



## **Whose Arctic? Indigenous Agency in Regional Policy Formation**

*By Florin-Madalin Nicu*

The Arctic region has increasingly gained prominence not only as an area of environmental and strategic significance but as one of the most instructive arenas for examining the limits and possibilities of inclusive international governance. At the center of this examination stands a question that is both institutional and normative: to what extent do Arctic Indigenous peoples hold genuine agency in shaping the policies that govern the region they have inhabited for millennia? This article analyzes the role of Indigenous Permanent Participants (PPs) within the Arctic Council framework, the normative foundations of their participation rights under international law, the post-2022 institutional disruptions caused by the conflict in Ukraine, and the trajectory of Indigenous Arctic governance under Denmark's 2025–2027 Chairship.

### **Table 1: Comparison of Permanent Participants — Status, Influence, and Post-2022 Positions**

Organization (PP)	Year Admitted	Constituency	Formal Status	Key Influence Areas	Post-2022 Position
Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Represents ~180,000 Inuit of Canada, Greenland, Alaska, Chukotka	Founding PP ( <a href="#">Ottawa 1996</a> )	~180,000 Inuit across Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka (Russia)	Full consultation rights; sits at all AC meetings; no formal vote	Shipping/Maritime: Co-leads 'Meaningful Engagement in Marine Activities' (PAME) Climate: Co-leads Indigenous Knowledge Mobilization (EPPR) Health: Leads Project CREATEs on mental health (SDWG)	Called for careful consideration of proper mechanisms for resumption (Mar 7, 2022); pressed for full and effective PP participation in all resumed activities
Saami Council Represents Sámi peoples of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia	Founding PP ( <a href="#">Ottawa 1996</a> )	~100,000 Sámi across Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden	Full consultation rights; active across all AC working groups	Land/Food: Leads EALLU II (reindeer herding, food) (SDWG) Environment: Led Kola waste project (ACAP) Gender: Leads Arctic gender equality project GEA II (SDWG) Climate: Co-leads CITE knowledge co-production project (AMAP)	Announced it would not attend AC meetings under the then-current conditions; pledged to maintain cooperation with Indigenous communities across all borders including Russia (Mar 13, 2022)
RAIPON Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North	Founding PP ( <a href="#">Ottawa 1996</a> )	~250,000 members of 40+ Indigenous peoples of Russia's North, Siberia, Far East	Full consultation rights; official PP head of delegation in AC; special consultative status at UN ECOSOC	Culture/Education: Leads 'Digitalization of Indigenous Heritage' (SDWG) Biodiversity: Co-leads 'Salmon Peoples' project (CAFF) Environment: Involved in Actions for Arctic Biodiversity (CAFF)	Formally expressed commitment to maintaining the Arctic as a zone of peace, stability, and constructive cooperation; called for a speedy return to full-format AC cooperation; affirmed that decisions affecting Indigenous peoples must incorporate PP opinions (RAIPON Statement, 2022)
Aleut International Association (AIA)	Admitted 1998 ( <a href="#">Iqaluit 1998</a> )	~15,000 Aleuts in Russia and USA (Alaska)	Full consultation rights; U.S. PP coordination role; not-for-profit corporation	Marine: Co-leads 'Meaningful Engagement in Marine Activities' (PAME) Waste: SDWG projects on solid waste management Subsistence: Co-leads	No published stand-alone statement on the 2022 pause identified on AIA official channels; resumed cooperation via AC written-

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				'Salmon Peoples' (CAFF)	procedure frameworks
Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC)	Admitted 2000 ( <a href="#">Barrow 2000</a> )	~45,000 Athabaskan peoples across 76 communities in Alaska and Canada	Full consultation rights; U.S./Canada member coordination	Fisheries: Co-leads 'Salmon Peoples of Arctic Rivers'(CAFF) Biodiversity: Involved in 'Actions for Arctic Biodiversity' (CAFF) Wildlife: Focus on caribou and inland water systems	Participates in all resumed activities under AC written-procedure and virtual modalities; no stand-alone statement on the 2022 pause identified on AAC official channels
Gwich'in Council International (GCI)	Admitted 2000 ( <a href="#">Barrow 2000</a> )	~9,000 Gwich'in in NWT/Yukon (Canada) and Alaska (USA)	Full consultation rights; U.S./Canada member coordination	Wildfire: Leads ArcticFIRE wildland fire monitoring project Food: Co-leads Arctic Food Innovation Cluster (SDWG) Climate: Engages on energy and climate research through AC channels	Strongly supported pause and peace (Mar 3, 2022); demanded direct inclusion in resumption planning, warning that exclusion undermines Arctic stability (Jun 9, 2022)

Sources: Arctic Council official pages, Ottawa Declaration, Iqaluit and Barrow Declarations, AC Rules of Procedure, and PP organizational websites. Admission years and formal rights from Arctic Council materials (<https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org>).

### The Permanent Participant Framework

The Arctic Council, established by the Ottawa Declaration of September 19, 1996, introduced a governance innovation that remains unique in the landscape of intergovernmental institutions: the Permanent Participant (from now on it will be abbreviated as **PP**) category, [which accords Indigenous peoples' organizations formal and continuous participation rights](#) alongside the eight Arctic member states (). Six organizations currently hold this status, as detailed in Table 1 above. Together, they represent approximately 500,000 Indigenous people across the Arctic, constituting a significant share of the region's total population of four million.

