

# How the New Cold War travelled North (Part I)

## Norwegian and Russian narratives

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### Summary

The standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine has already obstructed cooperation across a range of issues. Could it also affect state interaction between Norway and Russia in the Arctic—an area and a relationship long characterized by a culture of compromise and cooperation? In two policy briefs we examine changes in how Russia and Norway have approached each other in the Arctic in the period 2012–2016. This first brief presents the development of official Norwegian and Russian narratives on the relations between the two countries in the Arctic. Such narratives stipulate logical paths for action. Showing how Norwegian and Russian policies have changed in line with these narratives, we conclude that what some refer to as “the New Cold War” is indeed spreading to the Arctic.

Since the Ukraine crisis erupted in 2014, Russian–Western relations have plummeted dramatically. In this and in an accompanying policy brief we examine how this situation has affected state interaction between Norway and Russia in the Arctic—a region that in recent decades has been defined largely by a culture of compromise and a spirit of cooperation. How do the two countries talk about the High North and the Arctic? How does each state represent its own role, interests, and intentions in the region, and how does each see the role, interests, and intentions of the other?

This first policy brief presents the development of official Norwegian and Russian narratives on relations between the two countries in the High North in the period 2012–2016, before and after the crises in Ukraine erupted. We find that the primary prisms through which the countries view each other have changed significantly, from being partners to (potential) threats. Despite the intents expressed on both sides, the High North has become a far more conflictual and security-oriented place than only a few years ago.

Our analysis builds on in-depth, systematic scrutiny of official statements and documents in Norway and Russia.<sup>1</sup> For Norway, the data are statements, press releases, speeches etc. from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Prime Minister’s Office, and the Ministry of Defense (MoD). For Russia, we draw on transcripts and statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (including the public appearances of the Minister and Deputy Ministers, transcripts from press briefings, “answers to the press,” and official statements and “comments”), as well as transcripts from the President’s public appearances, and news documents from the Ministry of Defense. On the Norwegian side we have examined documents that include references to both Russia and the Arctic; for Russia, we have studied documents that include references to Norway or the Arctic—the difference being due to the far higher number of documents on the Norwegian side.

Such official narratives should not be dismissed as mere “rhetoric”: they shape policies and patterns of state interaction in fundamental ways. The words used to describe the world and its actors lay out logical paths for some policies, while making other possible policies appear illogical or even irrational. In the conclusion we present a set of policy changes on both sides that follow logically from the changing narratives of the other in the North. The point here is not to compare the policy changes or to claim that the military measures are equivalent: it is more that, when two parties begin viewing each other as threats, events and policy changes involving the other party will be interpreted in this light—with major consequences for interaction between the two. These “interaction effects” are discussed in the second, complementary, policy brief (How the New Cold War travelled North (Part II)).

### Relations in the North – a retrospect

As background for the current situation, it is important to note that Russia and Norway, over time, have approached the Arctic and each other in various ways across different issues—also during the Cold War, although security concerns

1. The policy briefs are based on our article “Norway and Russia in the Arctic: New Cold War Contamination?”, forthcoming in *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, vol. 9.

certainly were central. One example is how Norway and the USSR sought to develop bilateral management measures for the fish resources in the Barents Sea. Even the lengthy negotiations over the delimitation line in the Barents Sea starting in the early 1970s can be seen in this perspective, as they ruled out the securitization of this issue in the public debate, instead locating it outside the orbit of East–West confrontation.

With the end of the Cold War, Norway sought to strengthen the multilateral institutional structures in the North, including international legal regimes, and to promote interaction with Russia in these committing and potentially transforming institutional structures. A major Norwegian effort was the initiation of the Barents cooperation in 1993. However, to say that Cold War realist thinking was replaced by post-Cold War institutionalism would be an oversimplification—of both eras.

The Arctic region experienced neglect from Moscow in the 1990s, but this changed after the turn of the millennium, due to rising Russian capacities, the re-emergence of the Northern Sea Route as a potentially important transport artery, and the possibilities of extracting Arctic oil and gas. With the economic prospects offered by these developments, as well as the general focus on Russian reform through integration with Western economies and global institutions in the first Putin years, Russia's approach to Norway in the North became more inclined toward the institutionalism—evident, for example, in Russian policies on Svalbard. This Russian approach corresponded with a renewed Norwegian emphasis on institutionalism from 2005.

