

## Interview with ARCUS Member, Gabriella Gricius

By: Katherine Schexneider, ARCUS Volunteer

*Editor's Note: Katherine Schexneider interviewed Gabriella Gricius on 27 January 2022. The following transcript of that interview accompanies and provides further background to the ARCUS Member Profile of Gabriella Gricius published in the March 2022 issue of Witness Community Highlights. This interview and the Member Profile highlight the work of our individual members and help ARCUS members get to know one another by supporting connections across disciplines, communities, and career paths.*

**Katherine:** Welcome, Gabriella. Thank you for letting ARCUS showcase your work. I want to do a deeper dive into several areas of your research, particularly to explore how the social sciences and hard sciences intersect and complement each other.

Gabriella: I'm excited to be here. Thank you so much for inviting me.

**Katherine:** The first question ties right in with your interest on the intersection of hard and social sciences. In Arctic research, as in research in other regions, we strive to *collaborate* more, particularly among the various disciplines. This means different subjects within the hard sciences as well as among hard and social sciences. Your work on geopolitical realities looks at *competition*, of course. What are your thoughts on *competition* on the geopolitical stage among state actors versus *collaboration* in research among the individuals and institutions (universities, organizations) of those states?

Gabriella: I think you're absolutely right that there's a lot of rhetoric around competition particularly, you know, US-Russia, US-China, but I think while that may be true in sort of a geopolitical reality case, there's a lot of space for cooperation between universities and organizations like you said. I can point to so many examples of Russian and European or Canadian-American, Canadian-European, there's a lot of really great opportunities for cooperation whether it is in the hard sciences looking at, you know, ice modeling or climate modeling, but even in social sciences there's a lot of interesting work that looks at, for example, Indigenous sovereignty or security issues. That can be kind of a dueling dialogue of, how do we see these things differently, and what can that say about our prospects for future cooperation?

**Katherine:** Do you see barriers to collaboration between, say, Russian or Chinese researchers, and those from the West due to political tensions? Do you see different areas of focus in research between these nations, or among other nations?

Gabriella: I think there's maybe somewhat of an ideological barrier sometimes, between Russian and American collaborations, particularly from a political science perspective. But I don't think that exists as much in the hard science realm, because they're focused on different areas and subjects than we are. But I would say, actually interestingly in the case of Chinese and western academics, there's a huge amount of cooperation that's gone on, even in social sciences, you know, trying to understand: What is China's role in the Arctic? Can it be there as this economic assistant maybe to places like Greenland and Iceland, or do those states see it as really a negative actor? And there's a lot of interesting work out there that I think highlights cooperation between western and Chinese academics, and it's not necessarily a bad thing at all.

***Katherine:* You mentioned in our brief questionnaire some datasets you're involved with. I'd like to hear more about these datasets you build. What sort of patterns interest you?**

Gabriella: I have three different datasets I'm building right now. The first is almost done. It's sort of a collection on public opinion polls about Arctic security. And so, I scoped out—What are some of the polls in Arctic states saying about the Arctic that are in some of these bigger foreign policy and security polls? The answer is not a lot. Like, despite the fact that the Arctic is this huge new issue on the geopolitical stage, it's not really reflected in a lot of polling, which is in of itself very interesting, so that's not as relevant.

But the second dataset that I'm working with right now is through a project that I am conducting at NAADSN, the North American and Arctic Defense and Security Network. So that, we're looking at the extent of collaboration between Chinese and western academics on the Arctic. We started by looking at citations and seeing—What's actually been published over the last fifteen years about China's role in the Arctic; who is publishing that; and are they working together? That dataset, when it's finished, will sort of have that list of citations and then have a separate table of, who are the experts, where have they worked in the past, and, sort of, is there institutional overlap between the people that do collaborate across Chinese-western boundaries?

So, that's the second one, and then the third one is a database that I'm looking at for my dissertation, and that's studying the role of Arctic security expert communities across the US, Canada, Norway, and Russia. So, for that data set, I'm more looking at like, who are the big experts in these fields, where have they worked, where have they studied in the past, and, sort of, how relevant are they in actual national level security policy-making? So, to build that dataset, I'm starting with just looking at those people. So, I'm sort of seeing, who's published the most, who is cited the most across these different states? Once that's done, I'll begin a more in-depth discourse analysis where I'll go through: What are the things that these people have written? What are the things that states have published at the same time about the Arctic? And then, I'll sort of build a more discourse database to see—Are there patterns over time where we can see certain people do really matter, or certain institutions really matter and others don't, and why is that so? Those are my long-winded way of explaining my database.

