



The Norwegian Barents Pride Festival: Reflections on bravery for LBGTQI+ activists from Russia

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Abstract

This article is based on two in-depth interviews with NGO representatives working with the Barents Pride festival, close to the Norwegian-Russian border. Organizations and activists from both sides of the border take a stand for equality and celebrate diversity and love. In the article, the concept of bravery is analyzed. Tatiana, a bisexual cisgender female Russian NGO worker and activist, is part of an organization fighting for LBGTQI+ rights in Russia. Steinar is a Norwegian representative for an international human rights organization. Faced with dominant Russian narratives that define homosexuality in negative terms, Tatiana and Steinar provide stories of bravery, creating a contextualized understanding of the need to stand together as fellow human beings in politically challenging times. Contextual narrative analyses of case studies play a valuable role in research by focusing on the term of bravery for minoritized groups fighting against systematic violence and oppression by political authorities.

Keywords

Barents Pride, bravery, civil society, human rights, LBGTQI+ rights, social justice, wellbeing

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present Tatiana's and Steinar's reflective experience-based stories of the Barents Pride festival, and to analyze these stories as examples of mattering regarding bravery in communities. Our work originates from a Norwegian-Russian collaborative project studying voluntary organizations' contributions to caring for people in vulnerable situations on both sides of the Norwegian-Russian border. Globally, NGOs have taken on greater responsibilities for addressing socio-economic and public health needs among vulnerable groups of people. This is the case in Russia, as seen in the context of

the country's major societal challenges, including groups of people whose sexual and gendered identities are brought into question, to the extent of those groups being challenged, criticized, and attacked. An increasing source of political concern and mobilization, social inequality and wealth inequality in Russia are among the highest in the world (Research Council of Norway, NORRUSS Pluss programme, 2017:16). Since the beginning of the millennium, at least, NGO activities in Russia have been restrained through a series of legislative measures. A law introduced in Russia in 2006 barred NGOs from pursuing political goals deemed sensitive by the government and placed restrictions on foreign funding and influence on NGO activities (Bogdanova 2017, Robertson 2009). The 'Foreign Agents law' enacted in 2012 obliged NGOs dependent on foreign funding to register as foreign agents, leaving them subject to strict government oversight (Flikke 2016:103). Immediately thereafter, 150 NGOs were registered as foreign agents, while at least thirty NGOs opted to shut down instead (Human Rights Watch 2016). In 2015, a new law was enacted allowing Russian authorities to ban and declare as undesirable any foreign or international organization they interpreted as a threat to national security, public order or the health of the population (Human Rights Watch 2016). At the same time, Russian authorities fund socially oriented NGOs that provide services seen as valuable by the state (Ivashinenko & Varyzgina 2017, Stewart & Dollbaum 2017:211). Following Putin's re-election in 2012, state funding for socially oriented NGOs increased significantly, partly as a countermeasure against the pull-out of large international donors (Ibid).

The town of Kirkenes in Norway, site of the Barents Pride festival, has a long history as a center for cross-border interaction. Social ties have been developed between the people of Murmansk, Russia, and the Eastern part of Finnmark in Norway over generations. Cross-border cooperation and social relations have become important and part of day-to-day life for the communities in both countries. In this context, societal challenges on the Russian side of the border have ramifications in Norway, affecting business activities, cross-border trade and family remittances from Russians living in Norway. The restrictions imposed on NGO activities in Russia naturally impact the overall climate of collaboration and social interaction between Norwegian and Russian border communities. The small town of Kirkenes has approximately 3500 inhabitants and is home to more than 400 permanently settled Russians. Kirkenes is a regional hub for cross-border trade and cooperation, visibly expressed by dual-language public and private signs around town. People who live within 30 km of either side of the border are entitled to a border zone ID card, encouraging movement across the border. When introduced in 2012, the border zone ID card triggered a boom in cross-border trade and cooperation. In 2013, there were more than 300,000 border crossings, 85% of which were made by Russians, who spent NOK 130 million¹ in Norwegian stores (Tvedt & Sørensen 2013). Following the events in Ukraine in 2014, cross-border trade and cooperation nosedived, but recovered from 2017 onwards (Rolland 2020). Then came Covid-19, and since March 2020, both cross-border trade and border crossings have stopped.

