

JØRN HOLM-HANSEN & AADNE AASLAND

Cross-Border Cooperation Against the Odds?

Russian and Norwegian Grassroots Organizations
in a Changed Geopolitical Environment

ABSTRACT What impact did changes in the geopolitical environment have on grassroots cross-border cooperation within the Barents Euro-Arctic Region in the years before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022? Drawing on interviews, surveys and document studies from two evaluations made in 2007 and 2020 of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat's grant programme, conducted by the authors of the present article, we analyse the development over time of cross-border cooperation in Russia's north-western and Norway's northernmost regions. The context in which the programme was conducted in 2020 differed significantly from that in 2007. The period was one of increasingly strained relations between Russia and the West. In particular, the 2014 events in Ukraine resulted in a new geopolitical environment that posed a challenge to the ideals of cross-border trust and people-to-people cooperation. Moreover, internal political developments in Russia led to more centralized power structures and control, also regarding civil society. Although we had expected these developments to have had a negative impact on the programme's goal achievement, we find that the programme was closer to achieving several of its objectives in 2020 than in 2007. Competence transfer went both ways, both sides benefitted more equally and despite the geopolitical complications, the number of groups involved on both sides of the border did not decrease. The article identifies the main challenges between partners, and how they were overcome.

KEYWORDS: Barents Euro-Arctic Region, Arctic, cross-border, Russia, Norway

Introduction

Since 1993, a grant programme financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and managed by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat (NBS) has facilitated local cooperation between Russian and Norwegian actors. The overall aims are to build trust and to develop people-to-people cooperation in the Russian and Norwegian regions that form part of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR). Most activities funded by the programme take place at the grassroots level. The programme's thematic fields are assumedly low-politics: culture and sports, education and competence-building, business and entrepreneurship, media and information, civil society, and environmental protection. Youth and indigenous peoples are prioritized target groups across these thematic fields (Barentssekretariatet 2022).

Since its inception in the 1990s, the Norwegian NBS's grant programme has worked in a setting of shifting Norwegian–Russian ties. Initially, Russia's central and regional authorities welcomed the initiative. This was a time marked by East–West détente, as well as the deep crisis economically and administratively in Russia in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. Russian authorities at the time saw the new cross-border arrangement as an opportunity to obtain much-needed financial and humanitarian assistance as well as investments from Nordic countries (Goldin 2015). Also, academic and cultural circles welcomed the opening up for foreign contacts. However, Russia's security apparatus and the military-industrial complex were reluctant, and there were concerns in Moscow that the competencies of central authorities versus regional ones might be affected (Goldin 2015). In the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs there were concerns about the wisdom of letting regions “do” foreign policy (Robertsen 2014).

In the early 2000s, the Russian economy recovered, and the country's self-assertiveness on the international scene grew. Since 2012, when Vladimir Putin was sworn in for a third presidential term, Russia has become increasingly authoritarian, centralized and culturally conservative (see e.g., Kortukov 2020; Laruelle 2020; Lewis 2020). Moreover, in 2014, in the middle of the period covered by this article (2007–2020), Russia annexed Crimea. This was followed by sanctions and counter-sanctions and a generally worsened geopolitical climate. We expected that these developments internationally, as well as those in Russia, would have a negative impact on the grant programme's goal attainment.

To check this assumption the article provides a systematic analysis of how the last decade's contextual changes have affected the grant scheme. In particular, it examines key aspects of cross-border cooperation, like mutual benefit, trust and equality between partners. What have been the challenges? Have some of them been overcome—and if so, how?

We begin with an overview of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (the Barents Region), situating the grant scheme within that elaborate architecture. Then some core challenges to this type of cooperation are presented and an analytical framework outlined. The major part of the article offers a systematic comparison of the grant scheme as of 2007 and 2020.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Barents Secretariat no longer funds projects that involve local, regional or federal authorities on the Russian side. Ongoing projects of this kind are put on hold until further notice. Some projects in-

volving only independent actors, e.g., artists, may receive funding. The same applies to projects with Russian partners residing outside Russia (Barentssekretariatet 2022).

The Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) and the NBS Grant Programme

The Norwegian NBS grant programme forms part of wider cooperative endeavours within the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR). Whereas BEAR covers regions in Finland, Sweden, Russia and Norway, the grant programme is bilateral: Norway and Russia.

BEAR

Unlike the case with other cross-border regions in Europe, BEAR does not apply solely to areas close to the state borders. The region covers a full 1.75 million square kilometres and has five million inhabitants. Among the urban centres in the region, only Murmansk and Arkhangelsk have populations of more than 100,000. Natural resources are abundant, including oil, gas, minerals, fish and forest. On the negative side, the region struggles with huge geographical distances, sparse population, out-migration and a harsh climate.

The establishment of BEAR in 1993 took place amidst widespread worries that Russia would destabilize, with disastrous consequences for the highly militarized



Fig. 1. Map of the Euro-Arctic Barents Region. Source: The Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland.

Norwegian–Russian border. Back in 1987, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had held a speech in Murmansk in which he encouraged Russia’s Northern regions to enter into cooperation with other regions of the North (Gorbachev 1987). In September 1988, a bilateral agreement on regional cooperation between Finnmark and Murmansk was signed, a harbinger of what was to become the much larger, multi-level, internationally anchored Barents Region (Regjeringen 2011).

BEAR was established to institutionalize cross-border cooperation on “low politics.” In the classical definition by Hoffmann (1966) these are politics that do not directly affect the survival of the state. In line with this, BEAR focused on issues like health, economic development and environmental protection across what was seen as a former geopolitical fault-line requiring a “high politics” approach focusing on military security (Eriksson 1995; Hønneland 2010; Østhagen 2020). Attention was to be shifted from military issues to societal challenges (Zysk 2015). The dramatic differences in living conditions between the Nordic and Russian regions in the North were also considered a challenge (Dellenbrandt & Olsson 1994) and emphasised by the then Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Johan Jørgen Holst (Holst 1994). As noted by Landriault, Payette and Roussel (2021) low politics issues fall within the competencies of local and regional authorities, and thus liberate space for the subnational levels of governments.

Regional cross-border cooperation was deemed conducive to bridging the gap and thus fostering stabilization. Three keywords characterized this approach to cross-border activities: normalization, civilization and regionalization (Hønneland 2017: 28). Bilateral people-to-people cooperation under the NBS grant programme fits into this approach.

Inspired by the then-popular idea of a “Europe of the regions” to downplay the role of the central states (Loughlin 2019), BEAR was set up with a complex, multi-level architecture consisting of two pillars: one involving the regions, the other involving the central states. The regional level of government on all sides of the borders is involved through the interregional Barents Regional Council (BRC). In all, 13 regions take part: five Russian and two Norwegian. The strong regional pillar distinguishes BEAR from other cross-border initiatives, like the Arctic Council, the Northern Dimension and the Council of the Baltic Sea States. In addition, representatives of the three indigenous peoples in the region are included: the Sami, the Veps and the Nenets. In parallel, co-operation between Sami organizations in Finland, Russia, Norway and Sweden takes place through the non-governmental Saami Council.

The four central states meet through the intergovernmental Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC). The Barents cooperation covers industrial and commercial development, environmental protection and climate, rescue operations at sea, indigenous peoples, health, culture, youth and people-to-people cooperation. Most of the practical work within BEAR is carried out by thematic joint working groups and sub-groups set up for several of these policy areas (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybstyna 2020).

BEAR is characterized by the use of soft-law instruments without binding force, and an emphasis on knowledge- and capacity-building through programme activities (Stokke 2015). Trust- and confidence-building are central here. As stated in the 2013 Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation, with reference to the 2010 treaty on maritime delimitation between Russia and Norway:

Mutual trust built through the Barents Cooperation can thus serve as a model for others on how neighbouring countries can resolve differences peacefully through dialogue and negotiations, and thus help release the huge potential of the regional and European integration (Barents Summit 2013)

There was no high-level cross-border contact during the years immediately following 2014 but soon the Barents framework was invoked for top-level meetings and occasions, as with the 75th anniversary of the Soviet liberation of Eastern Finnmark in 2019 (Holm-Hansen Aasland & Dybstyna 2020). Many of the events during that anniversary were organized as projects under the grants programme. According to an interview with one Norwegian government official:

This gives the politicians talking points they would not have had if it were not for the programme [...] For us the Barents cooperation is always a pleasant thing in the bilateral setting. (Quoted in Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybstyna 2020: 19)

The NBS Grant Programme

Ever since 1993, the NBS grants programme has facilitated regional international relations between the Norwegian and Russian regions within the Barents Euro-Arctic Region: Nordland fylke, Troms and Finnmark fylke on the Norwegian side, and Murmansk oblast, Arkhangelsk oblast, Nenets Autonomous District, the Komi Republic and the Republic of Karelia on the Russian side. In line with the overall approach of the BEAR region, the programme has addressed thematic fields conducive to joint social development in a wide sense. The thematic fields for cooperation have been selected among presumably “low” politics areas. Nonetheless, since its inception in the 1990s, the Norwegian NBS’s grant program has worked in a setting of shifting Norwegian–Russian ties, where the ideal of developing mutual trust through building trust and people-to-people activities has been increasingly challenged by high-politics concerns, in particular after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Holm-Hansen 2023). Even low-politics activities became controversial, and there were signs that project applicants internalized some of this caution and submitted project proposals that avoid potentially sensitive issues and concepts (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybstyna 2020).