The rights conferred by PP status are substantive. The Arctic Council's Rules of Procedure specify that PPs may address all meetings, that their consultation must precede the adoption of meeting agendas, and that they may propose cooperative activities and projects. The Ottawa Declaration stipulates that decisions are taken by consensus of the Arctic States, with full consultation and involvement of the Permanent Participants, a formulation that defines both the formal constraint on PP power and the practical leverage it generates. While PPs cannot formally block a state decision, the mandatory consultation requirement creates strong political incentives

for states to accommodate PP concerns before decisions are finalized. The Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat (IPS), operational since 1994 and predating the Arctic Council itself, provides the institutional infrastructure that allows PPs to function as genuine governance actors rather than ceremonial participants, through capacity-building, logistical support, and systematic coordination among the six organizations.

### **The Normative Dimension: UNDRIP and FPIC**

The institutional framework of the Arctic Council must be assessed against the broader normative standard established by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007. UNDRIP's most consequential provisions for Arctic governance concern Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Article 19 requires states to consult and cooperate in good faith with Indigenous peoples through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting measures that may affect them, while Article 32 extends this requirement to [projects affecting Indigenous lands, territories, and resources](#). The OHCHR clarifies that [FPIC requires consent given voluntarily, sought sufficiently in advance](#), and based on complete and accessible information, a standard qualitatively distinct from consultation alone ().

The gap between this standard and the Arctic Council's consultation-only PP framework represents the central normative tension in Arctic Indigenous governance. In practice, however, the mandatory consultation process combined with consensus-based state decision-making approximates a de facto form of influence that provides PPs with meaningful leverage over policy outcomes, even absent formal consent rights. Several Nordic Arctic states, including Norway, Finland, and Denmark, are additionally bound by [ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples](#), which creates legally enforceable consultation obligations reinforcing and extending the PP rights within the Council framework.

### **Policy Influence in Practice**

Each of the six PPs exercises policy influence primarily through project leadership within the Arctic Council's working groups. The ICC co-led the PAME working group project on Meaningful Engagement of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Marine Activities (2021–2023), producing internationally recognized guidelines for sustainable shipping. The [Saami Council's Climate Impacts on Terrestrial Environments](#) (CITE) project, developed with the [Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme \(AMAP\)](#), established a digital platform through which Sámi reindeer herders document seasonal landscape changes, [integrating traditional knowledge directly into scientific climate models](#) (). RAIPON, AIA, and AAC jointly

lead the Salmon Peoples of Arctic Rivers project within the [Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna \(CAFF\)](#) working group, linking Indigenous subsistence practices to biodiversity monitoring across Arctic river systems. The GCI leads the ArcticFIRE wildland fire monitoring project, addressing the growing threat of climate-driven boreal fires.

These roles reflect a model of Indigenous governance influence that operates through knowledge co-production rather than formal voting rights. Arctic Council assessment reports increasingly credit Indigenous monitoring data alongside conventional scientific sources: Inuit hunters have tracked changes in sea ice thickness and movement for generations, providing data that satellites simply cannot replicate. Sámi reindeer herders have documented shifts in grazing patterns that signal broader ecological disruption long before scientific surveys catch up, making Indigenous monitoring an addition to conventional science. The [Council's Strategic Plan 2021–2030](#) was explicitly co-developed between Arctic States and Permanent Participants, [embedding Indigenous priorities into the Council's long-term institutional vision](#).

### **Post-2022 Disruptions and Institutional Adaptation**

The conflict in Ukraine in 2022 represented the most severe test of the Arctic Council framework since its establishment. On March 3, 2022, seven of the eight Arctic states announced a temporary pause in Council meetings and activities, [suspending the institutional channels through which PPs exercise their governance roles](#). PP responses varied significantly, as documented in Table 1. The GCI and Saami Council supported the pause while insisting on continued inclusion in resumption planning. RAIPON's endorsement of Russian military actions created a rupture in PP unity and raised unresolved questions about the representational integrity of the PP category under conditions of state political pressure.

In August 2023, all eight states reached consensus through written procedure on modalities for resuming working-group-level activities, consulting all six PPs throughout. In February 2024, Working Group meetings resumed virtually, described by ICC Chair Sara Olsvig as a key step in maintaining [the full and effective participation of Arctic Indigenous Peoples](#). The 14th Ministerial Meeting of May 12, 2025 confirmed the Council's institutional resilience, producing the [Romssa–Tromsø Statement](#) which reaffirmed the individual and collective rights of Arctic Indigenous Peoples and called for strengthening the capacity and project leadership role of Permanent Participants ().

### **Denmark's Chairship and Future Trajectories**

The Kingdom of Denmark assumed the Arctic Council Chairship on May 12, 2025, with a program placing Indigenous Peoples as the first of five thematic priorities. Greenland's Foreign Minister Vivian Motzfeldt serves as Chair and Greenland's Arctic Ambassador Kenneth Høegh leads the Senior Arctic Officials process, meaning an [Indigenous-majority territory is exercising the prerogatives of an Arctic Council Chair for the first time](#). Høegh has described the

Chairship's approach to Indigenous Knowledge as practical rather than symbolic, arguing that [combining Western research and Indigenous knowledge produces a demonstrably better analytical and policy outcome](#).

The future effectiveness of Arctic governance will depend on whether the adaptations developed during the 2022–2025 crisis can sustain meaningful PP participation across the Council's full mandate. The weakening of multilateral cooperation in the region has direct implications for SDGs 13, 14, 15, and 17, undermining the scientific collaboration and climate monitoring that underpin global environmental governance. Preserving robust Indigenous participation is not merely a question of rights fulfillment but a practical prerequisite for the legitimate and effective governance of one of the world's most consequential and fragile regions.



## ARCTIC COUNCIL

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Each Arctic State appoints a Senior Arctic Official (SAO) to manage its interests in the Arctic Council. Arctic Council's Senior Arctic Officials met in Juneau's Centennial Hall in March 2017. (Photo courtesy of Linnea Nordström/Arctic Council Secretariat)