In this article, we explore the context and concept of bravery in relation to Tatiana's and Steinar's narratives – their bravery in showing they matter within their socio-political sphere of living and knowing. We analyze their stories through the frame of queer worldmaking (Alexander 2017). By performing this analysis, we demonstrate bravery as not only a relational but also a political concept that occurs in the participation of Barents Pride.

1 In 2013: NOK 130 million was approximately USD 21 million (Source: <https://www.valuta-kurser.no/m%C3%A5nedlig-gjennomsnittskurs>)

Bravery is the foundation of one's mattering in one's community. First, we present the context of the study. Then we introduce the Russian Propaganda Law as a necessary background for understanding the sense of necessity of attending Barents Pride, especially for Russian LGBTQI+ activists. We describe the importance of supporting environments for marginalized groups in welfare societies. We introduce our informants and the data collection before we present the concept of bravery. Further, we describe our analytical approach by analyzing the stories of Tatiana and Steinar. These stories relate to the three spheres of contexts of the relational and political scene of Barents Pride. The importance of being able to live in one's identity in the face of a hostile and oppressive law, is contrasted to living in a country where LGBTQI+ is protected by the government and embraced and celebrated in a space spanning borders. Lastly, we use the terms LGBTQI+ and queer interchangeably, with queer being the larger umbrella term for the myriad sexual and gender identities (Jagose, 1996). The reflections of Tatiana and Steinar are framed as 'stories' and get to a central and contested generic issue namely, that we all have the right and responsibility to feel valued and add value, to self and others, so that we may all experience wellness and fairness. Without fairness, there is a limit to how much wellness we can experience in our lives.

Context of the study

We address voluntary organizations and public institutions in Kirkenes in Northern Norway with activities addressing Russia. We interviewed several organizations working on education, theater, culture, innovation, and entrepreneurship in Kirkenes, and activists and people taking part in the Barents Pride festival.

Barents Pride in Kirkenes consists of a three-day conference for Russian and Norwegian participants, as well as the Pride festival with social, cultural, political, and social content. Barents Pride is an initiative of the organizations The Norwegian Organization for Sexual and Gender Diversity / Foreningen for kjønns- og seksualitetsmangfold/ FRI, Amnesty International Norway, and the Helsinki Committee, in collaboration with LGBTQI+ activists in Russia and Queer World / Skeiv Verden. FRI is a Norwegian organization for gender and sexuality diversity. Amnesty International and the Helsinki committee are both global human rights organizations, while the Russian LGBTQI+ activists belong to different organizations in Russia, and Queer World is a Norwegian association for LGBTQI+ people with minority backgrounds. Barents Pride was first arranged in 2017, and featured two hundred participants, and has become an institution for LGBTQI+ persons living in county of Troms and Finnmark², in the north of Norway. The purpose of the festival is to contribute to closer cooperation between Norwegian and Russian LGBTQI+ activists and human rights defenders on both sides of the border, as well as to create a greater understanding from and involvement of the local population on issues related to gender and sexual diversity.

The propaganda law in Russia

In Russia, tolerance towards sexual diversity has been and continues to be limited. Homosexuality has been publicly denounced as deviant, as profoundly immoral, as a violation of basic norms of decency, and as a violation of Russia's national character. The growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in a public discourse on morality and values has sought to strengthen anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments in Russian society under Putin's rule

2 Troms and Finnmark were two separate Norwegian counties until 2020, when they were merged based on a national political decision. The merger is due to be reversed as there are significant objections by local political coalitions towards the merger (<https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/nye-troms-og-finnmark-1.13686536>).

(Hill 2019). This has been reflected in legislation, where homosexuality has been met with great hostility and social condemnation, but it has not been illegal. This partly changed with the introduction of Russia's "Gay Propaganda Law" in 2013 (Ibid 2019). The law bans the "promotion of nontraditional sexual relations to minors" – a reference universally understood to mean a ban on providing children access to information about LGBTQI+ people's lives. The ban includes, but is not limited to, information provided via the press, television, radio, and the internet (HRW 2018). In practical terms, this means that any public expression of support for LGBTQI+ rights, or any articulation of homosexual desires or feelings, can be persecuted as a violation of the law.