Annual allocations from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have been around 25 million NOK (appr. 2.5 million euro) earmarked for projects and 15 million for operational purposes. The programme has been funding numerous relatively small project activities, some 200 to 300 projects each year. Grants have been distributed according to a twofold set of criteria: Firstly, the project portfolio should involve a wide range of public and private as well civil society institutions on both sides of the border. Secondly, in total the projects should cover a wide range of issues and include all regions of Norway that form part of the Barents Region. Only Norwegian applicants may apply and they have had to have a Russian partner to receive funding. This latter requirement, however, was lifted in the new guidelines introduced after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Barentssekretariatet 2022).

Project owners have included municipal agencies, private firms, sport clubs and

small charitable organizations. Projects in the immediate border regions (Kirkenes–Nikel/Zapolyarny) as well as those with actors based in regions further from the border, like Nordland and the Komi Republic, are included. Project activities range from joint football trainings and matches between neighbouring football clubs in Kirkenes and Pechenga, to exchange of handicraft skills and the large-scale Barents Games. Most projects have had a non-controversial profile, but the portfolio also includes potentially more provocative ones (e.g., on LGBT+ and indigenous peoples).

Initially, the NBS was established to serve as secretariat of Norway's two-year chairmanship of the Regional Council within the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR). After 1995 it continued as a project under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Since 1998, the Secretariat has been an interregional company owned by the Norwegian regions that form part of BEAR but is funded by the MFA. Its Board (*Styret*) and Council (*Representantskapet*) are composed of representatives from these two regions. Until 2008, the MFA had one observer on the Board. The funding and letter of assignment come from the MFA. The dialogue between the Secretariat and the MFA takes place, *inter alia*, in bi-annual meetings. Two of the MFA's departments are involved: the Section for the High North, Polar Affairs and Marine Resources, and the Section for Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Regional Organizations. Under this structure, the Secretariat operates according to a letter of allocation from the national ministry implementing Norwegian foreign policies and under the supervision of regional authorities (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybtsyna 2020). This reflects the fundamental, multilevel ideas of the Barents cooperation, but makes for complex manoeuvring.

The Secretariat's core function is to facilitate bilateral people-to-people cooperation between the Norwegian and Russian regions that form part of BEAR. In addition, the NBS is to serve as a competence centre for Norwegian–Russian relations in the North; and to take part in the public debate and draw attention to regional people-to-people cooperation. As of 2021, the NBS had 11 staff members in Norway and six in its offices in Russia (in Arkhangelsk, Murmansk and Naryan-Mar), the latter staffed by Russian citizens.

Challenges

Despite widespread initial optimism, obstacles to the people-to-people cooperation have existed from the start. Some of these difficulties sprang from lack of understanding of each other's realities and ways of thinking. These led to follow-up errors that have continued to challenge the cooperation.

Firstly, the emphasis on cross-border region-building proved easier said than done. BEAR has been underpinned by "region-building" endeavours aimed at constructing a regional identity for the region's inhabitants, based on the concept of the region as a natural unity with its population as "insiders" by virtue of being "Northerners." As pointed out by Hønneland (2017: 31, 39) the idea that "Northernness alone gave an intuitive feeling of how the others thought" was an over-simplification. For centuries, those living on either side of the border had inhabited different cultural spheres. Moreover, as pointed out by Mikhailova (2016) the cross-border region was divided by differences in legislation, administrative systems and policies.

The use of the term *Pomor* offers an illustrative example of misunderstanding of

each other's realities. The Norwegian side promoted historical narratives emphasizing the mutual contacts that had existed through the Pomor trade, referring to the exchange of Russian flour with Norwegian fish from around 1740 to around 1920, which even led to a simple pidgin language, *russenorsk*. On the Norwegian side, Pomor was evoked to build the cross-border region, whereas attempts at mobilizing the original Northerner population in Russia's north-western coastal areas as a Pomor sub-ethnos were met by accusations of separatism by the authorities (Shabaev et al. 2016).

Secondly, many Norwegian actors were slow to recognize the changes in Russia after the country recovered in the early 2000s. Thus, they continued to offer humanitarian aid that might have been relevant in the 1990s but was no longer needed, as living standards and public finances in Russia were improving. At times, Russian partners considered this approach to be condescending. This obstructed work towards a core ideal of the cooperation: building trust between peers through people-to-people cooperation.

Thirdly, in addition to the follow-up errors, the increasingly centralized Russian regime and geopolitical animosity have put the intended people-to-people cooperation under stress. Regardless of the significance of meeting places, Russia's 2012 "foreign agents law," the law on undesirable organizations (2015) and the media agent law (2017) reflect the growing centralization as well as the disciplining of civil society (Bogdanova 2017; Tulaeva, Tysiachniuk & Henry 2017).

The "de-securitized" approach applied in the Barents co-operation has taken place in an environment of increasing militarization in the North (Østhagen 2020; Åtland & Kabanenko 2020). The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was followed by restrictive measures, or sanctions, imposed by the EU (and followed by Norway) on the one hand, and counter-sanctions by Russia on the other. However, none of these measures had a direct impact on the grant-funded collaboration. Russian counter-sanctions primarily affected Norwegian seafood exports, whereas the EU/Norwegian restrictions concerned technology and defence. Moreover, state-to-state cooperation between coastal guards, border guards, search-and-rescue agencies, as well as warning and handling of incidents at sea, remained unchanged. Bilateral cooperation in fisheries and the environment has been continued, reflecting the fact that this is a functional region, although mainly maritime.

Despite developments in Russia and on the international scene, the Norwegian government in its report to the *Storting* (the Norwegian parliament) for 2020/2021 stated: "to a large degree, the value of the Barents cooperation consists in its stable and relatively uncontroversial arrangements, with predictability and good relations in several policy areas" (Regjeringen 2020).

Analytical Approach

BEAR came about as a result of *region-building*. As Neumann (1994: 58) points out, the existence of regions is preceded by the existence of region-builders, who "imagine a certain spatial and chronological identity for a region, and disseminate this imagined identity to others." Transborder regions are talked and written into existence but unlike in the case of nation-building, region-building implies transcending state borders. Following Browning (2003), initiatives like the Northern Dimension, the Council of Baltic Sea States and BEAR aim to build regional networks outside the

framework and independent of sovereign entities. As outlined in the section Challenges above, the post-modernist and post-sovereignist optimism of the 1990s, however, proved only partly to survive the developments that were to follow.

Cross-border people-to-people cooperation has been applied in a range of settings by civic activists as well as governments—for instance, for peacekeeping and reconciliation between adversaries (Herzog & Hai 2005) or to prepare for geopolitical advances, e.g., along the Belt and Road Initiative (Shrestha 2019). In Europe, people-to-people cooperation is primarily used in order to facilitate day-to-day interaction among relatively likeminded populations on both sides of a shared border, as with the Nordic countries (Strang 2016) and the EU member states (Klatt & Wassenberg 2017).

BEAR is a “hybrid” variety in this respect. First, by including both Russian and Nordic territories, the region is diverse—indeed, that is why the region was “created” in the first place. As such it has similarities with the EU Neighbourhood Policy, which covers most of the EU’s external borders except those with Russia (Schumacher & Bouris 2016). Second, by including areas far from the border, especially as measured in travel time, BEAR is not solely a cross-border arrangement. However, for settlements close to the borders, like Kirkenes and Nikel, it certainly is one. The Norwegian–Russian border is peripheral and crosses a sparsely populated area. However, the area is of high military importance for both sides, and a visa is required to cross the border. The intensity of people-to-people interaction suffered from this also before the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In his much-cited article, van Houtum (2000) distinguishes three strands of debate concerning borders and border regions, centred on flow, cross-border cooperation and people, respectively. The first sees borders as an obstacle to the natural flows of (mostly economic) activity. The cross-border approach is mainly concerned with the structures and processes needed to overcome the hindrances created by borders. The former could be said to be mainly descriptive, with the latter more activist and focused on creating potential dynamics in the border area.

