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Early expectations of the Barents-cooperation compared to current assessments of the cooperation

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Declaration

I, Julie Sande, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature

[Sign.]

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ABSTRACT

The status of the Barents-cooperation thirty years after it was established has been analyzed by comparing ambitions against realities as perceived by practitioners and experts on the cooperation. By studying the Barents-cooperation through the perspective of practitioners, I have situated my theoretical approach between the critical constructivist and poststructuralist approaches, where language is central in understanding social reality. I have analyzed how the Barents-cooperation – emerging from a foreign policy project articulated by elites – is understood today by local practitioners.

The external conditions that were present in 1993 are still present and are highlighted in the interviews. Namely the distance between the West and Russia. This can be seen as the main motivation behind the establishment of the collaboration, and there is still broad support for it. Expectations attached to the collaboration in 1993 were high. The practitioners interviewed in this thesis and their descriptions considerably vary in the assessments of the cooperation today.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of the thesis

Established in 1993, The Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) approaches its 30th anniversary. The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the contemporary development of the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation, by offering analytical reflection on how the cooperation holds up today. Such an analysis is in particular interesting in view of the fact that it must be correct to state that the gap between Russia and the West is currently expanding. As evidenced by the news on a regular basis, Europe is today witnessing a severe backlash, with a surge of nationalism spreading in multiple countries. Former Soviet member states Poland and Hungary are turning authoritarian, Consequently, political instability is spreading across Europe, in Norway's immediate backyard.

In order to analyse this development, the following research question will be examined:

How do the early expectations of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region compare to assessments of the cooperation today?

The Barents-cooperation was founded in the early years after the end of the Cold War, with high expectations of a new era, enthusiasm over new opportunities and higher levels of contact across national borders. The purpose and expressed intent of the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation were to promote stability and progress through partnership and cooperation, which in turn would reduce tension and division, and thereby promote peace and security (Kirkenes Deceleration, 1993).

In 2013, the signatories of the Kirkenes Declaration (1993) reaffirmed their commitments to the purpose of the Barents-cooperation and stated that "*demand for cooperation is greater today than ever*" (Kirkenes II Declaration, 2013). Today, Norway maintains a cooperative relationship with Russia in issue areas with shared interest. Additionally, in 2019, the Norwegian Chairmanship stated an intention to *highlight success stories* regarding the people-to-people contact.

However, even though the Arctic stakeholders and states maintain a mantra of a cooperative region, rivalry and contestation frequently characterize the debate on the Arctic. Against this background, it may therefore be questioned whether the current situation meets the early expectations of the Barents-cooperation. Whilst the cooperation has proven dynamic enough to survive the external strife and geopolitical tension, there is lingering doubt whether the cross-border relations and the people-to-people contact that have been built over the past 30 years are robust enough to withstand more suspicion and tension.

The spill-over from the arrest and subsequent release of Frode Berg, a local cross-border advocate, entry-ban to Russia of editor of the Independent Barents Observer Thomas Nilsen and expulsion of local businessman Atle Berge are felt in the local community. These events are expressed in the interview material. Further, these events show that the Barents-cooperation is not necessarily "stable" and characterised by "peace and security", as envisaged by the BEAR. However, it should at the same time be recognised that progress has been achieved in some respects over the last years, which may give grounds for highlighting the so-called "*success stories*".

Discourse is shaped by historical and social context. Within this framework, in this thesis, special attention will be given to demonstrate how narratives and representation change over time. Recurrent in the discourse surrounding the cooperation is the notion of duality, the so-called "Self" and the constituting "Other". For example, between the centre and periphery, and between East and West. The discourse is evident today and in the early 90's, which points to the reproduction of these discourses throughout the cooperation's existence.

In furtherance of the research question and the current tension, one could also ask the following question:

Do the complex relations in the North with the enduring ideological contest and high political tensions affect expectations to the cooperation today?

As this thesis will show, despite progress on certain areas, the high expectations at the inception of the BEAR cannot be considered as met. And the expectations to the cooperation today seem to be less ambitious – and accordingly therefore potentially more realistic – than those that were expressed at the inception of BEAR.

1.2 Outline of thesis

In chapter 2, I will provide a theoretical framework for the analysis to be carried out in this thesis. This part includes a presentation of relevant conceptual debates in international relations. Further, important theoretical terms will be explained. In particular, the chapter will focus on *constructivism*, as the main theoretical basis.