In a society where anti-gay sentiments are strong and widespread; the law also creates a permission structure for abusive behavior against LGTBQI+ individuals. Since 2013, there has been an upturn in vigilante violence against LGTBQI+ people in Russia, and along with legal persecution, against people and organizations advocating for LGTBQI+ rights and forms of expression (HRW 2018).

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of a supportive environment in determining the individual and social wellbeing of LGBTQ people. In Italy, researchers have found that LGB youth face social isolation and rejection in rural communities, while often being ghettoized – confined to social arenas exclusive to LGBTQ communities – in more urban settings (Agueli et al. 2022). In the Nordic countries, where overall support for LGTBQ rights is relatively high, LGTBQ youth still suffer from social isolation, depression, and other psychological ailments at a much higher rate than non-LGTBQ youth, partly due to experiences of anti-LGBTQ sentiments and social exclusion (Anderssen, Heggebø, Stubberud & Holmelid 2021, Siverskog & Måve 2021). Research also shows that support from local communities, schools and health service providers means a lot for the social and psychological wellbeing of LGTBQ people (Agueli et al. 2022, Siverskog & Måve 2021).

Participants and data collection

We did two in-depth interviews to elicit participant reflections, with one representative, Steinar, from a Norwegian human rights organization, and one prominent LGTBQI+ activist, Tatiana, from Russia. Steinar is a middle-aged, heterosexual cisgender Norwegian man, who has been working in the organization for many years. He has been active in Barents Pride since its inception in 2017 and was strongly engaged in the fight for human rights among all LGBTIQI+ activists. Tatiana is a middle-aged Russian cisgender bisexual psychologist and LGBTIQ+ activist who has participated in Barents Pride since its inception. She felt privileged as an activist because she never had felt threatened by conflicts or confrontations.

At the time of the interviews, the world was under lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Barents Pride could not be organized in 2020 and had to be downscaled to a hybrid version in 2021. The lockdown had made our informants even more aware of the importance of Barents Pride as a unifying political arena. Because of the Covid-19 restrictions, the interviews had to be conducted on Microsoft Teams in Norwegian and in English. The informants had signed letters of consent and interviews were digitally recorded. The audio files were transcribed verbatim. The excerpts from the interviews presented in this paper have been transformed into coherent pieces. This process involved constructing comprehensive, condensed excerpts. Comments or questions from the interviewers were omitted to improve the coherence of the excerpts.

The interviews began with the open question "Can you tell me about Barents Pride?". The open questions were designed to elicit a reflective narrative account (Thornhill et al. 2004)

where the interviewees were invited to speak as freely as possible (Sørly, Sivertsen and Stalsberg Mydland 2021). As the interviews were done on Microsoft Teams, talking to Norwegian researchers would entail a risk for the Russian interviewee. Challenges in the study experienced by the researchers related to ethical awareness and safeguarding the informant's anonymity, as being an LGBTIQ+ activist can be very dangerous in oppressive political regimes. Before the interview with Tatiana, we discussed this concern and were assured that she wanted to participate. The study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data in 2020.

The concept of bravery

For certain parts of the world, social-psychological mattering in relation to LGBTIQ+ activism is closely related to the concept of bravery. In line with Elliot et al. (2004), awareness and relationship are the two superordinate measurable categories related to mattering. Our study allows for adding another category, admittedly more difficult to operationalize – that of bravery. Awareness means that people realize one exists and is distinguishable from other surroundings, while mattering through relationship is related to importance and reliance (Carey 2019). Mattering as a relational phenomenon contributes to an individual's self-concept (Carey 2019; Elliott et al 2004; Marshall 2001; Marshall et al 2010; Rosenberg and McCullough 1981). Our surrounding structures, as well as dominant narratives and cultural norms, influence our self-concept. Cultural norms govern policies and everyday life. These norms accept or reject individual significance, value or worth in relational interactions through lenses of making certain people matter and other people anti-matter. The experience of bravery contributes towards the much-needed LGBTIQ+ activism. The Russians, by travelling to a safer community, Kirkenes, act against political oppression across borders, alongside Norwegians. While taking part in Barents Pride is very much an act of resistance from the oppression LGTBQ people face in Russia, our focus is on the bravery of individuals that makes resistance possible. We suggest the transformative, shared community which arises from the Barents Pride festival occurs when all the participants seek to make changes, however small, to the practices and the places where everyday life is acted out. As such, we suggest that the festival contributes to making this world a more harmonious and better place to learn for communities, to teach for younger people, and to live with those we live alongside.