Van Houtum’s third perspective—the people approach—emphasizes mental creation as well as the shaping and reshaping of the meaning of borders by human beings, including ordinary citizens, politicians and firms. As noted by Brunet-Jailly (2011: 3), borders are “institutions that result from bordering policies—they are thus about people.” Rather than being seen solely as barriers, borders are viewed in light of how people’s behaviours, actions and mindsets make them relevant.

Both cross-border and people-oriented approaches have been applied in the borderlands between Russia and Norway. For instance, cross-border measures were taken to increase flow as early as the 1990s, when the Norwegian government funded snow clearance of a border road. In 2012, local border traffic permits were introduced, allowing people residing up to 30 kilometres from the Russian–Norwegian border to visit this area without a visa (Jonassen 2022). However, such measures affect only a very small part of the vast Barents Region.

People-to-people projects go one step further in bringing people together, with measures varying according to the context. Prior conflict or isolation, wealth gaps and a shared language are relevant here. Bar Tal and Teichman (2005: 391–393) draw on the Israel–Palestine conflict in noting some psychological steps that should be made, although that case is not directly transferable to the Barents setting.

Three of these steps are of particular relevance for the Barents Region. Firstly, there is a need for *personalization*, for recognizing that those living on the other side of the border are “like us.” This has been emphasized in speeches and documents ever since the establishment of the Barents Region, to such an extent that the differences in people’s frames of reference may have been under-communicated. Secondly, *equalization* entails viewing the other group “at eye level.” Overcoming the Norwegian “aid mentality” in relations to most of the world has been a challenge in the Barents Cooperation. Russians have been portrayed as being “needy” and the Norwegians “good helpers” (Hønneland 1998). The third challenge is being able to recognize the other side as just as *diverse and heterogeneous* as one’s own side.

Data and Methods

Data for this article were collected via two evaluations of cross-border collaboration between Norway and Russia made possible by a grants programme administered by the NBS and funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), conducted in 2007 and 2020, respectively (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybtsyna 2008; Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybtsyna 2020). In both evaluations, triangulation of data collection methods was applied: Besides scrutiny of project reports and relevant policy documents, the evaluations involved individual and group interviews with programme stakeholders (e.g. NBS representatives in Kirkenes and local offices in Russia, board members and advisers), key policy-makers at national (e.g. the Norwegian MFA) and regional levels, interviews with project leaders and participants in Norway and Russia, and web-based surveys sent to project leaders and their partners in both countries.

Our cases for in-depth studies in 2007 and 2020 were chosen in cooperation with the NBS to cover as many aspects of the Secretariat’s activities as possible, and to be representative of the grant programme. They were selected to provide insights into factors that enable or inhibit productive cross-border collaboration under the current rather strained geopolitical conditions.

Detailed information about data collection in both evaluations, including interview guides and questionnaires, can be found in two openly accessible project reports (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybtsyna 2008; Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybtsyna 2020). The criteria for the selection of case studies for more in-depth analyses are also described in these reports.

Table 1 gives an overview of interviews and survey respondents. Interviewees were selected to cover all thematic fields and regions involved. The lower number of survey respondents in 2020 compared to 2007 is due mainly to differences in the project portfolio characterized by a smaller number of (comparatively larger) projects in the most recent programme period. To enable comparison between the two surveys, most of the questions asked were identical. Several open-ended questions were included, to allow the respondents to elaborate further on some of the key survey themes.

	2007	2020
Total number of interviewees (including participants in group interviews)	65	57
Interviews with project leaders/participants	32	31
in Norway	14	16
in Russia	18	15
Number of web-based survey respondents	140	60
in Norway	69	35
in Russia	67	25
in other countries	4	-
Project case studies	14	20

Table 1. Interviewees and survey respondents in 2007 and 2020 evaluations.

Limitations

Even though for the most part questionnaire items were equal in the two surveys, some challenges when comparing the two survey years should be mentioned. Firstly, the project portfolio in the two years was somewhat different, e.g., in terms of size of projects and distribution of projects on thematic areas. We compare the portfolio in the two years without controlling for such differences. Secondly, with the rather small number of respondents in each survey year, only relatively large differences in results can be considered statistically significant. Since we have only aggregate data for the 2007 survey, we are not able to run proper significance tests. Typical margins of error for the 2020 survey are around ± 8 per cent and ± 4 per cent in 2007. Given that we have surveyed a substantial proportion of grant recipients and not a random sample of a larger population, we would still argue that the results are meaningful and likely to reflect the respondents' experiences and attitudes in the two survey years reasonably well.

The Project Co-Operation

The number of project applications has been kept quite stable in the 2010–2019 period, as shown in Figure 2. Thus, changes in the geopolitical environment, as well as changes in Russian legislation and regulations, generally appear to have had little effect on the number of project applications.

The funds are Norwegian, the programme is administered from Norway and only Norwegian actors can apply. This means a risk of projects being driven more by Norwegian supply than Russian demand. For example, Norwegian actors have been keen to share their experiences and practices with Russian counterparts, without taking demand sufficiently into consideration. Memories of the aid-oriented approach

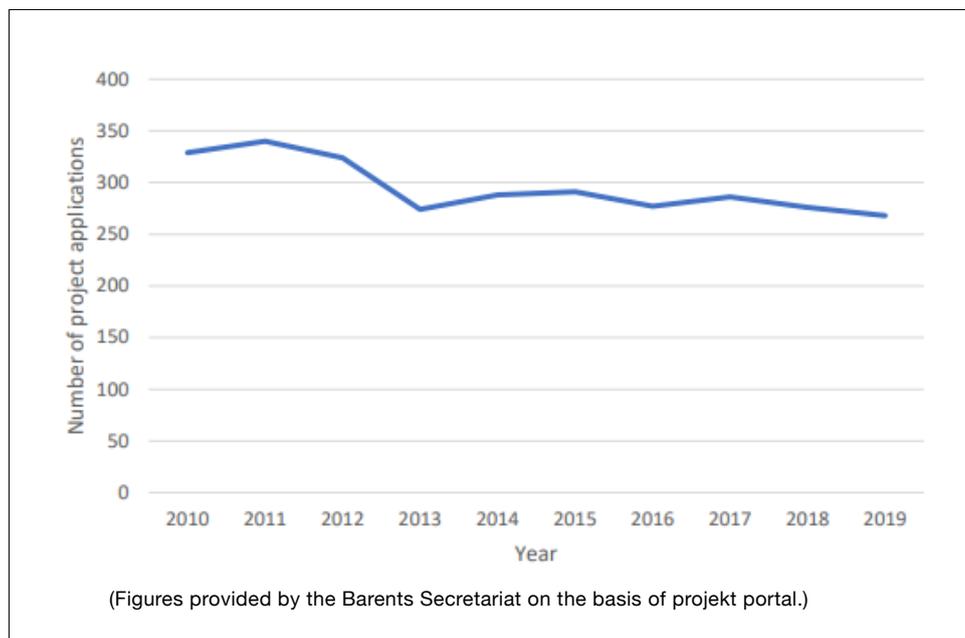


Fig. 2. Number of project applications received per year, 2010–2019.

from the 1990s may have lingered on. Therefore, the 2007 evaluation recommended emphasizing mutual gains on both sides (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybtsyna 2008: 121). Consequently, the NBS made mutual benefits of projects an explicit prerequisite for funding. This seems to have had the intended impact.

In the 2007 survey, the direction of competence transfer was more frequently reported as going from Norway to Russia. By 2020 this had evened out: indeed, transfer of competence from Russia to Norway was now noted slightly more often than the converse. In its most basic manifestation—material support, e.g., buying equipment—this approach had shifted in most projects already in 2007 and was reduced even further by 2020 (see Fig. 3).

Interviews with participants show that projects based on skills and specialized interests in, e.g., music, handicrafts, vocational subjects or sports have provided mutual inspiration, often leading to the wish for further specialization. Young Norwegian musicians got a wakeup call when they realized how advanced their Russian counterparts were, according to a project leader, who added that this inspired the Norwegian children to work harder. Instructors learned didactic skills from their Russian counterparts.

