

Les Donnees Regionales: Rivalites et Cooperations

The Barents Cooperation – region-building and new security challenges

By

Rune Rafaelsen, general secretary of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat in Kirkenes, Norway

Thank you for the invitation -

Witnessing the enormous interest in the High North these days, we should know that this region has been in focus for centuries! Let me illustrate my point by showing you an example which was initiated by the duke of Orleans, who in a way was one of the forerunners of the Barents Cooperation 200 years ago:

The 2 year “Rescherche” Expedition, launched by France in the year 1838 towards the Nordic countries, Spitzbergen and the White Sea, remains one of the most memorable explorations ever bound for “The High North”. The principal goal of the expedition was to accomplish great scientific work, and La Recherche resulted in the publication of a series of articles and reports. However, the most remarkable result is a series of pictures portraying landscapes, monuments, villages, life of the population and of individuals. This collection must be regarded as a quite extraordinary cultural and historical legacy.

La Recherche was eagerly supported by the current French king, Louis Philippe. Back in 1795, being the young duke of Orléans, he became acquainted with the High North himself. Travelling incognito, probably to get away from the French Revolutionaries who had recently beheaded his father, he visited this region. He must have kept good memories from his journey, since he 40 years later decided to support the Recherche Expedition- slides

The Barents Euro-Arctic Region which in terms of land territory is one of the biggest international region-building projects in Europe, was established in 1993 to meet the new security challenges following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the opening up of the borders between East and West. Stretching over major parts of Northwest Russia and three Nordic countries, the region bridges areas, which for decades were heavily influenced by high Cold War tensions and deep social, economic and political cleavages. With the formal establishment of the Barents Cooperation, the involved countries signaled an important shift from hard security priorities to an alternative and diversified security approach, which included emphasis on regional political cooperation, cross-border human contacts and the formation of common regional identities.

The Barents Cooperation has become an important contribution to rapprochement in the High North and a platform for improved cross-border relations. How can these experiences be used to improve general East-West relations in the North of Europe, as well as more generally in other regions with closed or troubled borders?

In the years to come the huge natural resource potential of the North will become object of increasing focus from the international oil and gas industry. How will new challenges and possibilities in the wake of this development influence the Barents Cooperation as region-building project?

The Barents initiative

The Barents Region was formally established in January 1993 after an initiative from then Norwegian Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg. The participants at the founding conference expressed their conviction that “expanded cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region will contribute substantially to stability and progress in the area and in Europe as a whole”. They also “saw the Barents cooperation initiative as part of the process of evolving European cooperation and integration”.

The security aspect was essential behind the Barents initiative. Murmansk Oblast, being the host region for the powerful Northern Fleet, was one of the heaviest militarized areas in Europe. Norway, located just about 200 km west of the city of Murmansk, was the only NATO country with a common land border with the Russian Federation. In addition, Norway has huge common marine borders with Russia.

Norway was the country, which was the driving force in the initiation of the Barents Cooperation. In this process also relations to the EU were of major importance. The official establishment of the cooperation came immediately after the establishment of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and in the heat of a Norwegian government campaign for EU membership in a 1994 referendum. In one way, therefore, the Barents Region initiative can be seen as a Norwegian contribution to the ongoing regionalization processes in Europe, as well as a move intended to sweeten EU membership to a skeptical population in the north of Norway.

The region today comprises of thirteen administrative entities in four countries; Russia, Norway, Finland and Sweden, covering a land area of 1 755 800 square kilometers, stretching from the Urals to the Norwegian Sea.¹ About 5,9 million people inhabit the region. The structures of the cooperation include two political levels, the *Barents Council*, where ministers and government officials assemble, and the *Barents Regional Council*, where politicians and officials from the respective regions meet. The strong emphasis of political regional cooperation has made the Barents structures quite unique in European East-West cooperation with Russia.

Main focus in the practical cooperation is on trade and industry, transport, energy, environment, resource management, health, education and culture.

Dividing lines

While military tensions today are at a low level, the region remains strongly divided with regard to social and economic development level. These divides have widened since the breakup of the Soviet Union. While per capita GDP in the Nordic countries are between 33,000 EUR (Norway) and 24,000 EUR (Finland, Sweden), it is in Russia about 8000 EUR (2004). In the Russian part of the Barents Region there are also major internal differences. Thus, while average monthly salaries in the oil-rich Nenets Autonomous Okrug in 2003 were almost 17,000 RUR (530 EUR), they were only 6000 RUR (188 EUR) in the Republic of Karelia. Also inside the respective federal subjects social and economic divides are huge. In the Komi Republic alone, the income gap between the richest ten percent of the regional population and the poorest ten percent is as much as 18,2 times, - the highest of all the federal subjects in Northwest Russia.