A contextual frame

Context enters the narratives of Tatiana and Steinar in a complex choreography and moves on several levels, existing in the spaces between narrator and listener, between telling and setting, between reader and text, and between history and culture (Riessman 2008). From a performative perspective, the interviews with Tatiana and Steinar emphasize that stories are created in the moment and exist in a vital and vibrant setting (Klausen et al. 2013; Klausen 2016). Identifying context is a complex task because there seems to be no limit to the relevant contexts (Zilber et al., 2008). The researcher must decide what to exclude or include in a context analysis of stories (Klausen, 2016). This is always a challenge, as it is vital to attend to and avoid choosing extracts that correspond to 'our' system of relevance. We have chosen to concentrate on the external context, on how the world is constructed and experienced by the storytellers. An important remark, though, is that the participants had been told, before the interview started, that we wanted to know more about challenges related to participating in the Barents Pride festival. As the excerpts show, the life experiences they spoke about were probably colored by the research expectations. At the same time, many

delegates' difficulties in participating has been a dominant narrative connected to the festival. This narrative has been presented in Norwegian media since the festival started several years ago. We explore how Tatiana and Steinar experience and situate the context or the background against which their stories unfold (Zilber et al. 2008). In line with Zilber et al. (2008), we analyze the stories in the following three relevant spheres of context: the micro relations in which the narrative is produced; the meso collective social field in which one's life and story evolve; and the macro broad cultural meta-narratives that underlie and give meaning to a particular story. In the following analysis, we employ these spheres to describe the interview situation. Each sphere is further described through how the participants describe how they matter in their community, the socio-political context in which they live, survive, and employ acts of bravery by existing as LGBTQI+.

In order to interpret and analyze the narratives, we lean on queer worldmaking. Queer worldmaking is useful here as it:

... sees an elsewhere, a disruption, and a rejection of the legitimized and routinized conventions of normativity ... privileges the queer voices and impulses and gestures to alternative ways of seeing, knowing, hoping, and being in relation ... is the impulse to resist the normativity that is embedded and continues to actively embed itself in our worlds, our minds, our relations, our hopes, and our futures (Goltz & Zingsheim, 2015, as cited in Alexander 2017: 13).

We use the framing of queer culture and worldmaking by Berlant and Warner 1998: 588, where they explain that “by queer culture we mean a world-making project, where ‘world,’ like ‘public,’ differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright”.

Analytical approach: The three spheres of context

LGBTQI+ people come from Russia and Norway to meet and celebrate in Kirkenes, Norway at Barents Pride, bravely living and mattering in three spheres: Russia, Norway, and Barents Pride. In each of the three contexts we identify what it means to matter, how mattering looks, how it is done. In the Russian context, LGBTQI+ peoples are living and existing, *mattering as opposition/resistance*; in Norway, LGBTQI+ peoples are *mattering as visibility*; and when the two communities meet to celebrate at Barents Pride, they are living both to form *mattering as possibilities and justice*. These spheres are queer worldmaking in action – where queer voices are trying to be heard, or are heard depending on the context, as well as actively living in the hope of justice and possibilities for a safe inclusive world for all queer peoples. The mere act of existing as queer is an act of resistance to also live for the hope of a just future. Concurrently, as is shown throughout the narratives, many times these spheres of knowing overlap in how participants navigate all three spheres.

Analysis of findings

The Russian context: Mattering as opposition/resistance

Mattering as opposition and resistance is seen through the varied ways LGBTQI+ people in Russia live and love in their identity. This type of mattering is viewed and known where the Russian LGBTQI+ community matter for and with one another, and with their friends and families who are their allies; they still identify as LGBTQI+ in Russia despite the threats they face. Community members are still living, still surviving, despite whatever Putin does or says. This becomes explicit to the world beyond Russia, as part of the

external context, especially so when Russian LGBTQI+ peoples bravely take the journey to Norway. Conjointly, Steinar explains that when the Propaganda Law was introduced and then passed, people sympathetic with and not intimidated by being seen with LGBTQI+ in Russia, worked with agencies outside Russia to oppose the law and fight for justice for LGBTQI+ peoples. Refusing to submit to the law shows the strength and bravery of the community to oppose and navigate towards its own safety, rather than all queer peoples and agencies retreating in the face of the law. Here, queer worldmaking is done and seen by how people are fighting, either underground for reasons of safety, or in public in the face of being detained, to challenge the Russian authorities and non-allied citizens, to envision a disruption to what they know to be true about sexuality and gender, to defy heteronormativity, to live without fear in a just and welcoming society for all.

