

Commentary

Research on the Euro-Arctic Borderland under pressure: a case and some reflections

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Are field excursions, participant observations and face-to-face interviews during visits to an area of study a prerequisite for claiming profound knowledge on it, or is freedom of travel just some kind of ingrained privilege for academic researchers? This commentary for the Arctic Yearbook will explore the present dilemmas of doing research in social sciences and the humanities on the Norwegian, Finnish and Russian High North borderland as we face sanctions and rapid change in national and university policies towards Russia.

While belief has recently all but evaporated in the media and among North-European governments, in the Barents Euroarctic Region 1993-2022 cross-border program, modelled on EU neighborhood policies, faith was high for some decades in the institutional cross-border partnerships it facilitated, governed by top-down funding and political promotion. Among the components of this were cross-border interaction on regional level by "people-to-people" relationships. After Russia's military attack on Ukraine in 2022 this peace-work is now seen as highly problematic, stamped in hindsight by many as naïve and counter to the real security interests of the Nordic countries.¹ Is this maneuvering the necessary flip-side of a responsible top-down monitoring of northern regional activities including university borderland research, Russian studies and cross-border education? Most Scandinavian scholars seem to say yes to that today, esp. those who didn't engage more than opportunistically in the Barents Euroarctic policy in the first place. Somehow lost in the present new-old "security from above" concern are people still residing under the pressure of outmigration in the Euroarctic, and those who take seriously the Euroarctic collective memory – dating far back to similar times of conflict that were brought north from the south.

This commentary will briefly relate a journey made by a group of Norwegian citizens, including the present author, to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk in June 2024 and the storm of dislike it caused in Norway a few weeks later when information about it was planted on the national media scene. Public condemnation and deep concern were expressed to response-fishing journalists by domestic commentators, importantly the leader of the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø (UiT) who reacted immediately to journalists against two of the travelers who were former and present

professors of the UiT. The “successful” journalist initiation and piloting of this affair through a week of overblown agitation will be reflected on, along with the widely spread lack of awareness of the principles of freedom of speech and research that are stipulated in Norwegian law. Attention will be drawn to how different academics, the public, journalists and university leaders understand and apply the Western sanction-policy against Russia which Norway follows. I will go on to present what I see as the main “take-aways” of this affair, and what may be the continuing challenges for scholarly research on Russia that it demonstrates.

A Norwegian-Russian cross-border trip – its features and consequences

So what was this all about? It was vacation, based on travels in Russia made in full accordance with UiT IT security regulation. Thus the two UiT employees participating operated no job computer, cell phone or soft-ware provided or serviced by UiT inside Russia, no on-line connection were opened there with UiT E-mail systems. The recommendations against travelling in Russia issued by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA) were known to all, and obviously Russian Visa were applied for and bought privately as was travel insurance valid in Russia. The main goal of the trip was to attend the White June cultural festival in Arkhangelsk where my colleague at the UiT professor emeritus Ivar Bjørklund did two excellent presentations on literary topics while I did none. Others in the group were musicians and performed elsewhere in the many parallel shows of this great festival.² Returning with a stop-over in Murmansk we did museum visits and met members of the Russian-Norwegian language club, several of its members now being out of a job after being fired from Norwegian and other international enterprises that have cancelled their business in Russia.

From the extensive web program of the White June festival anyone able to read Russian, or taking the trouble to translate its contents, could with some effort find the names of a few Norwegians performing there – we were the only foreigners present. One organizer of a private dinner in Murmansk put pictures of the event on Facebook; those were also found by the media-tipper and handed to journalists of the National Norwegian Televisions Cooperation (NRK).

Having been involved in job partnerships in Russia the group naturally met with people we had worked with on various Barents cross-border endeavors now all closed. Regarding UiT this typically included book publishing, conferences, and in my case internationally open on-line courses in Northern Studies, offered in institutional alliance with several Russian universities. In the days all of this was run fully transparent to the NMFA, in-line with Barents policies and endorsed as UiT academic undertakings.³ Some former colleagues in Russia refrained from meeting us due I guess to personal risk evaluation. Nowhere were we pursuing such contacts because this was vacation. However, given my experience of Russian society and that of all fellow travelers, field-research based on participant observation was part of the trip.