In addition to the social and economic cleavages, the regional cooperation also struggles with high language and cultural barriers.

¹ The region includes: Murmansk Oblast, Republic of Karelia, Arkhangelsk Oblast, Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Komi Republic (Russia), Finnmark county, Troms county, Nordland county (Norway), Norrbotten county, Västerbotten county (Sweden), Lapland county, Oulo county and Kainuu county (Finland)

Barents people-to-people

The Barents Cooperation embodies the idea that increased cross-border contacts between humans and institutions will eventually improve general East-West relations in the region. Region-building processes are used as a security policy approach, - as a way to promote peace and stability. After 12 year of official Barents Cooperation, how well do people know each other across the borders today?

Although the general knowledge about each other remains modest, much has still been achieved considering the relatively short span since the opening of the border. Researcher Geir Hønneland believes that the extensive human contacts across the borders already today have resulted in the emergence of a “Barents generation”, at least in the areas close to the East-West border.² There is reason to believe that progressed common decision-making processes, increasing cross-border traveling, business cooperation and common projects, will continue to improve general East-West relations in the region.

Cross-border movements

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the number of border crossings between East and West in the region has boomed. In 1990, about 8000 people crossed the 196 km border between Norway and Russia. In year 2000 the number had increased to 131,000.³ Figures about the number of people crossing the much longer Finnish-Russian border (1340 km) show the same tendency with 1,3 million people crossing the border in 1991 and 6,1 million border crossings in 2002.⁴

Cross-border traveling still remains strictly regulated by visa arrangements. The Norwegian Barents Secretariat's study shows that 19,3 percent of the Russian respondents have been in the neighboring Norwegian town of Kirkenes.⁵ Asked whether they would visit Kirkenes if the visa regulations were simplified, as much as 69,2 percent of the respondents who had not been across the border, responded positively.

Visa regulations between Russia and the Schengen-zone are not surprisingly the main reason for hampered cross-border movements. More flexible arrangements for East-West traveling would significantly facilitate more contacts, cooperation and growth in the border areas.

Russia and border policies

With its 20,000 kilometer long land border, the Russian Federation faces numerous states with a major diversity of social and economic development levels, political systems and cultural specifics. In the Soviet period the external borders of the country were object to strict regulations on all traveling. In today's Russia, the growing power of internationalization exposes Russia's external border to surging cross-border movement of people and goods, as well as information and ideas. This situation facilitates the development of cross-border cooperation in Russian border areas, but is far from seen as an unambiguously positive trend by the federal government.

To what extents should Russia promote or prevent the regions' direct contacts with foreign powers? The question is about as ancient as Russia itself. Moscow has always struggled to balance the federal authorities' need for control over the regions with the regions' need for freedom to develop. In the ongoing debate in Russia about the federal structure of the country, the question remains highly relevant.

On the one hand, President Vladimir Putin has positively worded international cooperation in border regions as compatible with the country's national security objectives. In a speech to the Russian Security Council 30 September 2003 he said: "I want to stress: the principal aim of Russia's border policies is to effectively safeguard national security. At the same time, these policies should contribute to the integration of our country into the world community and to developing friendly relations with neighbors."⁶

On the other hand, however, Putin has in his presidency unabashedly centralized the country and curbed the power of the regions in a way, which could negatively affect their ability to develop relations with bordering foreign powers.

To what extent, then, is Russia today willing to downplay "hard" security policies in favor of a "softer" security approach in border regions? Some researchers, among them Vasilij Valuev, believe the Russian government remains entangled in former security thinking. In a study published in 2002, Valuev concludes that Russian federal authorities "surprisingly, seem rather uninterested in borders". The scholar writes that the federal government is embedded in strategic partnership thinking and neglects the "low politics" of cross-border issues. He believes Moscow sees border issues first of all in the light of the country's geopolitical interests.⁷

Despite the general current trend of federal power centralization, Russian regional administrations are likely to continue to play important roles in border region cooperation. Thus, the federal subjects in the Russian part of the Barents Region continue to develop their own international cooperation programs. Relations across the border are viewed as important for many regional administrations. Yelena Sychenkova from the Murmansk Committee of Foreign Relations says that: "Over the last 15 years, cross-border cooperation has been of considerable importance to the development of Murmansk oblast."⁸

Also the Euregio Karelia project, the first of its kind between the EU and Russia, signals both sides' commitment to regional cooperation. Euregio Karelia was established in year 2000 between three Finnish counties and the Republic of Karelia.