Tatiana articulates how she lives this opposition not merely in her identity as a bisexual female, but in her work. Tatiana has been working with parents' dignity and gay rights for a Moscow-based organization. Her wish is to continue this work with a cultural festival that promotes tolerance of sexual diversity, another example of actively living and mattering, and bravery in resisting the laws in a hostile socio-political environment.

Steinar speaks to this living as opposition, the fear faced by LGBTQI+ Russians and their allies, when they went back to Russia after Barents Pride and faced Russian agents:

After the party was over and you had to go home on Sunday, then two or three of our delegates were stopped at the border and taken aside and questioned ... One delegate was offered to sign his name on a blank sheet of paper, this is an old KGB trick, because they have the signature on a sheet, so they can fill in whatever they want afterwards. These [LGBTQI+ activists and allies] were upbeat people.

This tactic is meant to place fear into people, to show the strength of Russian authorities over LGBTQI+ peoples and their allies. However, despite this, and in the face of extreme fear for one's life, people have taken the risk to live in their identity as they cross back over the border. Returning to Russia after Barents Pride does not go unnoticed by the Russian authorities, often aware of why they went to Norway, what they were doing in Norway at Pride.

Speaking to this living as a matter of opposition, Tatiana explains that "... the Russian experience says that you MUST fight for your rights, it is so important to continue the fight." Again – extreme bravery. The fight in opposing, in resisting, is a form of mattering in the larger Russian socio-political landscape in which one's mattering exists in the larger collective of being Russian.

The Norwegian context: Mattering as visibility

In Norway, LGBTQI+ to a large extent live openly and visibly within society. They know, even with the constant intimidation of the opposition and harassment on the street, they by and large live in a community where their right to live visibly in public is backed by legislation, and laws against discrimination and hate crimes (Hollekim, Slaatten, and Andersen 2012). Even if people do not want to be visible, they know they are safe due to the openness that has gained ground through organizations and festivals, media coverage and even though schooling in Norway. It is obvious how and where they matter beyond their home. This is seen through Norway's commitment to legal protections for the LGBTQI+ community, in direct opposition to the Propaganda Law next door in Russia. The Norwegian government decriminalized homosexuality in 1972 (Hollekim, Slaatten, and Andersen 2012), and today, Norway is generally ranked as a progressive country in Europe on LGTBQ

rights³. While anti-gay sentiments can still be found, public opinion polls show a growing acceptance of sexual diversity and growing support for LGBTQ rights among Norwegians at large (Bufdir 2018). As Norwegian authorities have come around on LGBTQ rights, the resources of the Norwegian welfare state have also been allocated to shed light on, raise public awareness about, and address the challenges still facing LGBTQ people in Norway. In this context, Barents Pride is not only an expression of solidarity with Russian LGBTQ people. In their support of Barents Pride, local police forces, the local parish priest, and the leadership of Sør-Varanger Municipality demonstrate an awareness that LGBTQ people still face hardships in Norway and that these must still be addressed through concrete efforts and campaigns of support.

Support for this idea of mattering as visibility is the difference LGBTQI+ Norwegians and Russians experience while attending Barents Pride. Both parties see the local community's protection of festival attendees. The local police and church leaders are there to defend, protect, and visibly support their cause. Beyond the police and priests, Tatiana describes what it was like for her to attend Oslo Pride for the first time, two years after the Propaganda Law came into effect. Tatiana's understood mattering as visibility the moment she stepped off the train in Oslo:

I got on the train platform [and there were] so many flags in the streets. I got scared and went back to the train station! Fear, fear, but also exciting. What can I do? Do I dare this? It was a big parade. I was overwhelmed with Oslo Pride.

The fear in Tatiana subsided, but the visibility of the universal LGBTQI+ rainbow flag was something causing her to pause, to grapple with how this visibility looks and what it means to be queer in Norway:

At first [this was] a great feeling. You feel small, part of a larger context. [There was a feeling] this was a good thing not only for activists, but also for the community in general. Being surrounded by a lot of people who share your concerns – it is a good thing. It was so motivating, so inspiring. I get flashbacks from the parade when I think of it. When I got back home, I was so inspired.