We don't know who tipped the NRK about our trip, but we can guess. What we know is that Western legislation on journalism means that its sources are protected from disclosure. Indicative of the intellectual level of the media witch-hunt against the undersigned and Ivar Bjørklund were interview questions repeatedly phrased like, how is it even possible for a professor at a Norwegian university to travel in Russia these days? One academic colleague at a domestically highly ranked research institute informed us via the media that he would not have undertaken that trip, considering in hindsight, I guess, the bad publicity it created for us. As part of the media defamation campaign I was mentioned on national news web-sites by name with full affiliation and big high-

resolution portrait photos. Television outlets propagated it further in the echo-chamber of national and district news. I am today recognized by any Norwegian familiar with the affair, this includes most academic people.⁴ I received hate mail describing cancellation measure planned against me and my family from individuals including some in doubtful mental health.

After responding to an internal UiT request from the faculty leadership for rapid/brief information I received feedback from the academic union, and some relevant high-level UiT functionaries. While being unsupportive of the trip, they advised me to let the thing blow-over and avoid any hasty statements in the media. This was largely OK, but most of those in touch with me regarded it as obvious that the trip was one big embarrassing mistake. UiT legal advisors and academics in the faculty of jurisprudence were missing in this and continued to be so until the affair was over. At the peak of summer vacations advisors were perhaps also missing around UiT's then acting leader prorector Jan-Gunnar Winter who rashly told some journalist asking for comments that I, being the only full UiT employee among the travelers would be facing an UiT internal investigation and charged with disciplinary measures (*personalsak*). This is the strongest kind of reaction against an employee available at a Norwegian state institution and includes the option of the accused being fired. For the media this was the "best possible" UiT reaction and allowed further inflating the drama and building a burgeoning readership.

Twenty-four hours later the threat of a disciplinary investigation was withdrawn by the prorector in a 180-degree turn; the affair was called off as far as the UiT was concerned. Later he explained to me that the whole thing resulted from mistaken use of terminology on his behalf, and the matter was and is – I hope – laid to rest on the top-level of the university.⁵

In the outpour of anti-academic sentiments there were clarifying comments rapidly made which proved crucial for how the affair progressed. Those came from experienced legal experts and are of a general interest. In this category fall statements made by practitioners of law and experts on the principles of freedom of speech in Norwegian and international legislation, Anine Kierulf, Benedikte Moltumyr Høgberg and Mads Andenæs, all at Oslo University (UiO).

Benedikte Moltumyr Høgberg, professor of law, stated in a public post on her Facebook profile that she regarded the entire case as problematic for academic freedom of expression and deemed the UiT management's reaction against Bjørklund and Wråkberg as disproportionate.

"If academics face reactions [like these], it will work as an attempt to control research and academic freedom. Shame on any research dean at UiT or elsewhere who does not stand up for true freedom, democracy and academic autonomy." "This case is a grotesque example of how Norwegian academics are attempted to be controlled, duped and hung out in public if they do not behave as the Norwegian authorities, the university management, the press or the PR agencies want."⁶

Mads Andenæs, professor of jurisprudence at UiO stated to NRK "Regardless of what the internal [university] guidelines say, the principle of academic freedom of expression is weighty and must take precedence." He "agreed" that there ought to be a disciplinary case opened at UiT but not against the present author but against Prorector Winter.⁷

Formerly at the Dep. of Mathematics and Statistics of UiT, Professor emeritus Kristoffer Rypdal stated to the media:

"The problem in this case is that UiT is acting as a surveillance authority and interfering with our fundamental freedoms in a way that feeds the Russian propaganda machine, since they can rightly

claim that the fundamental freedoms we fight for in Ukraine are not worth much when it comes to ourselves.”⁸

What are the take-aways from this?

