

# Urban Wråkberg

## The new north

The north-western part of Russia is special by its short sea-links to Western Europe and nearby Scandinavia. In times of central neglect, not least so after Tsar Peter initiated the construction of St. Petersburg and connected Russia to the global oceans via the Baltic Sea, the Russian Northwest with the Kola Peninsula, the White Sea and Arkhangelsk were left on their own. But regional trade developed by itself across the border to Scandinavia. Grain and timber from Russia were exchanged for fish from north-eastern Norway. This so-called Pomor trade even caused a pidgin language to evolve "Russenorsk" far from any state control. Today that language has been forgotten and replaced by better skills in the language of the neighbour and in English.

The planetary, centre-periphery model of the relationship between the north and its national metropolitan capitals in the south is contested but still partly relevant today. Among the traditional tasks of the northern borderland officials was to send reports, taxes and raw materials to the centre and from there on to the world markets. All margins of the metropolis have also worked as buffer zones designed to absorb problems before they reach the centre. The remote border town remains in the shadow of the metropolitan centre as a terminus on its communication lines; the end of its body with the façade it has chosen to turn towards its exterior. On site in the north this was always seen differently by indigenous peoples and by other later migrants and permanent settlers. In post-Cold War Europe and after the economic transition of Eastern Europe and Russia, power balances have been negotiated, re-set and rebuilt.

In 1993, as part of the innovations in the EU and Scandinavian-Russian diplomatic relations a Barents cross-border region was inaugurated that included the northernmost counties of the Scandinavian countries and five of the counties/oblasts of north-western Russia. A new declaration on the cross-border region's course and goals is to be presented in 2013. Barents regionalism opens for local initiatives to collaborate on many levels. Cross-border exchange started in schools, in the cultural sector, sports and youth programmes, while foreign ministries were watching nervously at first. In northern Norway it is often said that the distance is longer from Oslo, the capital of Norway, to the



northern towns on the Barents Sea: Tromsø, Hammerfest and Kirkenes, then in the other direction. Kirkenes, the Norwegian border-town to Russia has Murmansk as its closest major city about 240 km east in Russia. Kirkenes' nearest town in Norway is Alta situated more than double that distance to the west. Communities up-north in both Scandinavia and Russia are losing inhabitants to the south but several towns in northern Norway are growing these days. Living happily up-north is to place the centre on the periphery, you don't think you are away when at home; it is an odd idea to most minds to believe you are "not in a central place" when you are at work, or outdoors enjoying your own time.

Another northern metaphor conceived in the metropolis is the idea of the fragile and sensitive nature of the north. There is a scientific consensus on the exclusiveness of northern nature, nevertheless nature reserves in the northern "empty wilderness" are far more popular in the capital than among those living up-north. Getting on over the barren cliffs of the Norwegian sub-Arctic county of Finnmark, across its tundra and the taiga, the idea of a fragile glass house of nature is not the first one to cross most people's mind, and you wouldn't like to have your hands tied when expected to make a living here.

Over the centuries many Russian planners have claimed to grasp the distances across the Arctic part of the country, and envisioned ways to manage its logistics, all have failed. Local people have more modestly tried to set-up functional regional systems. Disappointments in the capital have turned minds towards the opposite idea of the north as just a costly burden. Some launched a pessimistic metaphor, or rather an enigma, that of Russia's Siberian dilemma. Scientists may have proved the Russian Arctic rich in minerals and renewable resources but the complexity of the infrastructure to build, and the costs of running it, to get those extracted from the vast tundra and taiga, and on the global markets have proved staggering, perplexing. This explains the enthusiasm today in the north over what is by most other people seen as the problem of the increased melting of sea-ice in the Arctic during the summers of recent years. If trends are stable the Northern Sea Route (North-East Passage) along the mouths of the Siberian rivers will come true, creating the transport grid so long envisioned between the Arctic coast and the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the south where the taiga meets the steppe. Time will soon tell if the "opening" of Arctic Russia is for real.

## Nations as organisms

In the eyes of the capital city everyone on its outskirts is close to the border of something: spheres of interest, the nation, culture and identity. Locally in the periphery it has always made sense to disregard and move further across those borders. The border on the tundra between Norway and Russia was agreed upon in 1826. It follows the central branch of the river stream in the Pasvik River; it is the youngest segment of Norway's national borders but the oldest part of Russia's existing boundaries. Nineteenth century geopolitics regarded nations as Social Darwinian organisms or Hegelian individuals with different characters formed by their route through history; this character was believed to predetermine the future of the nation. In the heydays of colonialism holding the high-ground of Asia was launched by some geopolitical strategists as paramount for any nation striving for global supremacy. The whole of Eurasia was a fortress. Secured by the huge distance to its inaccessible centre anyone holding the land beyond Pamir, Mongolia, Xinjiang or perhaps Afghanistan would control the vast continent in the long run. This belief and the ensuing rivalry for supremacy in Central Asia between the Russian empire of the Tsars and the British colonial empire went on for most of the nineteenth century and became known as The Great Game or The Tournament of Shadows.