The way Tatiana understood queerness in Norway differed from what she saw happening in her country. Rather than attacking and “eliminating or erasing” queerness, Norwegians were openly celebrating in their largest city, in their capital city in front of the seats of government.

Steinar speaks to what he found when he began working with the queer community in Norway, which speaks to the safety felt by Russians in Norway:

We met Russian students in Tromsø who ... when we got to know them a little, we realized that they were simply queer refugees. They had chosen to study in the West in order to be more open than they could be at home.

This openness shows mattering as visibility, since those who came to Norway do not need to totally hide their identity, they could live visibly in their adopted home and study without publicly hiding their LGBTQI+ identity. From this openness is the queerness of being, the ability to navigate and, if necessary, challenge normative ideas of sexuality and gender

3 Rainbow Europe's ranking on LGBTQ-rights, website: <https://rainbow-europe.org/#8652/0/0>

without total fear of prosecution from the nation state. Kirkenes can be seen as a space of breaking binary normative ways of being in the world.

Barents Pride: Mattering as possibilities and justice

For those who attend Barents Pride, and for those living in Kirkenes, this type of mattering as possibilities and justice, is *being* in tandem with Norwegians and others who have seen their political leaders and fellow citizens live their lives freely. It reflects the possibility of living openly with LGBTQI+ identities. This possibility is seen in myriad ways, including Russian participants' understanding of the role of the police and the church.

Tatiana shares the first time she and her fellow Russians participated in Barents Pride. Their fear turned into possibilities:

For the first Barents Pride in 2017, many came to Norway for the first time. One of the guys from our side saw the police in the parade – and was scared. We told him they were here to protect us. Next time we invited the police to talk to us at the beginning of the parade and explain that they were there to protect us.

Also, when the pastor came to take part in the parade, many of our participants were deeply concerned. They were deeply confused to find acceptance from someone from the church. Visiting Kirkenes felt like coming to another planet. Many people came to attend and to support us.

Echoing this experience of possibilities and justice, Steinar shares how some Russian participants were ready to participate until they saw the police and priests:

When we went up to the school [where activities were being held], the Russian delegates saw that the police were there. [Some said] “We tried. It did not work. The police are here. We can just start packing.” Those who were cooler dared to take a selfie with the police. But then we came up and had to line up, ... in that schoolyard. And then two priests from the Norwegian church ... The Russian Orthodox Church is really harsh. They believe that this is a sin and all that. And when [representatives of] the Church of Norway came and were to go in the parade, the Russians thought “This is over, it’s not going, the church is here.” But they [the representatives of the Church] raised flags and went with the others. So yes, it was very successful.

Homosexuality has been and still is a divisive issue within the Norwegian Lutheran Church as well (Singh 2019). However, overall attitudes, as well as the formal positions of the church, have changed rapidly the last few decades, and since 2017 it has allowed gay couples to get married in church (ibid). For the Russians, mattering as possibility is seen in how they initially reacted to seeing the police and priests, but once they were told the police and priests were there to protect them, their fears subsided.

Steinar also notes how Barents Pride brought together many people of diverse backgrounds and motivations: “... it’s not only queer Russians who come, there are also sympathizers and people who are concerned about freedom of speech, Russian journalists and activists”. Many people came to Kirkenes knowing the possibility of freedom to be and live one’s identity, or to support one’s queer identity, which shows the importance of mattering for queer people – their identity matters, the possibility of living freely is within reach and can happen at an open pride supported by many community members.

In a telling moment of the overlapping of the spheres of mattering, Tatiana explains what being in Kirkenes means as a Russian bisexual woman:

We were also surprised by the Russians living in Kirkenes, we feared they would be intolerant to us. But they were not, they were very welcoming, very supportive of Barents Pride. Then we were also open about what we did – we did not keep quiet about our engagement.