Contemporary Scandinavian institutions suffer from media scare. Few things if any are as abhorred as bad publicity. No matter if the organization seems to be involved in committing anything right or wrong, and if leaders of the institution are unable to decide this, there is a nervousness when journalists call and ask for comments. The result is that journalism sets the agenda for much of the public conversations in society and that any employee causing bad publicity tends to be regarded not part of the problem but the problem. To quickly join the journalist’s accusations against such a person is a tempting way out of the institutional guilt-dilemma. This distrust-reaction against staff of your own organization seems many places to be part of the company culture. It should be tested more often to start negative media encounters with a standard response from the top that we will clarify and investigate matters before stating much more than as a rule our employees don’t make big mistakes.

Nordic media are free to present news involving the smearing of named individuals and institutions. The way to plant information useful for such media sensationalism follows a well-tested procedure. There is little or no efficient legislation in place against libel caused by what is found to be unfounded accusations and mistaken ideas on laws and regulation. The lack of proof of any wrongdoing of anyone exposed by journalists is manageable. This invites fraudulent information to be handed to journalists under the cover of anonymity against the public, that are motivated by malicious intent by the tipper against individuals, groups or institutions of his or her dislike.

International networking and field excursions are not academic privileges but something necessary to gain and hold credibility in expertise. It should be the duty of every scholar to leave the interior academic comfort zone regularly to test ideas and encounter extramural phenomena and values. To shut the door on interaction with a problematic region or country leads to poor research that will be prone to miss new trends and developments. In contrast the news reporters’ risky trips to dangerous locations are adamantly swallowed by most Western minds, not only as a journalistic privilege, but a valued component in the cliché of the heroic correspondent.

Enduring challenges

Certain groups of professionals in contemporary Scandinavia are held in low esteem by most journalists and many politicians. Unpopular academics, esp. scholars and social scientist, are suitable targets for journalistic attacks and entertaining media defamation. A set of stereotypical confrontation models can be found by which academic persons are typically dragged/lured into the public scene for “critical” studio interviews. Such interviews are typically kept short to the detriment of profound analysis, are full of interruptions and opposition from the expert-acting journalist or studio chairperson. Thus, scholars on less than national celebrity level, are reluctant to accept invitations to broadcasted debates and to give interviews. This is characteristic of Scandinavia media and stands in contrasts to journalistic practices in national news in other countries. I’m familiar with news outlets in Poland, Israel, Germany and the US. Here instead interviews of various professionals provides ample time for the respondent to answer which enables the public to receive and evaluate for themselves experience- or research-based knowledge on various matters.

In the Swedish state funded SVT news channel it is since long established a system in which real experts have been replaced by former SVT reporters and journalist who have been handed a position as news channel inhouse expert commentators on matters like macro economy and domestic politics. In Norway an undecided top-down dispute rolls on regarding who or what a researcher represents when stating anything in public media.

Turning to the standard reactions I have had from the average academic colleague, the most common one regarding field research or travelling in sanctioned countries like Russia is negative. I have had simplistic feedback, like: “How could you!?” “Going there to appear in anything in public you were of course used in Russian propaganda!” without the contender being able to give concrete examples and present the logic of the propaganda.

In other personal communication I have been lectured more interestingly by Russian academic colleagues living in Western diaspora. Their advice to me in conclusion is to leave Russian studies to them, as they would know Russia best. Non-Russians do well to stay out of there as they risk being lured into espionage or thrown in jail to be used for exchanges with Russian criminals imprisoned abroad. Nevertheless, we see mostly journalists committing crimes of information-gathering in Russia that get them into prison there. All Russian academics living in the West I know have strong bonds to family members still living in Russia. From what I have seen over time they tend to be careful not to undertake research on subjects that may irritate authorities at home. It could affect badly the life-quality of their Russian relatives as well as their own future permissions to undertake travels in and out of Russia. Pressure on loved ones in your home-country is a well-known practice internationally to control and extort citizens abroad into illegal activity in their land of residence. These are not only factors hampering free enquiry by those victimized by such state attention, but also of course something that may cause individuals in diaspora to become security risks wherever they are.