The Arctic Skills vocational competition project offers another illustrative example of mutual learning. In the project, Russian and Norwegian students of health work were found to differ as to what tasks they excelled in. The Russian students were better at technical skills whereas the Norwegians were better at communicating with patients. After having realized these competitive disadvantages, in the following year's competition, both teams had improved their skills where they had been weak.

However, a few signs hint at possible negative developments. These could pos-

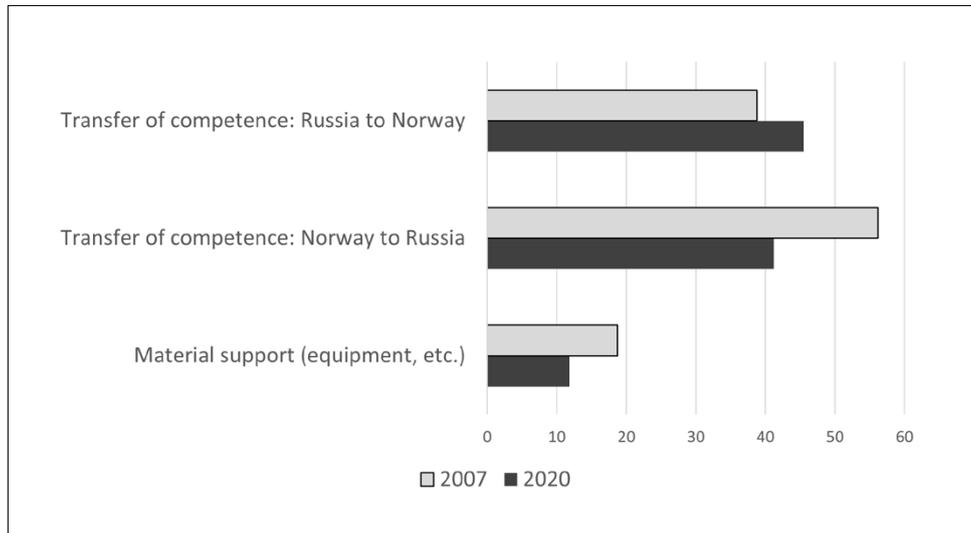


Fig. 3. Profile of projects in 2020 compared to 2007: percentage of projects involving various components “to a large extent.”
 Questionnaire item: “To what extent has your project involved the following components?” Answer categories: “To a large extent,” “To some extent,” “To a minor extent,” “Not at all,” “Do not know/not relevant.” The latter responses were removed.

sibly be explained by strained political relations (see below). These concern lower involvement of the authorities, at the local and, especially, national and federal levels (see Figure 4). These findings might indicate somewhat less political commitment to collaboration across the Russian–Norwegian border.

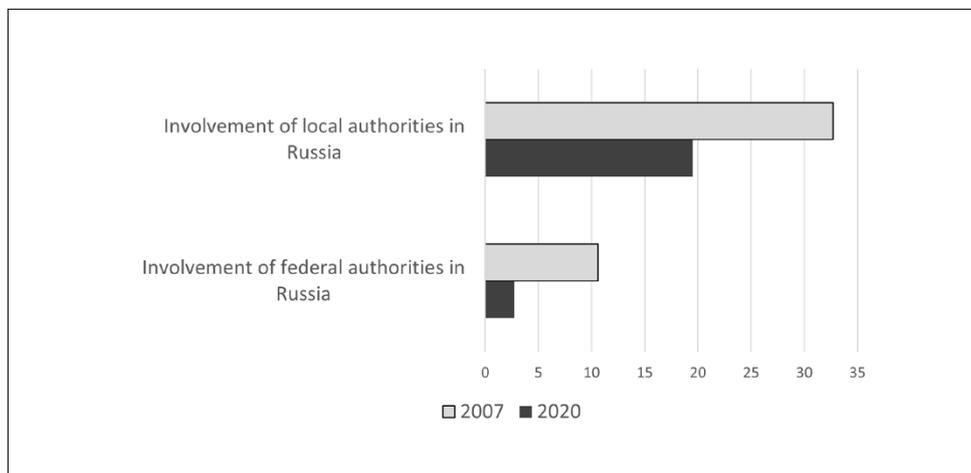


Fig. 4. Involvement of local and national/federal authorities in project implementation. Percentage reporting “to a large extent.”
 Questionnaire item: “To what extent has your project involved the following components?” Answer categories: “To a large extent,” “To some extent,” “To a minor extent,” “Not at all,” “Do not know/not relevant.” The latter responses were removed.

Project Features—Positive and Negative

Given recent developments in high-level politics, an increased risk of distrust might have been expected, also in people-to-people settings. Or mistrust might have been triggered as a result of the project cooperation itself, due to misunderstandings or poor adaptation to context. However, a large percentage of respondents on both sides of the border in 2020 reported that their project was characterized by high levels of mutual trust: 91 per cent of Russian and 85 per cent of Norwegian respondents (this question was not included in the 2007 survey). Since the overall aim of the grant programme is to “promote trust and people-to-people cooperation” (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dybstyna 2020: 12) the high score on trust is an indication of success.

On the other hand, nowhere in the documents underlying the grant programme has trust been defined. In the interviews, we found that respondents equated trust with low level of friction in communicating with each other and mutual involvement. Doing this, the interviewees very often made a point of stating that they experienced partners on the other side of the border as being not so different from themselves after all. Assuming that this makes sense, although the question on mutual trust was not explicitly asked in 2007, the collaboration climate appears to have improved considerably during this time period (see Fig. 5). In particular, we note that more respondents think that closer ties have developed during the project period. Also, as shown in Figure 3, the balance between project partners and mutual benefit appears to have improved. In the in-depth interviews, many interviewees related how their prejudices have been overcome. In other words, what was referred to as “personalization” and “equalization” above, was achieved.

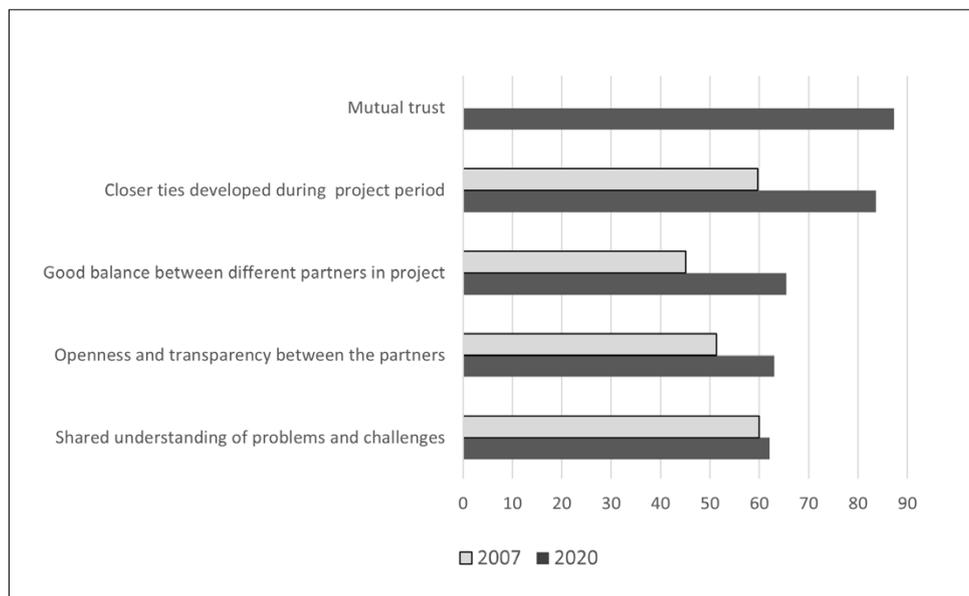


Fig. 5. The extent to which project collaboration has positive features: percentage reporting “to a large extent.”

Questionnaire item: “To what extent has the collaboration between Russian and Norwegian partners in the project been characterized by the following?” Answer categories: “To a large extent,” “To some extent,” “To a minor extent,” “Not at all,” “Not relevant/don’t know.” The latter responses were removed.