New focus on the Barents Region

In the years to come, a new set of challenges will determine security policy developments in the Barents Region. The region's huge reserves of hydrocarbons and its strategic location with regard to shipping make powerful states and international petroleum companies look towards the region. There is reason to believe that the prevailing security policy concept in the future first of all will be linked with *resources* and *environment*.

The Norwegian government white paper "Possibilities and challenges in the north", published in April 2005, gives a good indication about Norway's strategic thinking about the region. The report confirms the vital role of oil and gas in Norwegian policy objectives. "The exploitation of these [petroleum] resources will be decisive for the region in decades ahead. There is a possibility that the High North in a long-term perspective will represent the most important petroleum province in Europe".⁹ At the same time the document signals new political emphasis on regional cooperation.

The white paper reads that the Barents Cooperation is "an especially important tool in the High North policy", which the government wants to "evaluate, strengthen and make more effective".

Among the concrete government proposals is the establishment of a new research institution in the town of Kirkenes, *the Barents Institute*, which is to conduct research on regional development issues and resource management in the Barents Region, as well as the establishment of *an international Barents secretariat*.

Both the new institutions are believed to significantly facilitate a strengthening of the Barents Cooperation. The Barents Institute, an idea which has been raised and lobbied by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, is intended to engage in regional cross-border development issues and study new security challenges following oil and gas developments. The institute will also engage in region-building studies in a broader European perspective. The southern Caucasus is one of several regions, which in this regard could complement the Barents region as research arena.

If established, an international Barents secretariat would facilitate better coordination of the four Barents countries' policies and activities and strengthen their joint management of regional affairs. It could also enable the regional structures to embrace new fields of cooperation, like hydrocarbon production and resource management. In addition it could promote multilateral financing, which is rare in the region today. The new institution, which could be based on the structures of today's Norwegian Barents Secretariat, would eventually also facilitate coordination of activities with other regional organizations and initiatives active in the North, among them the Northern Dimension, the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council of Ministers, as well as strengthen the general role of the EU in the cooperation.

From the Norwegian side, stronger regional cooperation appears as one of the responses to the oil and gas developments in the North. It is far from evident however, how the other three Barents countries will respond to the new challenges. From the point of Murmansk Oblast, the Barents Cooperation is not listed among priority fields of activity. Thus, in its regional Social-economic development program for the period 2004-2008, which in detail describes objectives and planned projects, there is not a single mention of the Barents Cooperation.¹⁰

With its apparent primary focus on geopolitical thinking, it is also not clear how the Russian federal government will approach the Barents region-building project in the years to come.

With this in mind, the big politics of hydrocarbon production could potentially threaten to put region-building on the sideline in cross-border relations, making the people-to-people Barents regional project even more of a Norwegian-run engagement. However, the situation appears more likely to follow another scenario. The coming to the region of Big Oil and powerful politics could result in the vitalization of the Barents Cooperation as a platform for political interaction. In the wake of this could follow also a stronger focus on "soft issues", with commitments to region-building and easier access to project funding.

The Barents Secretariat welcome the increasing French presence in Northwest Russia, today most visible with Total as operator of the Karjaga oil field in Nenets Autonomus Okrug, where also Norsk Hydro has a 40% share.

The newly signed agreement between Total and the administration of Nenets AO creating a joint fund for financing of development projects in the region is also very much in line with the very spirit of the Barents Cooperation.

We also have noticed that Total together with our Norwegian petroleum companies Norsk Hydro and Statoil counts for three of the total five foreign companies on the Russian short list for

development for the offshore Shtokman gas field in the Russian part of the Barents Sea. This makes interesting perspectives for an even closer multilateral Russian-French-Norwegian cooperation in the Barents Region in the years to come.

The opinion poll from the Norwegian Barents Secretariat shows that as much as 62,3 percent of the respondents believe Russia and Norway jointly should develop the petroleum resources of the Barents Sea. Perhaps stronger international economic cooperation is exactly what is needed to strengthen relations between people in East and West in the Barents Region. Here France and French companies has a role to play.