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# “Chicken Is Not a Bird—Kirkenes Is Not Abroad”

Borders and Territories in the Perception of the Population in a Russian-Norwegian Borderland

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on the Russian-Norwegian borderland and its development in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. In 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the border was opened for communication in both ways, and since then its meaning has undergone significant changes that have reshaped the whole territory. My argument is that there are nowadays a considerable number of people in the borderland whose “own” territory is not limited any more by the state border, but includes both Russian and Norwegian territories as parts of a unified personal space, which is neither Russia, nor Norway to the full extent. Practical, operative space has expanded for the local people who actively use border-related resources in their everyday life. Local identity has changed, and the broadening of operative space has led to the formation of new life strategies and social mobility in the region. The idea of a unified cross-border space is now implemented both on the individual level, as a result of extensive cross-border contacts, and on the level of political and administrative decisions and official discourses. Furthermore, political and cultural elites of the region are actively constructing the concept of the Euro-Arctic Barents Region as an identity region.

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**KEYWORDS** Russian-Norwegian borderland, Barents region, borders, local identity, immigration

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## Introduction

Borders of “own” territory exist wherever human beings live. They can differ in scale and in nature: we can talk about the borders of the state,

region, district, neighbourhood; borders of one's apartment or a room; borders of a village, a city, a community, a courtyard, or a farm. Borders can be administratively established, or be part of tradition. As for the Russian-Norwegian borderland, there is a state border that shapes the national territories, but there are also other borders there: cultural, psychological, or symbolic ones. All of them influence local identity and social practices of the inhabitants.

The article focuses on the formation and functions of the borders in the region, which is conventionally called the Russian-Norwegian borderland, as well as on their influence on everyday life and attitudes of local people. It will also deal with how inhabitants of the borderland today comprehend "their own" territory, where they set its limits, and what meaning they give to the state border between Norway and Russia. Of course, there are two different stories at the two sides of the border that are interdependent but require individual attention. This article places the major emphasis on the Russian population of the borderland.

The notion of border is also closely interrelated with the idea of local, or regional identity, which is an important aspect of social identity and implies personal feeling of belonging to a place or territory occupied by the group. This local identity is not fixed in time or space, as territories are not eternal, and borders are subject to change (Paasi 2007: 29). Political boundaries can contribute significantly to where psychological boundaries are drawn (Llamas 2007: 582), but they are not the only factor. The borders of what is perceived as one's "own" place can shift depending on various aspects of inter-group relations, everyday practices, cultural and linguistic patterns, and official discourse.

## Data Collection

The article is based on empirical material collected during fieldwork in Kirkenes, Norway, and Murmansk, Russia, in 2006–2008. Fieldwork in Kirkenes was arranged twice in 2006 and 2007 with the support of the Barents Institute, and once in Murmansk in 2008. The whole period of work took four months. The major type of material that I use in the article is semi-structured interviews with Russians living in Murmansk and regularly travelling across the border, and with Russians and Norwegians living in Kirkenes. All interviews were held in either Russian or Norwegian, and the abstracts used in the article were translated into English by the author. Another type of material that I resort to consists of documents, including Russian and Norwegian local newspapers and web-publications.

## History of the Borderland

The Russian-Norwegian borderland, which is the object of the present research, is a rather new phenomenon, though this border has existed for a long time. Until the twentieth century the region had been only sparsely populated, and when the border between Norway and Russia was set in 1826, the population of the Norwegian municipality of Sør-Varanger consisted of only 290 people (Wikan 1980: 31). The Russian part of the Russian-Norwegian borderland also remained sparsely populated until the First World War, when the construction of Murmansk railway was started in 1914 and Murmansk was founded in 1916. Soon after that, in 1920, after Finland and the Soviet Union signed the Peace treaty of Tartu, the Petsamo region and adjacent territories up to the coast of the Barents Sea became Finnish territory. As a result, Norway and Russia did not share a common border until 1944, when the territory that belonged to Finland since 1920, became again a part of the Soviet Union. During all this period the border between Finland and the Soviet Union and then Norway and the Soviet Union was closed, which made cross-border communication impossible. In 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the communication across the border became possible, a new period of Russian-Norwegian cross-border contacts started and from here on it is possible to discuss the contemporary stage of relations and the formation of the Russian-Norwegian borderland, understood as a territory located near the state border and characterized by interaction between its inhabitants and by cultural and economic exchange between them.