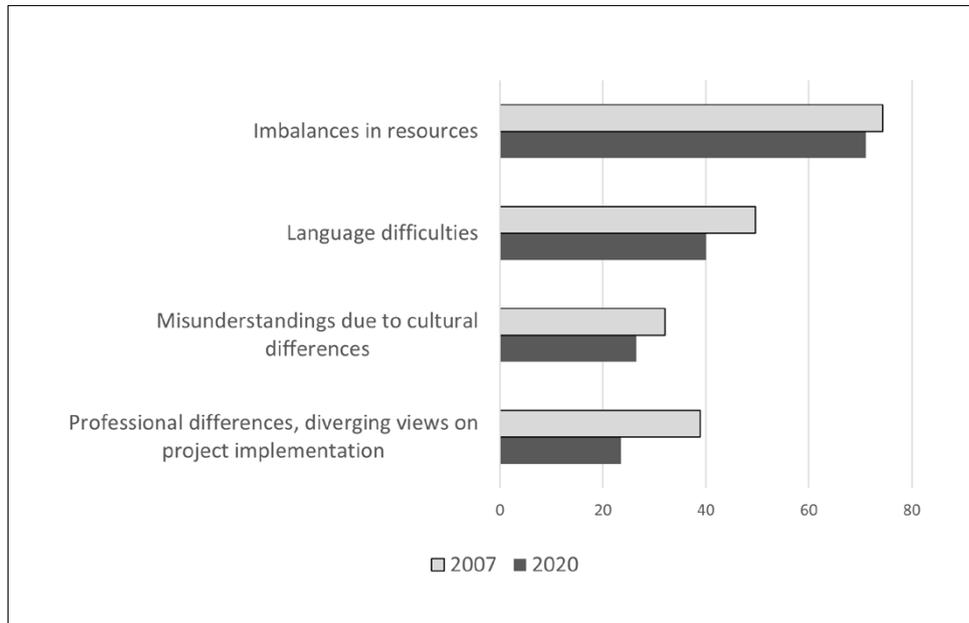


Fig. 6. Percentage reporting presence of negative features in their project “to a large extent.” Questionnaire item: “To what extent has the collaboration between Russian and Norwegian partners in the project been characterized by the following?” Answer categories: “To a large extent,” “To some extent,” “To a minor extent,” “Not at all,” “Not relevant/don’t know.” The latter responses were removed.

Building trust takes time and results here come primarily as side-effects of shared interests in specific project activities. The driving force is not necessarily the wish to contribute to the development of cross-border trust, but to be able to engage in favourite activities, e.g., in culture or sports, with those on the other side of the border. The question of mutual benefit is central here.

While according to our respondents, *positive features* had become more prevalent in projects in 2020 than they were in 2007, the opposite was the case with *negative features*, as shown in Figure 6. Of the positive features, it is, in particular, the development of closer ties between the partners during the project period, and the good balance achieved between them, that were more frequently reported in 2020 than in 2007. Of the negative features, the greatest reduction was observed for reported professional differences and diverging views on project implementation.

Given the overriding aim of the programme, the fact that project owners continuously come back with new projects is both a sign that the programme achieves results (a wish for cross-border contacts) and a pre-condition for goal achievement (building trust takes time). The survey shows that many of the respondents had long experience with Barents project collaboration: seven per cent had started their project activities before 2000 and more than half of the respondents had started project collaboration before 2014.

Findings from 2020 also indicate that since the start of the grant programme in the early 1990s, a generation of project participants have been growing up with close ties to Norway and Russia, “The Barents Generation” (Holm-Hansen, Aasland & Dyb-

tsyna 2020: 30). Some people are now in positions of power, and it is reasonable to expect them to be open to further collaboration. Others decided to study Norwegian or Russian, this implying that they will be involved in Russian or Norwegian activities in the future. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will put such ambitions on a halt, though.

An interesting observation from the 2020 evaluation concerns the role of the Russian diaspora in Northern Norway. Among project holders, Norwegian citizens with a Russian background and Russians living in Norway are frequent. In particular, representatives of the diaspora community contribute in sports and culture projects, bringing with them high competence, not least their inter-cultural and inter-institutional competence.

The role of the NBS should also be mentioned. Only three per cent of the respondents in 2020 reported difficulties involving programme administration, as compared with the already low level of ten per cent in 2007. Our in-depth interviews show that the NBS advisers follow up projects closely and practise a hands-on approach, starting with dialogue between adviser and applicant during the preparation of applications. Thus, attempts at including pro forma Russian partners for a project that is de facto solely Norwegian will be detected and applicants recommended to make greater efforts at finding real partners. Here the Secretariat's three offices in Russia can assist; advice on how to avoid potential controversies is also offered.

However, our in-depth interviews and open-ended questions in the 2020 survey show greater surveillance of project activities on the Russian side than previously. There is less freedom for Russian partners to engage in cooperation, and more administrative barriers. One practical obstacle concerns difficulties in transferring money between the countries, which one interviewee ascribes to "political decisions."

Project Achievements

Equality Between Project Partners

Given the grant programme's objectives, and the general objectives of the Barents Region, equality between partners from both sides of the border is essential. Our survey shows a marked increase in respondents reporting success in terms of achieving a high degree of equality between partners. By 2020, 56 per cent of respondents reported that their project was "very successful" in this regard, while the corresponding figure in 2007 was only 37 per cent.

Further analysis offers additional insights into differences in terms of Norwegian project leaders' and Russian project partners' survey responses on equality. On most survey items, the two categories give rather similar assessments, but we also find some notable differences. For example, Russian respondents are far more likely than Norwegians to perceive the partnership as characterized by equality and a shared understanding of problems and challenges, in addition to feeling strongly confident that there is openness and transparency between the partners. They also more often appreciate the better funding opportunities and the moral support provided by their partners. On the other hand, Norwegian respondents tend to believe that their project has strengthened their partners in the local setting.

These findings from the survey may in part be explained by the fact that even though it is the Norwegian partner who must be the formal applicant, the initiative often comes from the Russian side. Applications are often co-written by the Norwe-

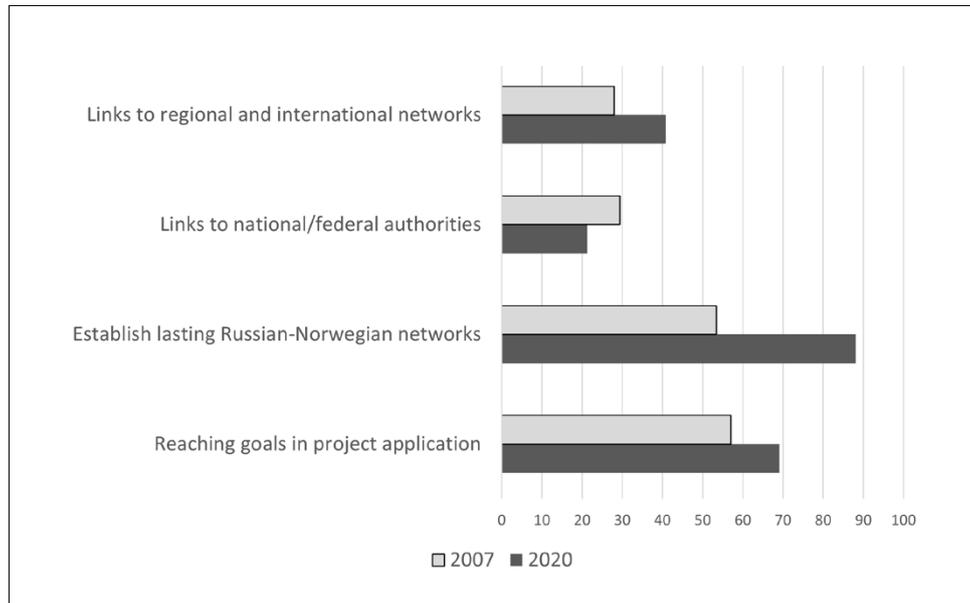


Fig. 7. Project achievements: percentage asserting that their project has been “very successful” in terms of specific criteria.

Questionnaire item: “How successful would you say that the project you have been involved in has been in terms of ...” Answer categories: “Very successful,” “Rather successful,” “Rather unsuccessful,” “Very unsuccessful,” “Not relevant/do not know.” The latter responses were removed.

gian and Russian partner, giving both sides ownership to, and responsibility for, the success of the project.

Self-Reported Success

As noted above, it does not seem that the deterioration of political relations between Norway and Russia during the past decade has seriously affected Norwegian–Russian people-to-people project collaboration in the Barents region. For most of the survey items concerning perceived project achievements, the improvements along the larger set of indicators are much more prominent than any setbacks.