For queer people living in Russia, being open about their identity requires a lot of bravery, even when they are out of their own country. During Barents Pride, this bravery was enabled by the show of support from various, sometimes unexpected sources. Meeting Russians living in Kirkenes shows how Russians are not, as a collective, intolerant of queer people, wishing queer people ill, or believing queer people do not exist. Russian residents of Kirkenes show how Russians can openly support queer people in their fight to resist power structures in Russia, but also how they can visibly support mattering as visibility in the Russian context. Lastly, by attending Barents Pride as Russians, they are showing the possibility of mattering in Kirkenes through Barents Pride, a possibility that keeps hopes alive for all and indicates what could happen in Russia if the struggle is not repressed.

Planning Barents Pride has not been an easy task. As Steinar notes of the intricate web, it takes a lot of planning to ensure everyone's safety:

We thought a lot about security for the Russian delegates. They were excited about how this would be and how this should go. We made such ingenious systems where they went at different times, on different routes, to meet in Kirkenes. Some went through Finland ... So we had given a clear message to all those involved in the project that nothing should be public until two days before. For the Russians, it was very important that it should be secret because ... they were ready to take the consequence of having participated in Barents Pride. What they were not prepared for was to be stopped before they arrived. So, there was a lot of secrecy the first time.

People from myriad organizations know the possibilities presented by attending Barents Pride, and in a cautionary tale of rights and justice, Tatiana astutely sums up all aspects:

Our Russian experience – we can have a good time, and then we can lose it. That's what we have experienced in Russia. We had greater freedom [in the past before the Propaganda Law], and then things got much worse. It's important to know that things can get worse. Keep the fight alive.

Reflections

In the following we offer seven reflections related to the narratives of Steinar and Tatiana, and our interpretation of the stories – related to bravery and a sustainable future for people living in the shadows of stigmatization and oppression.

1. Acts of defiance demand varying degrees of bravery

The spheres of mattering demonstrate how communities matter to and with one another and the power of mattering in one's own identity, in seeing and knowing identity in the face of opposition or hostility of dangerous laws and policies. Life can be hard, and the hostilities and dangers are acknowledged. Individuals navigate their own lives in ways they deem best for them to thrive. Those who choose to abandon their LGBTQI+ identity in the face of oppressive laws, such as in Russia, cannot be blamed for putting physical survival first, while seeking emotional support, so that they can continue to exist in a community where they matter, where they know and see the visibility of living their truth. Even though the

Russian government is determined to erase the LGBTQI+ community as authorized by the Propaganda Law, the very same communities are living in opposition, resisting the dominant narrative of anti-queerness.

In this context, the mere gesture of identifying with the LGBTQI+ community is an act of defiance. In Norway, the LGBTQI+ community lives visibly, knowing that the national government had passed legislation to protect the community (Hollekim, Slaatten, and Anderssen 2012). This is not to claim that all LGBTQI+ peoples in Norway live visibly, without fear of hate being thrown their way, including from family members and peers. Nevertheless, the Norwegian government is also their government and has vowed to include them in protections of equity (Savage, 2020).

Working for LGTBQ rights, or even taking part in Barents Pride, are acts of resistance, acts that require a certain amount of bravery at an individual level. This bravery may serve as inspiration, a moral boost, a mutual assurance, and as a window into a different reality than the one they live at home. A focus on bravery, rather than on resistance, allows us to highlight how bravery can be enabled, relationally, and how it can inspire more bravery within a group of vulnerable individuals.

Reflecting on the concept of bravery, its display correlates with the support or opposition from the political and legal context in which they live. Hence, it is far braver of the Russian LGBTQI+ community to dedicate their everyday lives to their sexual/genderized preferences than for their Norwegian counterparts, whose rights are statutory, to do the same when those who persecute them can be criminally prosecuted. It is fair to assume that the positions and perceptions of the two countries' highest-level politicians, community leaders and respect towards their citizens by and large trickles down to society.

2. Reflecting on rights

Barents Pride illustrates the mattering of possibility and that a perceived carefree life can be taken away at the hands of politicians in an instant, especially so if the election procedures of the highest levels officials are less transparent and less democratic than in countries where LGBTQI+ communities are not persecuted and are legitimate and respected citizens. In Russia, the fight continues for the brave participants and organizers. As Tatiana explains, "Barents Pride is more than fun and festival; it is a real fight for rights". What makes this more telling and important, the continued fight for rights and mattering in parts of the world where one's LGBTQI+ identity is being erased or criminalized (Parker 2021). For those who live in a society where openness about being LGBTQ+ can come at a terribly high price, a yearly arrangement such as Barents Pride can be a powerful reminder that a different reality different from the one they currently live, with less fear, risk and persecution for defining aspects of the self, for which the individuals have little or no influence, can be within reach. If not in their lifetime, for future generations.