The question of borders and territories in the Russian-Norwegian borderland is especially important today, since their meaning and role have undergone dramatic changes since the early 1990s. For decades, the border between the Soviet Union and Norway had been a symbolic end of the world for people living on the two sides of it, which was typical of any Soviet border (Brednikova & Voronkov 1999). Their practical experience very rarely expanded beyond this border, which clearly set the limits of their “own” space. The situation started to change after the Soviet Union collapsed and it became much easier to cross the border. The perception of the border and attitudes towards it shared by some groups of the local population have been transformed in the process of crossing the border and developing the territory on the other, “strange,” side of it, which has resulted in the formation of a new space, which we call the Russian-Norwegian borderland, and which is neither Russia nor Norway to the full extent.

This space is not equally important to all inhabitants of the territory. Important criteria of the formation of various social communities in the borderland are the individuals' attitudes towards the border, the choice of certain strategies of life that include or do not include the border, use or

do not use border related resources (Brednikova & Voronkov 1999). These choices lead to the formation of a personal space that can differ from one social community to another. There are two co-existing levels of space in the Russian-Norwegian border territories: (1) independent Russian and Norwegian territories, lying close to the border but clearly separated, (2) a new space (*borderland*) that includes western parts of the Murmansk region in Russia and Sør-Varanger municipality in Norway. These two levels of space exist simultaneously and their actualization depends on individual attitudes to the border and personal everyday practices. It is the second level of the space, *the borderland*, that is the main focus of the present article, and the aim is to prove that it really does exist, and to show how its existence influences the everyday life of people.

### The Borderland since 1991

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, changes that took place affected people living on both sides of the border. First of all, it resulted in a change of the social space, its enlargement for both Norwegians and Russians who started developing the territory that had been previously closed to them.

These first contacts across the border were usually chaotic, and often illegal, or on the verge of being legal, leading to mutual ethnic stigmatization and conflicts. While Russian and Norwegian authorities and politicians were establishing cooperation, idealizing common history and discussing a bright common future, people in the borderland faced a new reality that they had to adjust their lives to.

The 1990s were characterized by large social and economic crises in Russia, and the Russian-Norwegian border was marked at that time by a large socio-economic gap, which made the border an important economic resource for the local people. The usage of the border as a resource is common for a lot of border regions (see, for example, Brednikova & Voronkov 1999), and crossing the border to sell some goods for a better price or buy cheaper products or services also became a usual practice for the Russian-Norwegian borderland. After the border was opened, the first people to develop the new territory were various "traders." There were street vendors who sold goods of every sort and kind in the streets, smugglers who illegally sold vodka and cigarettes, and prostitutes.

Active street sales started in Northern Norway in 1992, when over 30,000 Russians visited Norway (61,191 border crossings both ways). The peak of the visits fell on September and October 1992. Russian who came to Norway sold various goods from matreshka dolls to Soviet army symbols, cut-glass ware, linen, etc. They were selling their goods just in the streets of towns. At first this trade attracted interest from the local people, but soon

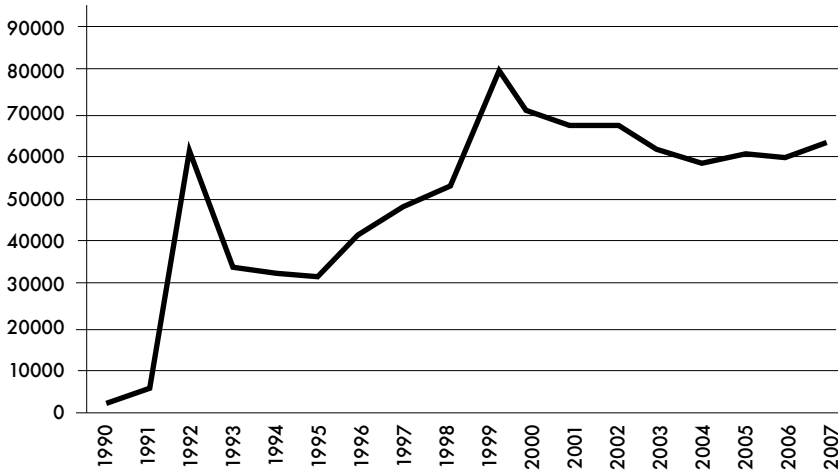


Fig. 1. Number of border crossings at Storskog by Russian citizens (the data provided by The Norwegian Border Commissioner in Sør-Varanger).

