

DECEMBER 2021 ANALYSIS  
– RUSSIAN PRESS  
AGENCIES AND THE  
ARCTIC

OBSERVATOIRE DE LA POLITIQUE ET LA SÉCURITÉ DE L'ARCTIQUE (OPSA) and  
OBSERVATOIRE DES ADMINISTRATIONS PUBLIQUES AUTOCHTONES (OAPA)



OBSERVATOIRE DE LA POLITIQUE  
ET LA SÉCURITÉ DE L'ARCTIQUE



**OAPA**  
Observatoire des administrations  
publiques autochtones

## RUSSIAN PRESS AGENCIES AND THE ARCTIC – DECEMBER 2021

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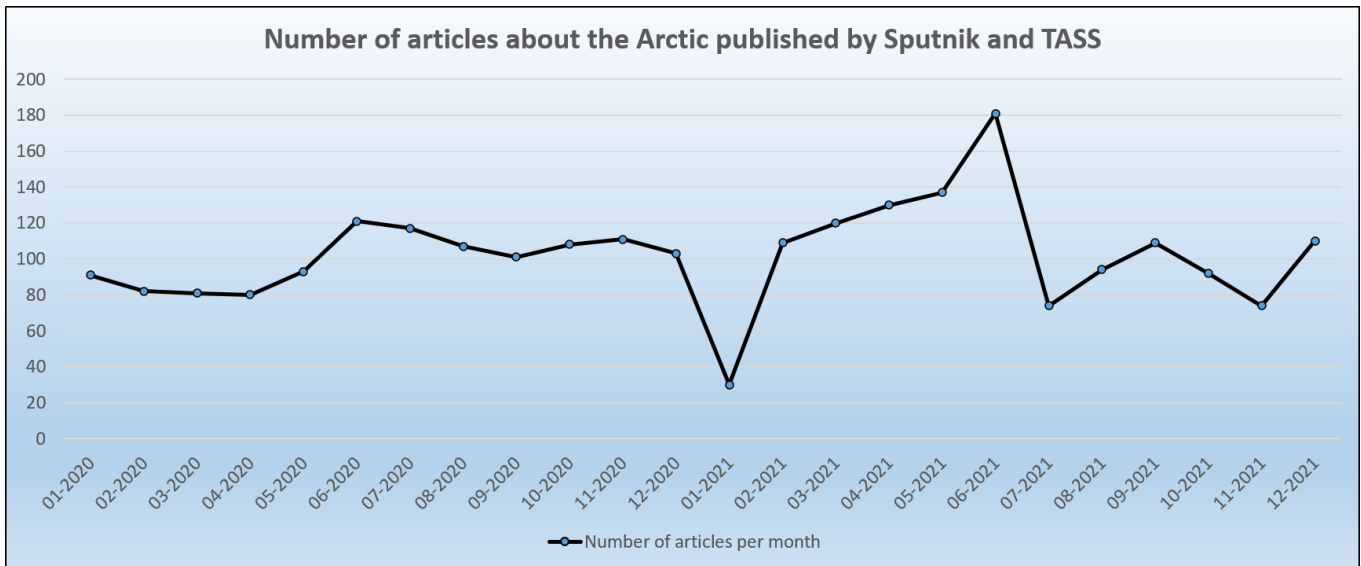
# DECEMBER ANALYSIS – RUSSIAN PRESS AGENCIES AND THE ARCTIC

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This analysis studied how Russian press agencies Sputnik and TASS covered Arctic issues during the month of December 2021. The intensity and nature of coverage will be put in perspective to capture trends since January 2020.

**NUMBER OF ARCTIC MENTIONS:** The number of Arctic mentions increased substantially in December 2021 to 110, after two months of decline. However, this interest did not go back to the level of attention in May-June 2021. Although this increase can be found across a variety of topics in order to account for this, there was an especially notable rise in the number of military-focused stories, which jumped to 42, as well as economic stories, which rose to 39.



**THEMES:** Military, economic, and – to a much lesser extent – political stories were the focus of the coverage. Military topics were most-discussed and focused largely on hardware, including descriptions of a new reconnaissance system, tank upgrades, and frost-resistant batteries, along with some discussion of NATO presence in the Arctic and threats to Russian borders. Economics-related stories were also frequent, and discussed development of specific regions and cities, such as Norilsk, while a smaller fraction discussed the Northern Sea Route and icebreakers. Finally, political stories generally focused on Russian cooperation, especially with Europe.

Military and economic stories dominated coverage in December 2021 as it did in December 2020. Environmental stories have been relegated to the margins for the second consecutive month, being present in only 11 articles.