The 2010 landmark Norwegian/Russian agreement on the delimitation line in the Barents Sea, dividing the contested area evenly in two, can be seen as the fruit of a culture of compromise emerging logically from state interaction characterized by an institutionalist mode of policy. Arguably, it was possible for such a culture to thrive because the region was not made an arena for security-oriented big-power politics and zero-sum thinking at this time—although the predominance of a culture of compromise at that point does not mean that other approaches to the Arctic were not present.

## How Norway views Russia in the North

How did official Norway view Russia and the High North back in 2012? Official speeches and documents represented the Arctic/High North as a land of opportunity and collaboration. Terms like energy-enthusiasm, “sustainability,” “knowledge” “international law,” “peace,” “development,” “technology,” “engagement,” “increasing activity,” “global interaction,” “institutions,” “collaboration in military sphere” and “success” were frequent.<sup>2</sup> In this northern space of positive dynamics, Russia featured as a key partner, in positive terms and as an actor who respected the law. Norwegian–Russian relations had “never been better than now.”<sup>3</sup> Even in policy areas where Russia was seen as a challenge, collaboration was to be the solution.

When heightened Russian military activity in the North was mentioned, it was represented as a “legitimate” return

to “normal.” During a visit by Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Anatolii Antonov, where military collaboration was on the agenda, Norwegian officials even suggested, “We will become world champions in defending the High North, on both sides of the border.”<sup>4</sup> This discourse on collaboration and partnership with Russia was pursued together with a low-key but continuous emphasis on the need to strengthen territorial defense in the North, as well as to draw the attention of NATO and Norway's closest allies to the region.

Russia's human rights and democratic credentials (or lack thereof) were not emphasized before late 2012/early 2013. Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre even stated explicitly that problems in these issues should not be used to question the legitimacy of Russia as an actor on the international arena.

During autumn 2012/spring 2013 new apprehensions concerning Russia began appearing in official Norwegian statements concerning NGOs in Russia and, more generally, Moscow's turn to “authoritarian” rule. With a new conservative coalition government in power in Oslo from September 2013 and before the crises in Ukraine, official Norwegian discourse on Russia shifted further. Together with a continued emphasis on collaboration and good-neighborly relations in a High North governed by international law and multilateral collaboration, representations of Russia as a partner were less evident, whereas Russia as a human rights violator became more prominent. Moreover, MoD texts increasingly represented Russia as an opposite to Norway/the West/NATO in terms of values, and as a security-oriented big power in the North. Modernization of the Russian military was no longer associated with “normalization” as in 2012, but with Moscow's rising big-power ambitions. Norway, it was felt, needed new military capabilities in the North to defend its sovereignty and protect its interests. Presenting a strong NATO as a prerequisite for Norwegian security, the new government sought to strengthen transatlantic bonds and reinforce collaboration with NATO. The West/NATO were represented as trustworthy, orderly, and reliable, whereas the status of Russia was tilting toward “threatening.” According to MoD texts, greater collaboration was needed within the transatlantic community, but not necessarily with Russia.

A tectonic shift, 2014–2016: These representations of Russia, Norway and relations in the High North became amplified following the crises in Ukraine, which official Norwegian discourse described as a tectonic shift in international relations, heading nearly every official account of international developments in 2014, 2015 and 2016. According to Foreign Minister Børge Brende, Russia had “moved into a fundamentally new phase in relation to the outside world,” pursuing “power-politics belonging to a different age” and “acting in a way nobody had done since the Second World War.”<sup>5</sup> In sum, Russia had now become a rule-breaker, even a liar, an actor that disregarded established institutions and was not to be trusted.

From that point on, “the High North” and even “the Arctic” were reframed in Norwegian government discourse with reference to Russia's actions in Ukraine (later also with reference to Georgia in 2008, and Syria from 2015). The

2. For full references to the documents referred to in the following discussion, see our article “Norway and Russia in the Arctic: New Cold War Contamination?”, cited above.