Part of the alarmist spirit behind the many popular forecasts that have been launched in recent years speculating in the coming international conflicts over the natural resources of the continental shelves in the Arctic seems inspired by an anachronistic transposition of several of the old ideas of The Great Game. Staying in the old vein of thought of wandering and clashing civilisations the border between Norway and Russia should probably be seen as the point where the Evangelical Christian sphere and the Byzantine, Russian Orthodox civilisation somehow ended their expansion. Like two beasts they are facing each other across the border river exhausted after the long march from their different southern origins, finally frozen up by the Arctic climate. But the ancient threat of conflict experienced at the centre of empire has passed thus this metaphor of menace is turned by adding the ridiculous

effect from anachronism to the horrific altering it into what is termed the grotesque in continental philosophy and modern media theory.

There is a whole border paraphernalia of still perhaps partly functional devices spread around the Norwegian-Russian boundary consisting in surveillance towers, odd gates in endless barbed-wire fences, check-points on the roads including the highway Kirkenes-Murmansk, border poles and snow-mobile teams of patrolling guards. It loads symbolic drama on the bridges of the land. Some of these impediments to the travellers have been decommissioned and removed in recent years as the result of high-level negotiations at the national centres. Properly defused these objects are cherished by the tourists who like to play around with them. In the aesthetics of borders this play on the peaceful but very real border is made more fun as part of various dark tourism concepts by allowing the visitor to move on from the horrific, via the grotesque to the sublime: the memory of the once all-encompassing Cold War cannot be undone as the result of historic reality but it can be exorcised individually and in groups.

The power of this rite is tested every day at the Norwegian-Russian border and it has proved strong enough to move tourists the year around from Kirkenes with buses or boats to within sight of the Russian border. Joint performances of sham border surveillance takes place at well-prepared pavilions overlooking the border river; ritual photos are taken, smiling back against the border. The tourist gaze is assisted by binoculars across the border as part of enactments amusing a steady stream of visitors. The participants in these outings are mainly passengers on the coastal express the "Hurtigrutten" who take a tour to the border in the morning after having flown in to Kirkenes the evening before and that are leaving on their cruise ship at noon. Nowadays it is not the costs for any of them of having a Russian visa that limits their will to spend another day or two to really cross into Russia, it is the fact that many well-off western Europeans doesn't need to have a passport at all to travel within the EU; without a valid passport no visa to Russia is possible.

Turning to borders elsewhere in Western Europe and Scandinavia they are often too invisible to be exiting to the travellers. To challenge this the curators of the winter art festival of Kirkenes "Barents Spektakel 2011" placed discarded border poles from the on-going renovation of the Norwegian-Russian boundary in the hands of artist Morten Traavik. He deconstructed the idea of the peripheral border by moving its icons, the border poles, to places where they are not supposed to be. By placing rows of them inside Kirkenes and in Murmansk – even outside the Norwegian parliament down in the capital of Oslo he made the periphery appear in the centre, thus violating hierarchy and order. Iconoclasm can be detected in all of this but these discarded border poles had been desecrated by the official border commissars so the strength of their remaining iconic power was in the aesthetic perception of the audience.



# Contested Metaphors in the European North

## Liminal states of border-crossing

What is in the waiting at the border? Crossing the Schengen-border between the Scandinavian countries and Russia time is spent on waiting in lines, on carrying your personal belongings in and out of the border station, and on replying to questions. This and filling out forms regarding the importation to Russia of your car (if you travel with it) and the exportation of it some days later drags on in time and make palpable the liminality, sometimes the limbo, of the political state of the traveller in transit. These procedures are stressful but when successful gratifying. They are often fun to those unfamiliar with them but a source of concern for policy-makers, migrants and business people.

While in between the two border stations the traveller is temporarily virtual as he or she is in-between the jurisdictions of two nations resembling the threshold state of the “rites de passage” described by social anthropologists. The first step in the rite of passage is the separation or detachment from the regular environment, movement to the margin with the subject passing the ambiguous liminal stage to a new fixed state. The liminal phase has been described by Victor Turner as neither located in the departed stage nor in the arrived-at, the liminal persona is characterised by a series of contradictions: having departed but not yet arrived, at once no longer classified and not yet classified, neither here nor there, maybe even nowhere, between the recognised fixed points in the space-time of structural classification. Immediately along these thresholds of the Norwegian-Russian border, beside the line of passage of the border-travellers, there are Tarkovskian zones and no-man’s land where only the border guards dare to thread and

and function of the relationships of the layers and the reasons for the “return of traditions” often believed/wished dead from political points of view.

