corporation Rosatom carried out a marine environmental monitoring program [source 28], which examined the environmental impact of increased navigation in Arctic waters and concluded that the rise in cargo traffic would not cause significant ecological problems. In this way, Russia's scientific initiatives remain closely aligned with its economic priorities.

These initiatives are open to foreign researchers. The monitoring program was conducted with the help of experts from India, China, Turkey, Norway, and other countries [source 28]. Additionally, several scientific consortia include participation from the Northern Forum, Chinese and Indian researchers, and leading Russian institutions, such as the Russian-Asian Consortium for Arctic Research. Therefore, there are some mechanisms in place for

scientific cooperation, even if it primarily involves Asian countries. At the same time, these examples of international cooperation have focused almost exclusively on the NSR and related issues such as logistics and maritime communication.

Svalbard, on the other hand, does not hold big value for maritime logistics for Russia, therefore it does not represent the main priority for active scientific research and it plays only a supplementary role in Russia's engagement with non-regional partners.

Russia maintains a scientific presence on the archipelago through several institutions and research centres. A permanent "Arctic Scientific Expedition" operates under the leadership of the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute (AARI), Russia's leading polar research institution [source 29]. There are also regional branches of the Russian Academy of Sciences institutes. At the same time, foreign researchers do not regularly participate in Russian-led expeditions. China and India, Russia's primary partners, particularly concerning the Northern Sea Route initiatives [source 30], maintain their activities on Svalbard primarily through research stations in Ny-Ålesund and cooperation with Norway. Ny-Ålesund offers reliable research infrastructure and administrative structures, such as the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee. In the 1990-s and 2000-s countries that wanted to establish scientific presence in the Arctic used Norwegian facilities on Svalbard, since they were relatively easy to access. Moreover, Norway has a long-term aim to improve the capabilities of Ny-Ålesund through investments in subsea fibre-optic broadband connectivity and the establishment of the UNIS university centre. Norwegian infrastructure is integrated into a regulatory and logistical ecosystem.

In contrast, as of now Russia doesn't have the necessary infrastructure on Svalbard to host foreign researchers on a regular basis. The development of such infrastructure would require additional funding, probably from business or foreign investors, which is difficult to secure at the current geopolitical climate. However, in 2026 Russian officials announced the establishment of an international research centre on Svalbard, which is scheduled to open in October. The centre will initially be funded by Arktikugol, but the extent of foreign researchers interest remains uncertain.

The project to attract BRICS countries, which cooperate with Russia in other domains, to conduct Arctic research in the Svalbard archipelago using Russian infrastructure has been under discussion for several years [source 31]. Despite that, financing still presents a problem for large-scale developments. The BRICS countries that have articulated Arctic ambitions in their strategic documents, such as India and China, already maintain a long-standing record of scientific cooperation with Norway on Svalbard.

The development of an international research centre would present the first political signal to Norway that non-Arctic states are ready to participate in activities led by Russia. The centre might also contribute to tourism by providing educational opportunities, networking programmes, and specialist courses [source 32].

At the same time, without appropriate business support and investors, the project would have only limited effect on actual scientific research. Geopolitical constraints may restrict the participation of foreign researchers, therefore in the short-term the project may have predominantly national character.

CONCLUSION

Tourism on Svalbard holds significant prospects for reinforcing the policy of presence for Russia. This view is supported by the revival of travel flows as well as continued emphasis on tourism as a core component of Svalbard's economic model. Through tourism and the establishment of direct maritime links with Murmansk, Russia is entering a new phase in its policy of civilian presence on Svalbard. The gradual restoration of additional instruments for promoting the Russian presence on the archipelago, such as media, cultural initiatives and institutional visibility, suggests that Russian policy has strategic and systemic goals. At the same time, it appears that Russia is placing a short-term bet on the return of tourism as a key driver of activity. This suggests the gradual laying of the groundwork for a more fundamental reorientation of the objectives underlying Russia's civilian presence in the archipelago.

Scientific cooperation continues to play an important role in Russia's engagement with Svalbard, but at present Moscow cannot position itself as a leading provider of scientific infrastructure on the archipelago. Norway, by contrast, operates a well-established and time-tested system of research facilities and maintains partnerships with numerous countries interested in Arctic science. Scientific cooperation with BRICS states remains a topic of discussion within Russian policy circles, yet it is framed as a long-term priority rather than an immediate project. There are ample opportunities to promote such cooperation elsewhere in the Russian Arctic, which is far larger and more diverse than Svalbard.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE AUTHORS

Roman E. Zhilin — conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing — original draft, writing — review and editing.

Tommaso Bontempi — conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing.

All authors approved the final version of the article.

ВКЛАД АВТОРОВ

Р.Е. Жилин — разработка концепции, методология, проведение исследования, создание черновика рукописи, создание рукописи и ее редактирование.

Т. Бонтемпи — разработка концепции, методология, проведение исследования, создание черновика рукописи.

Все авторы утвердили окончательную версию статьи.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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