Admittedly, moving further with such reasoning may lead astray. The Western sanction regime against Russia has been appropriated by activists also in Norway. The improved career opportunities that positive publicity entails have tempted some academics, despite lacking diplomatic experience as well as military special training and professional title in jurisprudence, to sense a call to help the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) to discipline credulous fellow countrymen, esp. amateur historians, from cross-border networking with Russians. Russian-oriented local circles and named individuals living in the Russian-Norwegian borderland have been stamped repeatedly in chronicles and in videos on the Internet as politically naïve security risks. This deepens distrust in the borderland for central authorities and for anyone from the university sector.⁹

Good scholarship needs historical perspectives and often geopolitical contextualization. Repressive regimes are found in many military hot regions globally and instructive to study before jumping to conclusions on domestic affairs. The truly naïve idea to my mind is that if we only think away our “problematic” neighbor and forbid cross-border interaction and research, we can sleep-walk through the bad times without the risk of being overwhelmed when we are forced to open our eyes again sometime in the future.

Notes

1. The foresighted scholar Geir Hønneland declared Barents Euroarctic regional collaboration dead already in 2017. Geir Hønneland (2017). *Arctic Euphoria and International High North Politics*. Singapore: Springer Nature. Cf. Astri Edvardsen (2022). “Border Seminar 2022: ‘We Must Check for Both Pessimism and Illusions in Our Perception of Russia’”. *High North News* October 22.
2. <https://whitejune.ru/program/> Visited November 3, 2024.
3. Peter Haugseth & Urban Wråkberg (2021). “Experiences of Norwegian-Russian Cooperation in the Field of Education at the UiT Arctic University of Norway Campus Alta and Kirkenes”. In: N.A. Shevchenko & Yu. O. Shestova (eds). *Dialogue of Cultures: History and Modernity of Russian-Norwegian Cultural Cooperation*, Murmansk: Murmansk Arctic State University, pp. 117–122.
4. <https://www.nordnorskdebatt.no/grenselost-naivt/o/5-124-317437> Visited November 3, 2024.
5. <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/uit-forskere-fikk-kritikk-etter-russland-reise--jusekspert-langer-ut-mot-universitetet-1.16961170> Visited November 3, 2024; Ivar Bjørklund (2024). “Russland Er Et Farlig Sted [Russia is a Dangerous Place]”. *Khrono* July 10. <https://www.khrono.no/russland-er-et-farlig-sted/888723> Visited November 3, 2024.
6. Quoted from an E-mail by journalist Oscar Henrik Biti Næss to the author July 10, 2024. «Hvis akademikere møter reaksjoner for dette, er dette et forsøk på å styre forskning og akademisk frihet. Skamme seg den forskningsdekan ved UiT eller andre steder som ikke står opp for ekte frihet, demokrati og akademisk frihet»; «Denne saken er et grotesk eksempel på hvordan norske akademikere forsøkes styrt, dupert og hengt ut hvis de ikke oppfører seg slik norske myndigheter, universitetsledelsen, pressen eller pr-byråene ønsker.»
7. <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/uit-forskere-fikk-kritikk-etter-russland-reise--jusekspert-langer-ut-mot-universitetet-1.16961170> Visited November 3, 2024.
8. “Det problematiske i denne saken er at UiT opptrer som overvåkingsmyndighet og griper inn i våre grunnleggende friheter på en måte som gir det russiske propagandamaskineriet vann på mølla, siden de med rette kan hevde at de grunnleggende frihetene vi kjemper for i Ukraina ikke er så mye verd når det kommer til oss selv.” <https://www.nordnorskdebatt.no/uit-skal-ikke-vare-psts-forlengede-arm/o/5-124-317981> Visited November 3, 2024.
9. Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv (2024). *Security and Geopolitics in the Arctic: The Increase of Hybrid Threat Activities in the Norwegian High North*, Hybrid CoE Working Paper 30. Helsinki: The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, pp. 16–18; Einar Sørensen (2024), “Uten Nordnorske Journalister Ville Vår Nære Historie Aldri Blitt Allemannseie”. *ND Nordnorsk debatt*, November 2. <https://www.nordnorskdebatt.no/uten-nordnorske-journalister-ville-var-nare-historie-aldri-blitt-allemannseie/o/5-124-332178> Visited November 3, 2024.