3. Community support

An element connected with the issue of rights is that of community support. Along with the advancement of LGBTQ rights, Norwegian society has gone through an evolution in social attitude, with stigmatization and overt hostility towards LGTBQ people being increasingly rare. Barents Pride as an event is both enabled and to some extent shaped by the community support enjoyed by the organizers on the Norwegian side. Barents Pride is celebrated in a community where LGBTQ issues are presented with understanding and empathy, in school education and in popular culture, and where the local population, including its Russian inhabitants fully embrace the event. The municipality of Sør-Varanger is honored to host,

offers logistical support, a venue for the event, and their official support. The Barents Secretariat, funded by the Norwegian government, offers financial support for the event and for transportation and accommodating for Russian LGBTQ activists attending. Finally, Norwegian police officers offer protection for those who take part in Barents Pride, and the local priests take part in the parade themselves. All of this adds up to a system of support enjoyed by LGBTQ activists in Norway that makes Barents Pride possible and that stands in sharp contrast to the kind of reactions their Russian co-organizers experience on the other side of the border.

4. Caring and daring

Barents Pride illuminates one conception of having a physical and psycho-social base, which is a fundamental need for everyone. The festival is a place and space for people to come together that provides a sense and measure of psycho-social and physical ‘protection’, safety and caring. The festival also potentially provides a source of inspiration and perhaps even energy for daring (to meet and converse), exploration and carries an element of risk-taking as the excerpts reflect. With the festival being a temporary ‘secure base’ – albeit temporary – it brings opportunities to inspire and bring forth energy within the LGBTQI+ community so that they may be able to celebrate their identity and lead a fulfilling life. The general reflective point here is that it is important for everyone to try to have both a secure base and be a secure base for others.

5. Hopefulness not hopelessness

Part of the back story to this article is the way for some Barents Pride can serve as a beacon of a kind of hope, which is not a question of personal gain or power over others but rather of the kind of hope that creates space for power with others to generate a ‘better’ future. This is not a future without conflict or one where people never fail themselves or others, but a future that is open to other possibilities of being and doing. Of course, the more we reflect on hope, the more we see its complexities and potentials. It can quickly take us into reflecting on at least two related issues, namely despair and being brave, with the latter being the focus here. By despair we mean that for some in the LGBTQI+ community there may not be a clear and ‘safe’ path forward. These are situations where outcomes either cannot be seen or, if they can, fear is felt, and bravery is needed to confront these feelings.

6. Wholeness

The Barents Pride festival might also be seen as illuminating one of six principles of appreciative inquiry, namely the wholeness principle. This principle embraces the powerful notion that “the experience of wholeness is one of understanding the whole story. It comes about when people are able to hear, witness and make sense of each other’s differing views, perspectives ...” (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003, p. 69). Whitney and Trosten-Bloom explain appreciative inquiry as “the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best [...] Appreciative Inquiry suggests that human organizing and change, at its best, is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation” (p. 1). What we have done here is present these narratives, framing the experiences and mattering from a non-deficit perspective where queer peoples are living, even in the face of oppressive and hostile policies or in communities where the people have immigrated in order to find and make a new home. Our inquiry appreciates the humanness of our participants, of those with whom they speak, of whom they have lived and worked, helping to make change for the best in order to make society a better place for all.

Therefore we elaborate the notion of context. This is critical if we are ever to claim that we have a valid grasp of the moment-by-moment lived experiences of those fighting for LGBTIQ+ rights.

7. Deepening our understanding of ‘community’

Community can be understood as the experience of belonging. The Barents Pride festival can very much be experienced in this way. Although transient, it is a place where people can feel that they are part of ‘something’ that supports them as individuals and their rights. It represents belonging and relatedness. It is a place for acknowledging and celebrating differences and interdependence. Optimistically, it may be a place for collectively envisioning a future different from the present. Understanding the power of context and possibility enables us to change our relationship with the past. The Barents Pride festival offers a catalytic reflective question, namely ‘How will the world be different tomorrow as a result of our meeting today?’

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