***Katherine:* That's fascinating. I want to use physical science as a jumping off point for this next question. Permafrost thaw is a major concern across the Arctic. On 29 May 2020, there was a large diesel oil spill in Norilsk, Russia, which evidence strongly suggests was caused by thawing permafrost. So, building ports and support facilities along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) coast is not without danger. We need to ensure that the researchers (geologists and ecosystem scientists) and the civil engineers collaborate to ensure the safest possible construction. What are your thoughts on the infrastructure build-up in the Russian Arctic in the setting of thawing permafrost in this region?**

Gabriella: I think it's unfortunately a little bit of a paradox because, as you say, the permafrost is melting and it will continue to melt faster and faster as global warming speeds up in the Arctic. But, nonetheless, the Northern Sea Route, Russia's sea route, is becoming more and more used, so I think it's necessary to have some more infrastructure, particularly for search and rescue and port facilities. As more ships are going through the Arctic, that means more people will inevitably face problems where they're stuck in the ice, or something goes wrong when they're traversing that area, so on one hand, well, we don't want to be building our infrastructure on permafrost and permafrost that's melting, but I think that's where cooperation amongst these hard scientists does come in, so maybe again this is an opportunity for cooperation amongst not just Russian scientists, but other international scientists as well to come in

and say, “Well, if we are going to build this infrastructure, let's think of ways to make this better and more maybe resilient in the face of climate change, because it's not just Russian infrastructure that will melt, it's also all of our infrastructure across the Arctic.” So, I think definitely focusing on that international cooperation is important, but also maybe saying what infrastructure is needed, so focusing more on search and rescue rather than militarizing infrastructure, and making that a priority, is probably important.

***Katherine:*** The general public (hopefully) understands that global warming is affecting the Arctic, and at a greater rate than elsewhere on the planet. I don't think they know as much about the geopolitical forces at work there. What are three key concepts the general public need to know about the Arctic, from your perspective?

Gabriella: It is a hard question. So, the first concept that I thought was important was something that probably the general public knows about, this resurgence of geopolitical competition on the world stage. So, understanding that this dynamic of a declining hegemony in the US, a resurgent power in Russia and a rising power in China—that dynamic is very influential when thinking about what's happening in the Arctic, not just amongst state level, but also how people can cooperate with each other. Who's getting visas, who's not able to get visas. So, that's certainly very important.

The second concept I would point to is more of a dynamic, but the dynamic between national security and human security. So, when we talk about security issues in layman's terms, most of the time we're thinking about national security. We're thinking about the protection of borders. Can ships get through areas? Will a terrorist attack happen? And on that level, we're thinking about security conceptualized from the state level, but there's this other type of security: human security, where we imagine security from an individual level. That changes the way that we think about Arctic security. So, we're not talking about great power competition. We're thinking about: Can an Arctic resident living in northern Canada have access to their energy? Will they be able to get their food if sea ice is melting? And then: Will they be able to kind of have societal security for practicing their traditions over time? So, that dynamic, I think, is really important when we're talking about Arctic security. What kind of security are we talking about, and how are we thinking about solutions to that?

And then the last concept—I'm a little selfish in bringing it up because it's very relevant to my research, but I do think it's really important—is something called ontological security. So, kind of in the same way that we talk about national security, where we're thinking about physical security borders, migration, all of that, ontological security is this idea that the state is almost like an individual. So, the state says, “Yeah, I want to protect my borders, I want to protect the people inside of my borders, but I also have a sense of where I am in the world, and I have a sense of an identity.” So, Americans, for example, may not say it, but the American state wants to protect this idea of American exceptionalism, that America is always the best in the world, and that's really important in driving how they act. Similarly, in Russia, you know, Russia has always been this Arctic power. I think it wants to maintain that power and we're acknowledging that when we talk about Russian militarization or Russian action in the Arctic. It's just important to contextualize that in the state seeking this secure identity over time.

***Katherine:*** That is fascinating. I think there there's a lot there that the public doesn't know and would really appreciate knowing.

**And, finally, what else would you like us to know about the important work you're doing?**

Gabriella: If there's something important that I would want people to understand, it's just that the work that Arctic researchers do matters to where they come from, so the work that Arctic researchers put out, whether it's from social science or hard science, is very valid. I think understanding their backgrounds—what institutions they worked at, what networks they run in, that sort of meta-analysis of Arctic research—is really interesting and also is really important in deciding what sort of research we put out. How much cooperation is available highlights the role that we as researchers have an agency in subnational activism and determining what goes on in the Arctic over the long term. So, I think just focusing on agency rather than more structural ideas of Arctic politics is really important.

***Katherine:*** Well, thank you so much, Gabriella. This has been a fascinating discussion, and we look forward to hearing more from you in the future.