Our main finding is that project participants report higher levels of success in reaching their goals on a large number of dimensions in 2020 than they did in 2007 (see Fig. 7). The increase has been particularly noteworthy as regards establishing long-lasting Russian–Norwegian networks, from a level quite high already in 2007. We also find a marked increase in respondents reporting success in terms of achieving a high degree of equality between partners. This mirrors our finding of more transfer of mutual competence in projects.

Projects are now even less linked to national (Norway) and federal (Russia) institutions than in 2007. This should not necessarily be interpreted as a negative development, given the programme’s regional profile and focus on people-to-people cooperation. When asked about major obstacles in project implementation, significantly fewer respondents mentioned bureaucratic obstacles: from just below 40 per cent to well under 30 per cent.

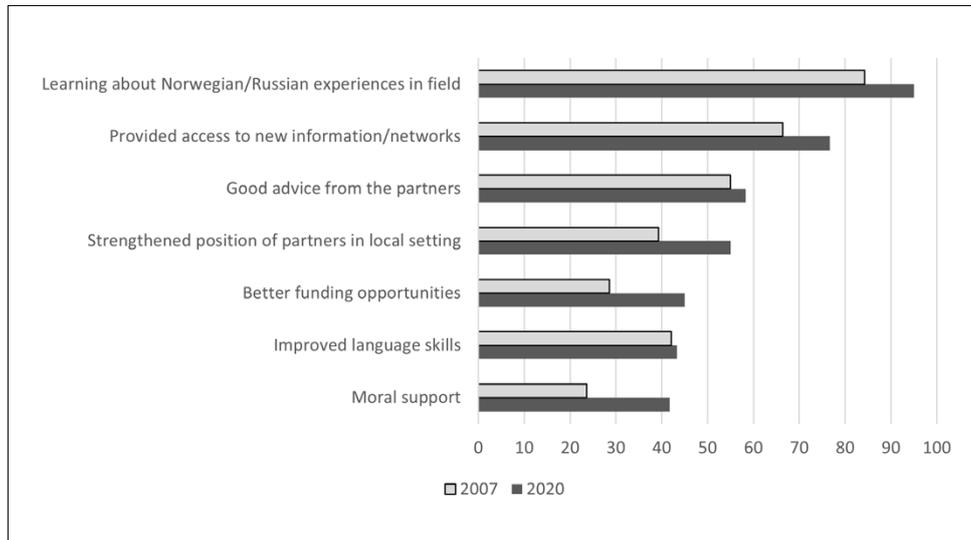


Fig. 8. Reported most important positive impacts of project, %.
Questionnaire item: “Which of the following would you say are the most important positive impact(s) of the project? Several answers possible.”

Further, respondents reported more positive *impacts* of their projects in 2020 than in 2007 (Fig. 8). We note considerably higher scores than in 2008 for items such as competence development, access to networks, strengthened position of partners in the local setting, funding opportunities and moral support. There was no reduction in reported positive impacts for any items in the 2007–2020 period.

External Pressures. Political Tensions and COVID-19

When asked directly in the 2020 survey whether changes in bilateral political relations between Norway and Russia had affected their project, either negatively or positively (Fig. 9), around half of the respondents answered that they had not affected their project, or only to a minor extent. Some respondents (Norwegians only) even held that there had been positive effects on their project; about one in five reported negative effects, most of them Norwegian respondents. By contrast, Russians were more inclined to tick the “Don’t know” option. Figure 10 shows that a much higher percentage of respondents reported negative effects from the COVID-19 pandemic than from deterioration of political relations for project implementation (between two thirds and three quarters of the respondents), with closed borders between Russia and Norway posing obvious challenges for project planning and implementation.

Politically Controversial Projects

Some projects have been politically controversial, even though the NBS runs risk analyses of potentially controversial projects, and many project applicants try to ensure that they submit proposals that avoid potentially sensitive topics and concepts. Our in-depth interviews showed that this primarily concerns projects on indigenous peoples (the Sami) and LGBT+.

Most project proposals in the thematic field of indigenous peoples now focus on

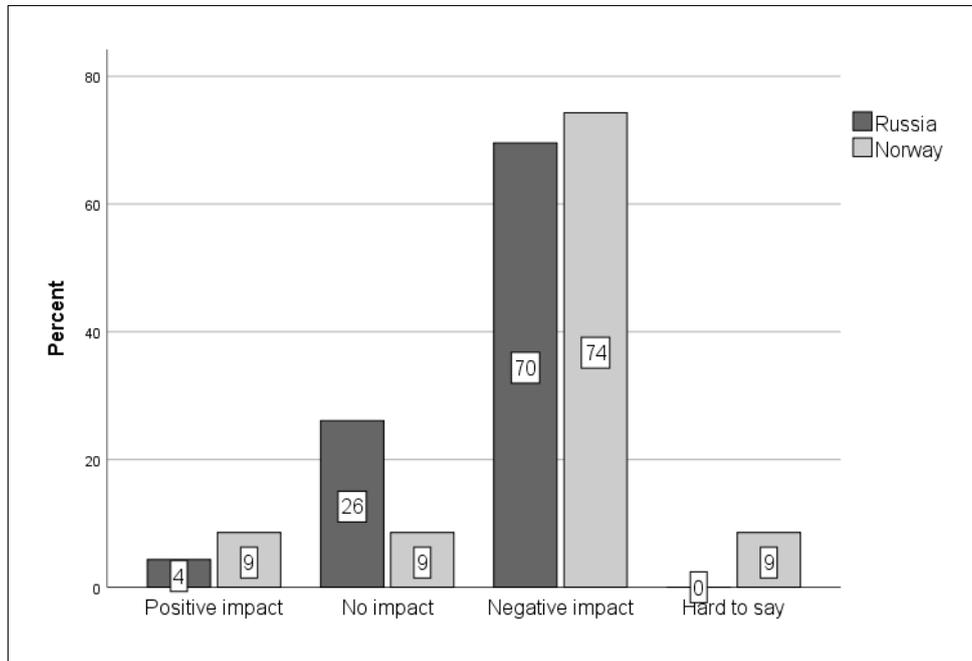


Fig. 9. Assessment of impact of deteriorating bilateral political relations between Russia and Norway on project implementation, by country, %. Questionnaire item: “Have any of the following factors affected project implementation? Bilateral political relations between Norway and Russia.”

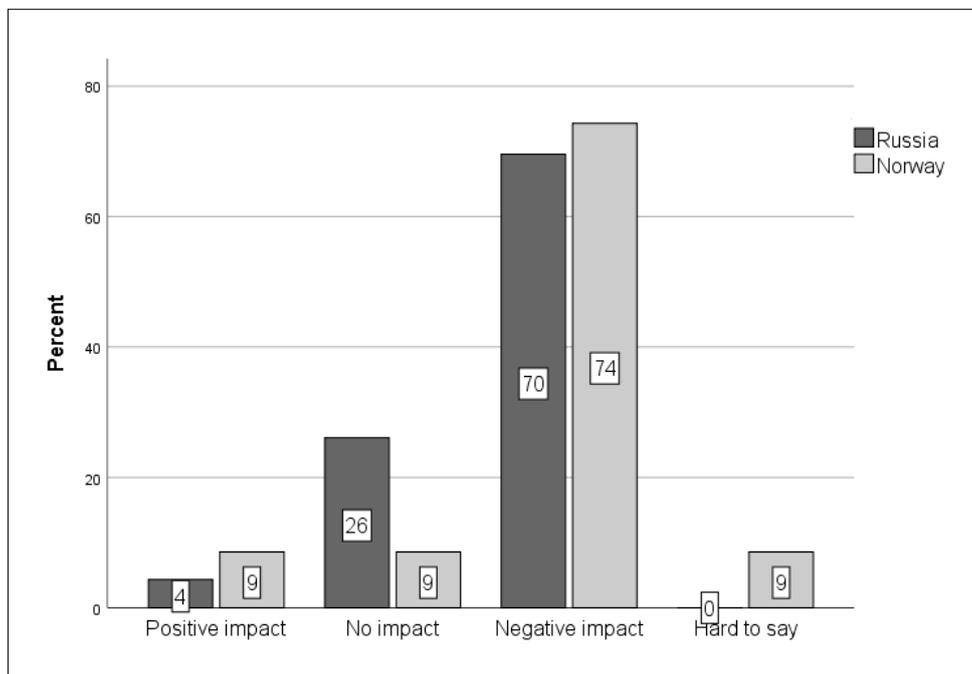


Fig. 10. Assessment of impact of COVID-19 on project implementation, by country, %. Questionnaire item: “Have any of the following factors affected project implementation? The COVID-19 pandemic.”

presumably non-controversial issues, like language preservation, reindeer husbandry, or culinary tourism. Nonetheless, indigenous issues remain potentially controversial in both countries, especially when rights to natural resources are involved. On the Russian side, the institutional representation of indigenous peoples is still quite controversial, and NGO's in this policy area risk having to register as "foreign agents" (Zmyvalova 2020). The fact that the Sami are a cross-border ethnic group adds to the sensitivity of the issue (Berg-Nordlie 2015). In addition, there are internal rivalries among Russian Sami activists and groups. Some of these are particularly relevant for the grant programme because they are linked to side-effects of foreign funding. Norwegian funding of Russian Sami activities in the 1990s was generous. This enabled "gatekeepers" to position themselves, resulting in long-lasting resentment among those who lost out. Also, some pragmatic Russian Sami activists who were prepared to join government-supported platforms for indigenous affairs have gained the impression that this would mean losing prestige among funders and potential partners in the Nordic countries.