Thereafter, in chapter 3, I will present my interview project and explain the methodology used. This includes a presentation of how the respondents were selected and how the interviews were carried out (type of questions etc.). As further explained therein, I chose to conduct *semi-structured interviews*, which gave good insight in the respondents' views, and accordingly, how their narratives compare to the early expectations of the BEAR.

Chapter 4 comprises a more general presentation of the relations between Norway and Russia. This includes a description of Norwegian-Russian relations before the Cold War, the discourses that served as a legitimation of the cooperation, as well as how the Barents-cooperation has been framed in light of larger political environments in the post-Cold War period, taking into account the cooperation's mention in public debate.

The main analysis based on my interviews is presented in chapter 5, aiming at highlighting assessments of the cooperation today compared to assessments of the cooperation at the time the BEAR was established. This includes how the respondents make use of Russian-Norwegian shared history and differences between Northern Norway (Self) in contrast to the South of Norway (constituting Other) with regard to Russia. It will also be shown how the authoritarian turn in Russia since the early 2000's has impacted narratives on both sides of the boarder, although this varies in view of the respondents' background and connection to the Barents-cooperation.

Lastly, I will present the main conclusions in chapter 6, in response to the research question of how the early expectations of the Barents-cooperation compare to assessments of the cooperation today.

2 THEORY

2.1 Introduction

The end of the Cold War sparked massive debates around world politics. Naturally, International Relations (IR) theory was also affected, confronted with this major political shift. The traditional theories of neo-liberalism and neo-realism, concerned with explaining why states act as they do and trying to maximize power and security in the international system, struggled to explain and comprehend the major changes that occurred. The issues of these traditional theories pointed to a need for a broader discussion and asking questions on change and agency among many other things.

Taking the concepts as anarchy, sovereignty, and states for granted, understandably makes it hard to explain possibilities of change. If the research question asked in this thesis was different, for instance what the intent behind the formation of the Barents-cooperation was – a realist perspective would arguably have more to bring to the table. This discussion is also more broadly about the theoretical spectrum in IR today – how we interpret events in history is shaped by the theoretical lenses through which they are viewed. As Prince and Reus-Smit points out, the end of the Cold War and the traditional theories' failure to explain it also "*compelled many critically-inclined theorists of international relations to shift their focus from disciplinary critique to substantive analysis*" (1998, p. 265).

Few periods in global politics are as vigorously debated as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. And for several reasons, there are numerous ways of interpreting and understanding these significant events and the underlying causes that led to them. That time in history was shaped by contest, conflict, and disagreement about fundamental perspectives of how to make sense of the world. These formative historical changes formed a window of opportunity that brought about the Barents Cooperation. It also created a space for constructivism to challenge the rationalism and positivism of neoliberal and neo-realist theories, which dominated IR scholarship up until that time (Reus-Smit, 2013, p. 217). Bringing in a social dimension to the study of the international world, by introducing a dimension of shared meaning and intersubjectivity promotes a different way of studying IR.

This thesis takes a constructivist approach to the research question on assessments of the Barents-cooperation. Constructivism emphasizes context and history in its understanding of International Relations. In my analysis, I also borrow from Lene Hansen, which commonly is situated within the poststructuralist camp of IR scholarship. The decision is based on the focus on identity and the way in which it is relational, discursive, and social. I have chosen to enter the discussion of realism and liberalism because these were challenged by constructivism at the time the Barents-cooperation arose. In the early 1990s, the focus on meaning began to gain traction, in part because the fall of the Soviet Union was not within the range of possibilities that the traditional theories envisioned. Constructivism, with its diversity of actors, draws attention to the fact that international relations are created and given meaning by specific actors. As a result of such an understanding, we must study what they do.

This chapter presents the theoretical framework used for this study and shows how a constructivist perspective benefits this research project. First, a brief overview of the traditional theories will be given, followed by a discussion on identity in foreign policy. After all, the Barents-cooperation is viewed as an important element of Norwegian foreign policy since 1993 (Regjeringen 2018).

2.2 Conceptual debates in IR

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published an essay in *The National Interest* - "The End of History?". The piece, later published as a book, became instantly famous, sparked controversy and became a significant contribution to the IR discipline at the time. Fukuyama argued that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and thereby Communism, Western liberal democracy was the champion and only viable political system, by calling it the final form of government (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 4). In this regard, the following statement summarizes his view:

"What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." (ibid.).

