Arctic: The New Front

The Barents Cooperation: Region-Building and New Security Challenges

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The Barents Euro–Arctic Region (BEAR),\(^1\) 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’.\(^2\)

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 militarised areas in Europe. Norway, located just about 200 km west of the city of Murmansk, was the only North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) country with

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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 European Union (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 regionalisation processes in Europe, as well as a move intended to sweeten EU membership to a sceptical population in the north of Norway.

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

**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 years 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. 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 8,000 people crossed the 196 km border between Norway and Russia. In year 2013 the number has increased to more than 300 000. Cross-border traveling still remains strictly regulated by visa arrangements. 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 km 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 internationalisation exposes Russia’s external border to surging cross-border movement of people and goods, as well as information and ideas. This situation facilitates
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 on September 30, 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 the neighbours.4

To what extent, then, is Russia today willing to downplay ‘hard’ security policies in favour of a ‘softer’ security approach in border regions?. Despite the general current trend of federal power centralisation, 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 programmes. Relations across the border are viewed as important for many regional administrations.

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 Barents Cooperation is an especially important tool in the High North policy, which the government wants to ‘evaluate, strengthen and make more effective’. 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. 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 vitalisation 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.

Perhaps, stronger economic cooperation is exactly what is needed to strengthen relations between people in East and West in the Barents Region.