The conservative turn in Russian family politics is another possible source of controversy, as it runs counter to trends on the Norwegian side of the border. However, we found that Russia's conservative turn has not led to less focus on gender issues in the project portfolio. On the contrary, gender and equal rights perspectives appear to have been strengthened since 2007: the inclusion of gender and equal rights has increased from being an element in 15 per cent of the projects in 2007 to 30 per cent in 2020.

LGBT+ rights, however, may be considered to have a more serious potential for controversy, but here, too, the grant programme shows results. The Barents Pride festival, officially called the Barents Exchange, was organized in Kirkenes for the first time in 2017, and with funding from the grants programme. This has grown into an annual success co-arranged by groups in Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, Tromsø and Kirkenes—an example of cross-border mutual benefit for the groups involved. The first Barents Pride grant came after the NBS had conducted a risk analysis and also obtained information and advice from the MFA and the Barents offices in Russia. Later, the NBS received comments from representatives of regional authorities in Russia that this arrangement did not deserve support.

Conclusions

As we saw above, talking and writing the Barents Region into existence turned out not to work smoothly. Nonetheless, against the odds, the bilateral Barents people-to-people cooperation funded by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat grant programme has proved capable of surviving. It survived three main contextual phases—the "aid" period of the 1990s, the Russian economic and administrative revival of the early 2000, and then the rivalries between Russia and Euro-Atlantic structures. All three phases have posed specific challenges to the core aims of the programme which are to create trust and people-to-people cooperation.

During the current phase of international rivalry, Russia has become more assertive, culturally conservative and also more centralized, all likely to be disadvantageous to open, regionally based international cooperation. Externally, the events in Crimea since 2014 and the ensuing sanctions further harmed the prospects for a cooperative

atmosphere. Given these developments, we had hypothesized that achievement of the stated objectives of this low-level, trust-promoting people-to-people cooperation would be jeopardized. To check this hypothesis, we compared the NBS grant programme as of 2007 and 2020. We found that the hypothesis could not be supported. The NBS programme was closer to achieving several of its core objectives in 2020 than in 2007, despite the challenges posed to it.

Whereas the belief from the 1990s that a cross-border region could be “talked” into existence failed to take deep-seated differences into account, the NBS has been able to make the region attain a certain level of existence through concrete people-to-people cooperation involving those willing to engage in it. Despite the troubled times, the programme has been able to reduce some of the psychological barriers to people-to-people cooperation listed by Bar Tal and Teichman (2005). The cooperation has become more “personalized” in the sense that partners on one side of the border perceive their partners on the other side as being more like themselves. Participants on both sides of the border who have taken part in Barents projects since they were young and over a certain time span—the so-called “Barents Generation”—epitomise this.

Moreover, our findings show that partners have made steps towards “equalization,” seeing each other “eye-to eye.” Some unfortunate legacies from the 1990s have been overcome, notably the earlier tendency of the Norwegian side to apply a kind of “development aid approach.” In 2007, competence transfer went predominantly from Norway to Russia—now it goes both ways, with even a slight predominance of transfer from Russia to Norway. The high level of mutual trust as well as benefit from project activities, as reflected in the survey and interviews, can be seen as indications of this.

The programme’s “low politics” approach were put under strain due to the increasingly unfavourable context of geopolitical tension and Russian authoritarianism. Although some fields of cooperation were affected by this to the extent that they are hardly “de-securitized” anymore, notably indigenous rights and LGBT+, we find that the project cooperation in these fields between Russian and Norwegian actors were upheld. The number of groups on both sides of the border willing to engage in joint projects did not decrease as a result of geopolitical or other political complications between the two countries.

One explanation why the NBS grant programme was to survive and thrive may be its clear-cut “people approach” in terms of van Houtum’s (2000) classification, where borders are made relevant through people’s behaviour, actions and mindsets, rather than as barriers. Given the security issues between the two states involved here, this approach has its limitations. Nonetheless, people-to-people activists have found it relevant to work together within the limits given.

In short, the programme was successful in its “people approach,” making meaningful practices out of the fact that there is a border. This was possible thanks to what van Houtum calls “the cross-border approach” which is concerned with the structures and dynamics needed to overcome the hindrances that borders create. Important in this regard is the fact that the Norwegian government provided stable funding of the programme since the 1990s, treating it as a goodwill issue in bilateral relations with Russia. One outcome of this stable support is that the NBS was able to develop

into a competence centre for the programme's wide-ranging projects. In interviews, many project owners mentioned that the Secretariat's facilitation had helped them to avoid pitfalls. Indeed, the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and its grant programme has offered structures and dynamics for cross-border people-to-people cooperation to thrive.

The future of the people-to-people collaboration now mostly depends on external factors, i.e. the war in Ukraine, and whether and when there will be a normalisation of Russia's relations with the West, including Norway. At the time of writing the prospects look quite grim, at least for the nearest future. All official collaboration between Norway and Russia has been suspended by Norwegian authorities. However, there is still some limited room for Norwegian actors to collaborate with non-state actors in Russia with financial support from the NBS.

A long period without communication and joint activities is certainly going to make it more complicated to start up again. However, the good relations between the partners who have built up trust in each other over years will make it easier to recommence if, hopefully, more normal collaboration can be resumed in the not too distant future. Preserving the main platforms for such collaboration, the Barents, Arctic and Northern Dimension institutions, would then make resumption of the collaboration with Russia go smoother than if the programme had to start all over again.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank two anonymous reviewers, as well as Elena Dybtsyna at Nord University in Bodø, Norway, who took part in the two evaluations of the grant programme and Marit Jacobsen at the Barents Secretariat.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

None of the authors had any formal or informal links with the NBS when the two evaluations were conducted. At present both authors collaborate with the NBS in the "RE:Barents" project, in which the NBS is one of two non-academic partners.

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Research Council of Norway under grant number [318565].

REFERENCES

-
- Åtland, K. & Kabanenko, I. (2020). "Russia and its Western neighbours. A comparative study of the security situation in the Black, Baltic and Barents Sea regions," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72:2, pp. 286–313.
- Barents Summit (2013). "Declaration on the 20th anniversary of the Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation (Kirkenes, Norway, 3–4 June 2013)"; <https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/ud/vedlegg/nordomrc3a-5dene/barentssamarbeidet/barentssummitdeclaration2013.pdf>; accessed on 8 March 2023.
- Barentssekretariatet (2022). "Våre nye retningslinjer og vilkår for tilskudd fra Barentssekretariatet, revidert april 2022" ["Our new guidelines and conditions for grants from the Barents Secretariat, revised April 2022"]; <https://barents.no/nb/barentssekretariatet-ender-kravene-til-prosjekter>; accessed on 8 March 2023
- Bar Tal, D. & Teichman, Y. (2005). *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict. Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berg-Nordlie, M. (2015). "Two centuries of Russian Sámi Policy. Arrangements for autonomy and participation seen in light of imperial, Soviet and federal indigenous minority policy 1822–2014," *Acta Borealia*, 32:1, pp. 40–67.