its scope and negative consequences caused resentment. Already in November 1992 Norwegian authorities made an attempt to stop the street trade and the flow of Russians to Norway. The police department in Sør-Varanger municipality announced that the street trade was forbidden unless vendors had obtained a special license. This announcement was also published in some local newspapers in the Murmansk region. This new regulation led to a sharp decrease in the number of Russians coming to Norway through the Storskog border station: there were over 12,000 border crossings in October, and already in November the figures dropped down to only 4,000, while in December they decreased to as low as 2,000.

At the same time, during the autumn of 1992, a show trial for drug smuggling was organized against Igor Zadorozhny from Murmansk. The trial got a broad coverage in both Russian and Norwegian mass media. Zadorozhny's barrister accused the Norwegian mass media of using the trial for the spread of the "anti-Russian campaign." He said, in particular:

One of the arguments against Russian tourism was the following: The Russian mafia brings drugs to Norway. They needed this trial as a confirmation. During the four months that Igor was held in their prison, local mass media were making good use of the situation (*Polyarnaya Pravda*, 2 December 1992, my translation).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that illegal trade stopped at that moment. Here is the fragment of an interview with a Russian woman living in Murmansk:

Respondent: I started going to Norway in September 1994 and went there every week.

Interviewer: Why did you go there?

Respondent: To sell alcohol and some souvenirs, though it was forbidden. All groups went there to sell alcohol, first of all. (Interview with a Russian woman, field diary 2008.)

For some people in Murmansk, the opportunity to go to Norway and earn money there in one way or another was the only source of income and maintenance of the family in the 1990s.

Norway maintained us. We survived owing to it. Went there with all these vodka bottles... There was competition, I must say! [...] My son was 5 years old then, and I can now say that we survived because I sold these bottles in Norway. If I could get 2,000 Norwegian kroner, it was 8,000 roubles, and you could really live on that money then. (Interview with a Russian woman, field diary 2008.)

Another aspect of the cross-border contacts of the 1990s, closely related to the smuggling and illegal trade, was so-called Russian prostitution in Finnmark. Russians who came to Finnmark at that time were mainly women, and their trips were organized by travel agencies, who brought them for weekends to various camping places situated in the proximity of the border. The situation was probably more complicated than it is usually labelled as prostitution. These groups consisted of various women and represented a mixture of trade, smuggling, prostitution, as well as looking for a man to get married, or genuine tourism. Nevertheless, those women who came to these weekend trips were generally perceived as prostitutes by the local Norwegian population and were similarly presented in the Norwegian mass media. The year 1997 saw an extensive growth of attention to this problem in the national media after some spontaneous demonstrations against Russian prostitution were organized at that time in several towns in Northern Norway (Stenvoll 2002: 147). These camping trips ceased soon after 2000, but the problem of prostitution and illegal alcohol selling did not disappear at that point as well, but has become less conspicuous and topical in the public sphere.

It was also in the early 1990s that the first Russians settled down in Kirkenes. The first Russians came there as specialists who had obtained a job there. They also brought in their families. In the course of several years, the number of Russians living in Kirkenes increased significantly (see Fig 2).

Russian trade, tourism, and immigration led to a change of the meaning of the border. It is possible to say that the state border between Russia



Fig. 2. Increase in the Russian population in Sør-Varanger municipality, Norway (*Sør-Varanger Avis*, Snart Helg, 5 May 2008, p. 5, with the reference to Statistics Norway).

and Norway does not mean the end of their “own” space for people living close to it anymore, and crossing the border does not mean leaving a familiar place and encountering a strange environment. Practical, operative space has expanded for the local population who actively use border-related resources.