3. October 25, 2012. MFA.

4. March 30, 2012. MoD.

5. March 25, 2014. MFA.

discursive positioning of the High North into the new orbit of potential conflict with Russia grew stronger and stronger, at least in MoD texts. In late 2016, Minister of Defense Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide stated, with clear reference to Russia, “we cannot preclude that military force will not be used against Norway... It is no longer so that war is declared through diplomatic messengers.”<sup>6</sup>

While the Arctic was still represented as a space governed by collaboration and international law, Russia was now projected as a potential rule-breaker, with Norway as a principled actor that would have to hold Russia accountable. The government continued to speak of preserving cooperation, but the North now figured increasingly as a military strategic space. Security became a key priority for Norwegian foreign policy, with special reference to the North. Good-neighborly relations in the North were now construed as the result of Norway being firm, predictable, principled and adhering to international law. By upping the civilian and military presence in the North and anchoring Norwegian security more firmly in NATO, Norway could contribute to “stability” and “predictability” in the North. It was even indicated that increasing transatlantic presence and making Norway into “NATO in the North” might be required to keep tension levels low and preserve the Arctic as a “peaceful region.” The strength of the transatlantic vector in Norwegian foreign policy was now explicitly cited as the precondition for good relations with Russia in the North—it was no longer a matter of what Russia and Norway could do together.

Were the crises in Russia–Western relations limited to the specific situation in Ukraine? Judging from the texts reviewed here, the Norwegian government’s answer was: no. Relations had changed irrevocably, and not even a solution to the crises in Ukraine could alter the new security situation in Europe. The reasons were Russia’s use of force against another European country, but also its poor democratic and human-rights credentials. In breaking international law, Russia was undermining the international order and its entire underlying set of values. Russia was now represented as a power inclined to use military means instead of diplomacy, incapable of respecting the political goals of other states.

The phrase Russia “has both the capacity and will to use military power for political gain” recurred, and by 2016 also the idea of Russia acquiring a “strategic advantage” in the North. Although Russia was never directly named as a “threat” to Norway in official discourse, taken together, the various representations constitute Russia as a threat in the North. The appropriate response was no longer “strategic partnership” and “constructive engagement,” but “firmness” and “deterrence”—and with “collective defense” and “reassurance” not of Russia, but of the Baltic states and Poland.

In official Norwegian discourse anno 2016, Russia and the Arctic looked very different from the picture in 2012. Both MoD and MFA texts put the blame for deteriorating relations firmly and exclusively on the Russian side: Russia would have to “change its ways” first, before any improvement could take place.

### How Russia views Norway in the North

In general, in official Russian discourse in 2012–2016 we can note an emphasis on the Arctic as an area of opportunity for Russia—and as a region characterized by successful international cooperation. The Arctic is presented as an example for other, less peaceful regions. Also after 2014, the picture is of continuing Arctic cooperation despite the overall worsening of international relations. Russia maintains the need to avoid militarization of the Arctic. In Moscow’s view, the clearest threat to the current state of affairs in the Arctic region would be a military approach from Western countries—especially attempts to get NATO involved in the Arctic.

While Norway increasingly presented the stability and peacefulness of the Arctic region as well as good-neighborly relations with Russia as depending on NATO engagement in the region, Russia held a diametrically opposed view. And while Norway consistently presented its positions as a logical answer to Russia’s changing behavior, Russia presented its actions as reactive, irritated that the West should view Russian military activity as aggressive, but not US and NATO activity.

In these years, Russia itself did not hide its markedly increased military attention toward the Arctic. In official Russian discourse, however, these efforts did not constitute militarization: they were represented as purely defensive, and aimed largely at addressing domestic concerns (like environmental protection), and framed as being about establishing good governance domestically in the Russian Arctic. In many ways, Russian efforts in the Arctic were represented as a return to the normal—a representation maintained also by the Norwegian side early in the period under study: in a changing natural and political setting, Russia sought to build on its history of management of the Arctic.

Norway: increasingly “NATO in the North”? In official Russian discourse we find several distinct representations of Norway, fairly stable in this period, but with a shift in emphasis since 2014: Norway is increasingly interpreted as the prolonged arm of NATO and the USA—a significant point, given Russia’s long-held view of NATO as a threat, indeed as an organization whose whole rationale is to contain Russia.