<b>DECEMBER 2021</b> 1- MILITARY (42) 2- ECONOMIC (39) 3- POLITICAL (13)		
<b>NOVEMBER 2021</b> 1- ECONOMIC (26) 2- POLITICAL (18) 3- MILITARY (17)	<b>OCTOBER 2021</b> 1- MILITARY/POLITICAL (28) 2- ECONOMIC (26) 3- ENVIRONMENTAL (21)	<b>SEPTEMBER 2021</b> 1- MILITARY (31) 2- ENVIRONMENTAL (25) 3- ECONOMIC (24)
<b>AUGUST 2021</b> 1- MILITARY (37) 2- ENVIRONMENTAL (29) 3- ECONOMIC (16)	<b>JULY 2021</b> 1- ENVIRONMENTAL (30) 2- MILITARY (19) 3- POL/SCIENT (11)	<b>JUNE 2021</b> 1- POLITICAL (58) 2- MILITARY (56) 3- ECONOMIC (39)
<b>MAY 2021</b> 1- POLITICAL (54) 2- MILITARY (41) 3- ECONOMIC (27)	<b>APRIL 2021</b> 1- MILITARY (52) 2- ECONOMIC (45) 3- POLITICAL (16)	<b>MARCH 2021</b> 1- MILITARY (46) 2- ECONOMIC (40) 3- SCIENTIFIC (14)
<b>FEBRUARY 2021</b> 1- MILITARY (44) 2- ECONOMIC (20) 3- ENV/POL/SCIENT (17)	<b>JANUARY 2021</b> 1- MILITARY (23) 2- ECONOMIC (22) 3- ENVIRONMENTAL/POL (7)	<b>DECEMBER 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (38) 2- ECONOMIC (37) 3- SOCIAL (12)
<b>NOVEMBER 2020</b> 1- ECONOMIC (37) 2- MILITARY (36) 3- POLITICAL (19)	<b>OCTOBER 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (44) 2- ECONOMIC (29) 3- ENVIRONMENTAL (15)	<b>SEPTEMBER 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (58) 2- ECONOMIC (25) 3- SCIENTIFIC (13)
<b>AUGUST 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (52) 2- ECONOMIC (17) 3- SOCIAL (16)	<b>JULY 2020</b> 1- ECONOMIC (43) 2- MILITARY (36) 3- ENVIRONMENTAL (14)	<b>JUNE 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (46) 2- ENVIRONMENTAL (35) 3- ECONOMIC (28)
<b>MAY 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (43) 2- ECONOMIC (26) 3- POLITICAL (11)	<b>APRIL 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (37) 2- ECONOMIC (22) 3- SOCIAL (13)	<b>MARCH 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (37) 2- ECONOMIC (21) 3- SOCIAL (15)
<b>FEBRUARY 2020</b> 1- MILITARY (27) 2- ECONOMIC (19) 3- ENVIRONMENTAL (16)	<b>JANUARY 2020</b> 1- ECONOMIC (33) 2- MILITARY (28) 3- POLITICAL (26)	

Table 1: most popular themes per month (with number of articles published in parentheses).

**COUNTRIES:** A focus on the United States continued, often in conjunction with NATO, and the threat it poses towards Russia given its militarization of the Arctic and ABM system in the Pacific. Stories discussing the United Kingdom pointed to tense Russia-UK relations, though one story mentions a continuation of cooperation despite this tension. India was also mentioned in relation to the development of the Northern Sea Route.

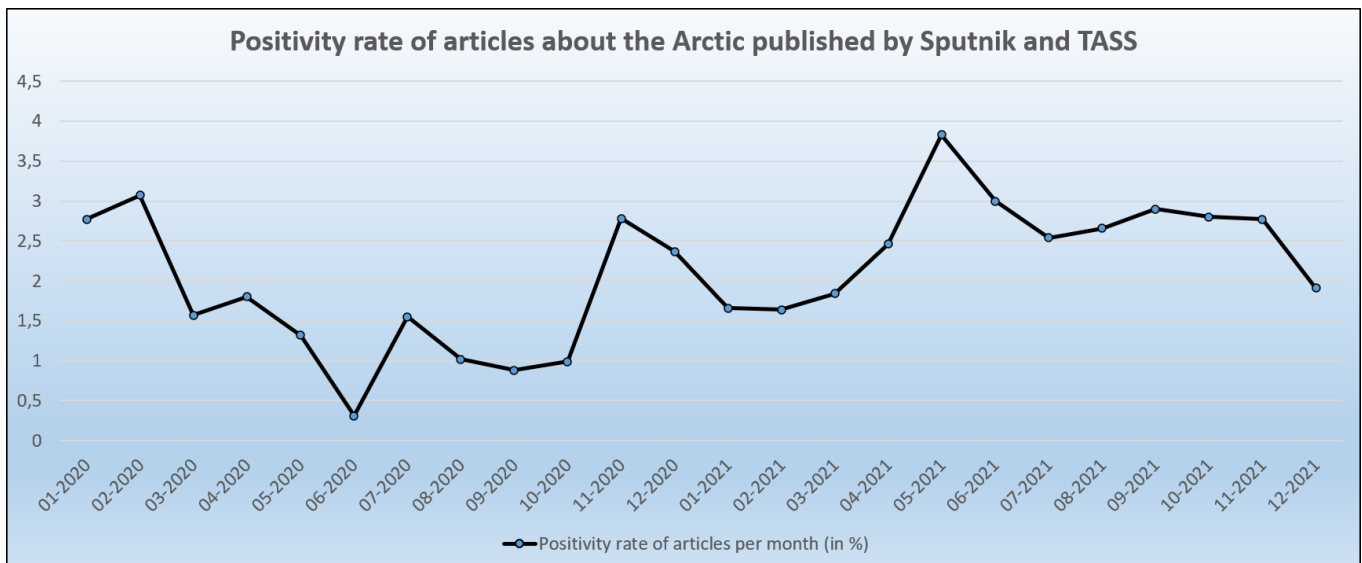
Articles published during the first half of the month focused on showcasing areas of cooperation with Western states such as Great Britain, Norway and Canada. The second half of the month turned more confrontational as NATO members and countries close to the organisation (Finland, Sweden) were more harshly criticized by Russian officials.