For the people living in Murmansk and the Murmansk region, their “own” space includes today Kirkenes, or, more precisely, its “Russian” part, which has several unofficial Russian names, the most popular one probably being *Kirsanovka* (it sounds like a typical name of a small place in Russia). We can reconstruct this change in the perception of space on the basis of the analysis of everyday practices of people and the popular discourse about the state border. Kirkenes is the place where people from Murmansk go several times a year for shopping, because prices there are lower and the quality of goods is better (at least for those who really believe in it). In addition, Kirkenes is a kind of transport point. People use the airport of Kirkenes to go for vacations or business trips. This route is considered as a faster, cheaper and more comfortable one than the way via Moscow or St. Petersburg. International cooperation is mostly concentrated to Kirkenes as well, and various meetings and negotiations take place there due to the geographical proximity of the town to the Russian border.

Thus, it is obvious that Kirkenes is not part of a foreign territory for people in Murmansk today. A popular joke that one can hear in Murmansk says that “chicken is not a bird—Kirkenes is not abroad,” and in recent years it also reflects the real developments. In a 1999 Murmansk newspaper arti-

cle, a journalist writes about some conflicts between Russians and Norwegians, and ends the article with the following words:

We are destined if not to love each other, but at least to be tolerant and friendly to each other. After all, Kirkenes is not a foreign place to us in Murmansk, and Murmansk is a close city to those who live in Kirkenes (*Polyarnaya pravda*, 3 November 1999, my translation).

Several interviews that I have taken in Murmansk confirm this statement:

If you have been to Kirkenes, you have been abroad, in Norway, if you look at the map. But... there are so many Russians there, and you do not feel that you are abroad. You use another currency, cross the border, and go through all these formalities, but you still do not have a feeling of being abroad. You feel at home there. (Interview with a Russian woman, Murmansk, 2008.)

Kirkenes has got a new name already: *Kirsanovka* or *Kirik*. It is a kind of a small Russian village. We have there the Kirkenes Center, a shopping mall. But everyone calls it *Volna*. Everyone says: "Let's go to the *Volna*, buy some food," for example, because we have a shopping mall here in Murmansk that is called *Volna*. There are very many such things that are Norwegian originally but Russians perceive them as something of their "own." (Interview with a Russian woman, Murmansk, 2008.)

The changes in the perception of space can also be traced by the analysis of acculturation patterns chosen by Russian settled in Kirkenes. Interviews and previous research works provide the basis for the assumption that Russians who moved to Kirkenes in the 1990s perceived themselves as immigrants and arranged their lives accordingly; they were mainly oriented towards local values and strove for assimilation into Norwegian society. A lot of Russian women spoke Norwegian to their children and declined to have a Russian assistant for their children at kindergarten, and they turned down the right of their children to receive instruction in their mother tongue at school.

This strategy of behaviour became apparent in all everyday practices, rather than only in the language choice. A Russian journalist describes her impressions of Kirkenes in 1993:

I have later met some Russian women who left Russia some time ago in the firm belief that they would get happily married there. They all had this watchful look, unwillingness to keep in touch with other Russians, and the desire to merge with the crowd and be as invisible as possible.

[...] One evening I noticed one of the Kirkenes Russian wives in the central street of the town. She rocked the pram in the company of some Norwegian mums and was telling something to them, obviously not in Russian. I waved my hand to her, but got only a slight nod back. She did not want to demonstrate her Russian origin once more before her new friends (*Komsomolets Zapolyariya*, 24 July 1993, my translation).

In 2001, the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*<sup>1</sup> published an article about Kirkenes, titled “Lille Murmansk” [‘Little Murmansk’]. This article included an interview with a Russian woman who had lived in Kirkenes for six years:

I never speak Russian with Isabel Monica [her daughter], even when we are alone. I always speak Norwegian. It would be stupid to live in a Russian way in Kirkenes. My daughter has Norwegian friends and she watches Norwegian programmes on TV (*Dagbladet*, 28 October 2001, my translation).