Thomas Seifrid has discussed the particular workings of the “illusion” in modern Russian culture by comparing the grand new construction of St. Petersburg with the reconstruction of pre-existing European cities such as Vienna of the Ringstrasse or Hausmann’s Paris. Seifrid claims there was no palimpsest at work behind the facades of St. Petersburg. They provided instead an illusion the result of an appropriation of culture and European splendour behind which there was only a “shore of wilderness waves” in Pushkin’s words. But St. Petersburg with its new admiralty, canals and neoclassical structures, was not only built to function practically, it was by that same technical and scientific functionality overtly European in origin and intended as a readable exteriority of European Russia. With time many more traditions and significantly European and Russian phenomena “bled through” to its surface in the multifarious and diverse ways of the palimpsest.

The archaeologists often refer to a cumulative palimpsest when they consider cases where older intact or partly ruined buildings have been reused and enlarged without any attempt to eradicate the original structure. The grandest example is probably Angkor Wat, the large Hindu temple in Cambodia, which was built during the Khmer empire in the early 12th century AD. Towards the end of that century it was rebuilt, mainly by being enlarged, into a Buddhist shrine. Turning for a decidedly more modest example on cumulative palimpsests we may consider the house of culture in Kirkenes called “Malmklang” which had its interior destroyed by an accidental fire in 2005. Paradoxically today its exterior looks just fine from a distance, but all windows are dark and closed as are its entrances. Nothing has taken place in the direction of creating a

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where strictly regulated common annual inspections may be the only thing happening. Here time and movement should ideally not exist to make the tracing of any trespasser over its ground easier. Any old constructions are in ruins, vehicles have just been abandoned, all is fossilising as nothing must be moved, scrapped or even photographed. Most such security zones further south in Europe have been re-used as commercial and population pressures are stronger; the ones up-north are slumbering-on creating aesthetic effects by their odd or sad reminiscences of the past. If properly defused by skillful policy-making and cross-border agreements their potential as tourist attractions maybe be realised by the event industry, but so far these zones have only been experienced by small groups of special guests.

## The borderland palimpsest

The Border Aesthetics research group of the University of Tromsø, and its members at the Barents Institute in Kirkenes, have discussed the concept of palimpsest while interpreting the public spaces and re-uses of built structures and signs in the Norwegian-Russian borderland. The cultural palimpsest is based on an analogy with the original concept of palimpsest which is a palaeographic object created by the recycling in medieval times of the scarce parchments of vellum used then for writing books. Chemical agents were applied to bleach away the original text of the parchments to be re-used and an apparently unrelated new text was written and illuminated on it. But after some considerable time the pigments and ink of the old text wandered or “bled” back on to the surface of the parchment causing the new and the old texts to fade together into a confused but often still readable double narrative of texts. This analogue has facilitated reflections on intertextuality and of the continuity between old and new phases in history. Great changes are often seen as modernisations or revolutions where posterity is believed to have broken away more or less completely from the past. But in the palaeographic palimpsest it is seldom a pure coincidence what texts are superimposed on each other, the succession mirrors broad contexts. When the palimpsest is applied metaphorically in for example architectural interpretations and in archaeology it facilitates seeing the actual closeness

new cultural scene for the town, only legal discussions over the house’s wanting insurance at the time of fire. The lack of ability, or rather the will, of the local municipality and relevant Norwegian state agencies to prioritize the reconstruction of the house of culture in Kirkenes, or even to dismantle the ruin, is obvious. Instead it presents an ironic lack of palimpsest today where the immaculate exterior of what is in fact a ruin symbolises a pretention to cultural values that has been beaten by an overarching commitments to neoliberal principles of always restricting public spending.

Across the border in the nearby Russian mining towns of Zapolyarny and Nikel slightly larger cultural house from the days of the USSR are fitted into the public space of the impressively sized squares in front of them. In Nikel also the statue of Lenin amidst the square is in a good state of preservation. A cumulative palimpsest is developing where local oligarch owned mining companies, which by their taxes keep the regional authorities going on a relatively lavish budget, also contributes directly to the maintenance of the existing public building of Soviet origin. By this and by supporting local culture they prove their willingness to be seen as the socially responsible successors of the old USSR combines. While renovating and expanding housing and public spaces in their neighbourhood this commitment extends to keeping some of the Soviet symbols, not emptied of meanings, instead in keeping them they are consciously reconnected to. In the eyes of the local citizens they were among other identified with the idea of a good life up-north. But no doubt the number of employees of these mines and metallurgical plants were cut quite considerably during the neoliberal transition of Russia in the 1990s.

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