<b>DECEMBER 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (11) 2- UNITED KINGDOM (4)		
<b>NOVEMBER 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (14) 2- CHINA (7)	<b>OCTOBER 2021</b> 1- NORWAY (8) 2- UNITED STATES (4)	<b>SEPTEMBER 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (10) 2- FINLAND (5)
<b>AUGUST 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (8) 2- UNITED KINGDOM (5)	<b>JULY 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (22) 2- UNITED KINGDOM, NORWAY, GERMANY (2)	<b>JUNE 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (57) 2- CHINA (14)
<b>MAY 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (50) 2- CHINA (9)	<b>APRIL 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (24) 2- CHINA, FINLAND (7)	<b>MARCH 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (16) 2- CHINA (9)
<b>FEBRUARY 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (24) 2- NORWAY (8)	<b>JANUARY 2021</b> 1- UNITED STATES (8) 2- CHINA, SWEDEN (3)	<b>DECEMBER 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (21) 2- CHINA (4)
<b>NOVEMBER 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (18) 2- NORWAY (6)	<b>OCTOBER 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (16) 2- NORWAY (6)	<b>SEPTEMBER 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (11) 2- UNITED KINGDOM (6)
<b>AUGUST 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (17) 2- CHINA (4)	<b>JULY 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (14) 2- CHINA (6)	<b>JUNE 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (10) 2- CHINA (5)
<b>MAY 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (15) 2- UNITED KINGDOM (11)	<b>APRIL 2020</b> 1- DENMARK (6) 2- NORWAY (5)	<b>MARCH 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (9) 2- JAPAN (3)
<b>FEBRUARY 2020</b> 1- NORWAY (11) 2- UNITED STATES (10)	<b>JANUARY 2020</b> 1- UNITED STATES (12) 2- INDIA (9)	

Table 2: foreign countries mentioned per month in Russian press agencies.

**SENTIMENT ANALYSIS:** the positivity rate dipped in December 2021 to its lowest point since March 2021. Although some articles focused on cooperation (potential or actual) with Western rivals (Canada, United Kingdom, Norway), they were outnumbered by stories reporting on what was framed as concerning NATO or Western countries deployments near Russia.

We observed this tendency during the first half of December, a pattern that only accelerated in the second half of the month as the rhetoric around the Ukrainian crisis intensified in Russian press agencies. More than 10% of articles were focused on relaying Russian criticisms of NATO or partner countries (Sweden and Finland, notably). Hence, we noted a spillover effect in the tone of reporting on Arctic issues: the Ukrainian standoff colored Arctic coverage by focusing on Western alleged misdeeds not only on the Ukrainian file but in other regions including the Arctic. It will be interesting to see if this pattern continues as the Ukrainian dispute will remain front and center in January 2022.



## **METHODOLOGICAL NOTES**

Sputnik and TASS articles were retrieved using the Factiva database. All articles containing the keyword “Arctic” were included in the sample. We manually removed articles that were duplicates from the same outlet as well as stories included in “news digest” articles that were not related to our keyword.

Themes present in these articles were manually coded. We looked for dominant themes in each article: more than one theme could be detected per article. For example, an article about a scientific study on the evolution of climate change was coded as both environmental and scientific. The six themes that emerged were: military, economic, political, social, environmental and scientific.

As for foreign countries mentioned, we only focus on sovereign states and did not include regional ensembles or international organisations. Hence, references to NATO, the EU, the Barents Euro-Arctic Region or the Nordic Council were not accounted for.

The sentiment analysis was conducted using the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary, as discussed by Stuart Soroka (see the following link for details: <http://www.snsoroka.com/data-lexicoder/>). The R package Quanteda was used to generate the analysis. On a month-to month basis, the number of positive words was subtracted to the number of negative words and then divided by the number of words in total; the output is referred to as the positivity rate. For example, the positivity rate for the month of June 2021 was 3% while it was 0.31% for June 2020. Hence, the closer you are to 0, the more negative the articles in a given month were.



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