These days it is still possible to observe this way of life in Kirkenes, but it has become much less typical. Russians in Kirkenes prefer today to choose other cultural strategies. One of the key definitions of the way of life of Russians in Kirkenes—“they live as if they were still in Russia:” they watch Russian TV, read Russian books, eat Russian food, and communicate mainly with their Russian friends. Unlike in typical immigrant communities, this type of behaviour is focused not on the closed immigrant community itself, but rather on Russia as a whole, which is revealed in various aspects of everyday life. Russians who leave for Kirkenes do not destroy their social networks in their mother land, they retain them and even broaden them by new contacts they get in Kirkenes. Some of them live in Kirkenes, but go to Russia every weekend to see their families and friends. Others wait for these trips “home” in order to visit a doctor or a hairdresser. One woman said about her son who went to high school in Kirkenes, and was also working there, that he was in Murmansk almost every weekend: “He says that he earns money in Kirkenes to go to bars and discos in Murmansk.” Some of the Russians prefer to stay in Kirkenes and not to move, for example, to Oslo or some other larger cities, only because of its proximity to Russia.

These changes in the perception of space and importance of borders affect and even shape the local identities of people. Today, immigration from Murmansk to Kirkenes does not mean immigration in the real sense of the word. I would argue that a lot of Russians who live in Kirkenes today do not perceive themselves as immigrants, because Kirkenes does not exceed the bounds of the territory that people in Murmansk can comprehend as their own territory, and it is not certain that it is a “strange” territory, as, for example, Oslo or even Tromsø certainly are.

## From Borderland to the Barents Region

The idea of a unified cross-border space in the region is being realized not only on the individual level, but, first of all, on the level of political and administrative decisions and official discourses. In other words, it is actively constructed by political and cultural elites.

The borders of what is perceived as one's "own" space can shift depending on various aspects of inter-group relations. When people experience the changes of the space they are used to accept as their "own," they are likely to establish new borders. In the case of the Russian-Norwegian borderland, there is a good alternative, created by political will, that is the Euro-Arctic Barents region. This project, started some 15 years ago, attempted to create a new space, in which the periphery becomes the centre, and the meaningful psychological and symbolic borders move from the state of Russia, which had been a threat and the end of the "normal" world for decades, to the regional borders within several states. The Barents region has offered people a new space, a new local identity, and a new image of "the other."

From the very beginning the Barents region was planned by the Norwegian authorities as an identity region, which can be defined as "an area where the population has a specific awareness of *us* inside the region, as opposed to *them* outside" (Hønneland 1998: 279). This strategy appears first of all in the political and administrative decisions and in the official discourse. There are a lot of projects that use the name of the Barents region. We can read about the "Barents jazz area," or "Barents TV." The latter one is especially interesting:

The project team is going to talk about the Barents Region in its cultural, spiritual, emotional entity through the eyes of its inhabitants. [...] the topics of the films would be the major human values and realities of everyday life like love, freedom, music, food, sport, religion, environment, landscapes, children etc. Obviously, the BTV mission is to open the Barents Region in its existing and developing identity to the outer world. But to a much greater extent it may influence the perception of common interests, values and aspirations of the people living in the High North.<sup>2</sup>

It is questionable whether this identity construction project has been successful. On the one hand, the Barents region has become a reality for a group of people. On the other hand, this group is relatively small, and the Barents region is still a vague notion for the majority of its citizens. We can surmise that the idea of the Barents region has gained more popularity in Kirkenes than in Murmansk. At the same time, people living in Murmansk, compared to those living in Kirkenes, use the border resources to a greater

extent in their everyday practices. They do not usually bind these activities with the Barents region concept, but make some of its basic ideas reality.

While the existence of so-called *Barents identity*, widely discussed in some research and public discourse, remains questionable, it is obvious that the opening of the border has changed people's experience and perception of themselves and the surrounding world. The local identity of the borderland population has changed, and the broadening of operative space has led to the formation of new life strategies and social mobility which will influence the development of the local community for years to come.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The change in the behaviour of Russians living in Kirkenes can be explained by various reasons. But the major one is, probably, the changes that took place in the perception of place and borders. Russians who came to Kirkenes in the 1990s found themselves in an unknown strange environment. Today the situation is different: the decrease in the psychological importance of the state border led to a change of the symbolic borders of their "own" space.

<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian Barents Secretariat: Barents Discovery in the New Film Series. <http://www.barents.no/barents-discovery-in-the-new-film-series-.4466190-41594.html>; access date 7 april 2008.

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