Initially, Norway appeared mainly as a good neighbor, in bilateral relations as well as through multilateral institutions like the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. In particular, the 2010 maritime delimitation agreement between Russia and Norway was hailed as a key achievement under the Medvedev presidency, and was later defended against internal Russian accusations that the treaty was a “gift” from Russia to Norway.<sup>7</sup>

As one expression of this attitude, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in early 2014 praised the state of bilateral relations,<sup>8</sup> and dismissed insinuations from the press that rising Western–Russian tensions had negative impacts on Russian–Norwegian relations.<sup>9</sup> However, he would soon start answering such questions differently. Increasingly, representations of Norway as a “good neighbor” were complemented by representations of Norway as a country that deliberately chooses to be a less good neighbor, catering

6. October 10, 2016. MoD..

7. March 6, 2013. MFA.

8. January 18, 2014. MFA.

9. January 20, 2014. MFA..

to its Western partners—and in doing so acts against the own interests of both Russia and Norway.

For example, while visiting Kirkenes in October 2014 for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Finnmark, Lavrov noted how Russia's and Norway's joint interests were threatened by "the bilateral cooperation being subject to artificial restrictions, based on Euro-Atlantic solidarity and with reference to the Ukrainian crisis."<sup>10</sup> Such concerns about Norway's policy being dictated by its allies became increasingly central in Russian views of Norway. At times, this representation situated Norway quite directly as part of a US military system seen as an offensive force directed against Russia. For example, it was in this narrative that Norway's decision to invite 330 US Marines to be based near Trondheim—on what Norway presented as a rotational basis—was placed.<sup>11</sup> Concerning how to remedy the situation, Russia, like Norway, fully expects the other party to change its behavior first.

### Conclusions

On the whole, in 2012–2016, Norwegian official discourse on "Russia," "Norway," and "the West"—and on the relations involving these entities—in the North shifted toward a juxtaposition of threat/protection, and bad/good. In line with this new interpretation of Russia and relations with Russia in the North, Norwegian policies on Russia have changed substantially since 2014, becoming increasingly realist and security-oriented. Recent policy initiatives, made acceptable by the changes in official representations of Russia, have clearly tilted the Cold War practice of "balancing" away from reassurance and toward deterrence: since 2017, 330 US Marines have been stationed at Værnes/Trondheim in mid-Norway. On June 12, 2018, Norway announced that it would increase the number of US Marines in Norway to 700,

stationing half of them further north, in Indre Troms. The Norwegian MoD has also been lobbying for the establishment of a new maritime command in the North and has proposed a Norwegian contribution to the European missile shield.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, turning to Russia's approach to Norway in the Arctic as it has unfolded from 2012 to 2016, we find an unmistakable drift, from behavior based on the perception that both states benefit from pursuing their own interests in a predictable manner, to more realist, security-oriented thinking. Moscow sees this drift as due to policy changes on the Norwegian side—in particular, Norway's acting in concert with its Western partners. In line with the changing Russian representations of the Arctic and the key actors in this region, we can also observe changes in Russian military policies. Examples from the period under review include the creation in early 2015 of the 80<sup>th</sup> Arctic Brigade, and the establishment of the Joint Strategic Command North in 2014, both ahead of schedule.<sup>13</sup> All of these changes are presented as a response to NATO activity in the north.

The point here is not to compare the policy changes or to claim that the military measures are equivalent. Rather, the point is that when two parties see each other as threats, events and policy changes by the other party will be interpreted in this light – with major consequences for the interaction between the states. These "interaction effects" we discuss in *How the New Cold War travelled North (Part II): Interaction between Norway and Russia*.

10. October 25, 2014. MFA.

11. October 28, 2016. MFA.

12. Between March 2014 and early 2016 not one Norwegian minister visited Russia, until the Minister of Fisheries went to St Petersburg in June. Not until March 2017 did the Norwegian Foreign Minister travel to Russia.

13. Pavel Devyatkin, "Russia's Arctic Strategy: Military and Security (Part II)," *The Arctic Institute*, February 13, 2018. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/russias-arctic-military-and-security-part-two/>.