- Bogdanova, E. (2017). "NGOs under state regulation. Strengths and weaknesses of Russian civil society," *Laboratorium*, 9:3, pp. 5–10.
- Browning, C.S. (2003). "The region-building approach revisited. The continued othering of Russia in discourses of region-building in the European North," *Geopolitics*, 8:1, pp. 45–71.
- Brunet-Jailly, E. (2011). "Special section. Borders, borderlands and theory. An introduction," *Geopolitics*, 16:1, pp. 1–6.
- Dellenbrant, J.Å., & Olsson, M.-O. (1994). "Regionalization and security in the European north," in *The Barents Region. Security and Economic Development in the European North*, eds. J.Å. Dellenbrant, & M.-O. Olsson, Umeå: Cerum, pp. 9–17.
- Eriksson, J. (1995). "Security in the Barents Region. Interpretations and implications of the Norwegian Barents initiative," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 30:3, pp. 259–286.
- Goldin, V. (2015). "Barentssamarbeidet" ['The Barents cooperation'], in *Naboer i frykt og forventning* ['Neighbours in fear and expectation'], ed. S. Holtmark, Oslo: Pax Forlag, pp. 615–627.
- Gorbachev, M. (1987). "The speech in Murmansk at the ceremonial meeting on the occasion of the presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star Medal to the city of Murmansk, October 1, 1987," Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, pp. 23–31; https://www.barentsinfo.fi/docs/Gorbachev_speech.pdf; accessed on 8 March 2023.
- Herzog, S. & Hai, A. (2005). *The Power of Possibility. The Role of People-to-People Programs in the Current Israeli-Palestinian Reality*, Herzliya : Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Hoffman, S. (1966). "Obstinate or obsolete. The fate of the nation state and the case of Western Europe," *Daedalus*, 95:3, pp. 862–915.
- Holm-Hansen, J. (2023). "Norsk russlandspolitikk under Søreide" ['Norway's Russia policy under Søreide'], *Internasjonal Politikk*, 81:1, pp. 49–59.
- Holm-Hansen, J., Aasland, Aa. & Dybstyna, E. (2008). *Building Neighbourhood Evaluation of the NBS's Grant Programme*, Oslo: NIBR; <https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12199/5655/2008-4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=>; accessed on 10 Aug. 2023.
- Holm-Hansen, J., Aasland, Aa. & Dybstyna, E. (2020). *Still Building Neighbourhood. Mid-term Evaluation of the Norwegian NBS's Grant Programme*, Oslo: OsloMet; <https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12199/6465/2020-24.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=>; accessed on 10 Aug. 2023.
- Holst, J.J. (1994). "The Barents Region institutions, cooperations and prospects," in *The Barents Region. Cooperation in Arctic Europe*, eds. O.S. Stokke & O. Tunander, London: Sage Publications, pp. 11–24.
- Hønneland, G. (1998). "Identity formation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 33:3, pp. 277–297.
- Hønneland, G. (2010). "East-West collaboration in the European North. Structures and perceptions," *International Journal. Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 65:4, pp. 837–850.
- Hønneland, G. (2017). *Arctic Euphoria and International High North Politics*, London: Palgrave.
- Jonassen, T. (2022). "Grenseboerbeviset ti år: – Vi har ingenting å feire" ['The local border traffic permit is ten years old: – No reason to celebrate'], *High North News* 13 April; <https://www.highnorthnews.com/nb/grenseboerbeviset-ti-ar-vi-har-ingenting-feire>; accessed on 5 March 2023.
- Klatt, M. & Wassenberg, B. (2017). "Secondary foreign policy. Can local and regional cross-border cooperation function as a tool for peace-building and reconciliation?" *Regional & Federal Studies*, 27:3, pp. 205–218.
- Kortukov, D. (2020). "'Sovereign Democracy' and the politics of ideology in Putin's Russia," *Russian Politics*, 5:1, pp. 81–104.
- Landriault, M., Payette, J.-F. & Roussel, S. (2021). "Introduction," in *Mapping Arctic Paradiplomacy. Limits and Opportunities for Sub-National Actors in Arctic Governance*, eds. M. Landriault, J.-F. Payette & S. Roussel, London: Routledge, pp. 1–16.
- Laruelle, M. (2020). "Making sense of Russia's illiberalism," *Journal of Democracy*, 31:3, pp. 115–129.
- Lewis, D.G. (2020). *Russia's New Authoritarianism. Putin and the Politics of Order*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Loughlin, J. (2019). "Regions in Europe and Europe of the regions. The origins of Regional and Federal Studies," *Regional and Federal Studies*, 31:1, pp. 25–30.
- Mikhailova, E. (2016). "Endogennye problemy prigranichnogo sotrudnichestva 'gorodov-bliznetsov'" ['Endogenous challenges for cross-border cooperation between "twin-cities"'], *Regional'nye issledovaniya*, 3:53, pp. 109–117.
- Neumann, I.B. (1994). "A region-building approach to Northern Europe," *Review of International Studies*, 20:1, pp. 53–74.

- Østhagen, A. (2020). "The good, the bad and the ugly. Three levels of Arctic geopolitics," in *The Arctic and World Order*, eds. K. Spohr & D.S. Hamilton, Brookings Institution Press: Washington, D.C., pp. 357–378.
- Regjeringen ['The Government'] (2011). *Meld. St. 7 (2011–2012). Nordområdene. Visjon og virkemidler* ['Report to the Parliament No 7 (2011–2012) The High North. Vision and tools']; <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld-st-7-20112012/id663433/>; accessed on 8 March 2023.
- Regjeringen ['The Government'] (2020). *Meld. St. 9 (2020–2021). Mennesker, muligheter og norske interesser i nord* ['Report to the Parliament No 9 (2020–2021). People, opportunities and Norwegian interests in the North']; <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-9-20202021/id2787429/>; accessed on 8 March 2023.
- Robertsen, T. (2014). *Banebrytende Barentssamarbeid. Fra mistro til vennskap* ['Pioneering Barents cooperation. From distrust to friendship'], Vadsø: Robertsen (published by author).
- Schumacher, T. & Bouris, D. (2016). "The 2011 revised European neighbourhood policy. Continuity and change in EU foreign policy," in *The Revised European Neighbourhood Policy*, eds. D. Bouris & T. Schumacher, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 1–33.
- Shabaev, Yu., Zherebtsov, I., Kim, H.Y. & Kim, H.T. (2016). "Pomors, Pomor'e, and the Russian North. A symbolic space in cultural and political context," *Sibirica*, 15:2, pp. 73–102.
- Shrestha, Ch.L. (2019). "Promoting regional people-to-people exchange and cooperation among regional think-tanks," in *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Building The Community Of Common Destiny*, eds. W. Linggui & Zh. Jianglin Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, pp. 143–152.
- Stokke, O.S. (2015). "Institutional complexity in Arctic governance—curse or blessing?" in *Handbook of the Politics of the Arctic*, eds. L. C. Jensen & G. Hønneland, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 328–351.
- Strang, J. (2016). *Nordic Political and Economic Cooperation. Context, History and Outlook*, Forum Paper (AEMI), Asean Studies Centre; <https://www.asean-aemi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/AEMI-Forum-November-2015-Strang-Feb2016.pdf>; accessed on 9 March 2023.
- Tulaeva, S., Tysiachniuk, M. & Henry, L. (2017). "Strategies of environmental NGOs in the context of the law on foreign agents. Games with formality," *Laboratorium*, 9:3, pp. 18–43.
- van Houtum, H. (2000). "III European perspectives on borderlands. An overview of European geographical research on borders and border regions," *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 15:1, pp. 56–83.
- Zmyvalova, E. (2020). "Human rights of indigenous small-numbered peoples in Russia. Recent developments," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 11, pp. 334–359.
- Zysk, K. (2015). "Forsvars- og sikkerhetspolitikken. Nye muligheter, ny usikkerhet" ['Defense and security policies. New opportunities, new insecurity'], in *Naboer i frykt og forventning* ['Neighbours in fear and expectation'], ed. S. Holtsmark, Oslo: Pax Forlag, pp. 555–564.

AUTHORS

Jørn Holm-Hansen holds a PhD in political science and is a senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) at Oslo Metropolitan University. He currently leads the research project "Russian Policies of Influence in the Populist-Pragmatic Nexus" and has carried out several studies of Norwegian-Russian project cooperation.

jornhh@oslomet.no

Aadne Aasland holds a PhD in Russian & East European Studies and is a senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) at Oslo Metropolitan University. He currently leads the research project "Replay or renew? Learning from 20+ years of Norwegian-Russian collaboration on health and social welfare in the Barents region (RE:Barents)" and has conducted research on Russian social welfare over several decades.

aadnea@oslomet.no