The essay was published before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fukuyama's prediction held firm in the 1990s, when the world witnessed the dismantling of Communism, transitions to democracy several places, and more states adopted free-market principles. In some sense, the Barents-cooperation can be seen as a child of Fukuyama's "End of History." It was against this significant shift in global politics that the cooperation was founded with a perception of a new international context, and security order in favour of peace and shared values.

It is clear today that the triumphant declaration of liberal democracies must be regarded as premature. Additionally, the rationalist assumptions underlying neo-realism and neoliberalism about international relations proved inadequate in explaining the major shift in global politics. That is not to delegitimize competing perspectives, rather, claiming that a turn to meaning gives a better understanding of the Barents Cooperation and the Foreign policy in general. Thus, some academics argue the region is best understood "*through the idea of neoliberal regionalism*" (Monica Tennberg, 2014, p. 47). Yet, as Julie Wilhelmsen writes, "*to say that Cold War realist thinking was replaced by post-Cold War institutionalism would be an oversimplification - of both eras*" (Wilhelmsen 2018, p. 387).

Constructivism does not necessarily dismiss realist assumptions, but the theory emphasizes subjective viewpoints as well (Hill, 2015, p.49). The traditional rationalist theories share a set of primary assumptions about international politics. Neo-realist and neo-liberalists contend a state-centric view, and those states are self-interested, rational actors operating in an anarchical international system. Neo-liberalism, all though embracing the notions above, sees the opportunity for cooperation when interdependence is present. While self-interested actors working in an anarchical structure make cooperation challenging, states therefore engage in cooperative regimes and institutions to mitigate these facts (Reus-Smit 2013, p. 220). Furthermore, neo-realism and neo-liberalism do not recognize the notion of human consciousness and its role in international politics. Emanuel

Adler, in his article 'Seizing the middle-ground' (1997), defines an understanding of constructivism as the "*view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world*" (p. 322). How we see, know and interpret the world is socially constructed and sets the ontological and epistemological foundation of constructivism.

Warranting distinction between what qualifies as conventional and what qualifies as critical, Price and Reus-smit usefully identifies four "*intellectual orientations*" (1998, p. 261). The first concern epistemological commitments to knowledge; positivist approaches knowledge as something that can be objective, and "*empirically verifiable truth statements about the natural and social world*" (ibid.). In addition to the traditional theories of IR, realism and liberalism, Wendt professes to be a positivist (1999). Second, concerning methodology, critical theories support a variety of approaches, but stresses the importance of interpretive strategies to knowledge. Third, concerning ontology, critical theorist challenges rationalist assumptions of the human nature, and their disregard of the social construction of identities, and the social reality at large. Finally, "*normatively they condemn value neutral theorizing, denying its very possibility, and calling for the development of theories explicitly committed to the exposure and dissolution of structures of domination*" (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998, p. 261).

This follows a turn to meaning, which I argue provides a better basis to understand and explain the formation of the Barents-cooperation and foreign policy in general and providing analytical tools to approach subjective viewpoints.

2.3 Turn to Meaning

Constructivism is a theory of international relations that maintain ideational factors constitute how we understand and perceive the world, and what we know about it. Constructivism asserts the following: "*(a) human interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors, not simply material ones; (b) the most important ideational factors are widely shared or 'intersubjective' beliefs, which are not reducible to individuals; and (c) these shared beliefs construct the interests and identities of purposive actors*" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 393). Intersubjective beliefs entail meanings flowing between people and across borders (Klotz and Lynch, 2007, p. 24). Constructivism acknowledges the "*the existence of a phenomenal world, external to thought*" (Guzzini 2000, p. 159). But material objects do not convey meaning by itself, rather people ascribe and construct meaning of things, both through shared ideas and linguistic practices (Miliken, 2001, p. 336).

The end of the Cold War changed people's perception about and mutual understandings about the prevailing order, which in turn changed what people once imagined as inconceivable to become a possibility (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 24-25). The meaning we ascribe to things can change over time. Materialist things such as weapon systems, oil, and money, does not have an inherent value or meaning, without agents applying it to them. Their value change over time, a given context and the intersubjective meaning people apply to them. In this conceptualization, it is the "*primacy of intersubjective structures that give the material world meaning*" (Katzenstein, 1998, p. 645-85). Capturing the essence of constructivism, Guzzini defines it as "*epistemologically about the social construction of knowledge, and ontologically about the construction of social reality*" (Guzzini, 2000, p. 160). To clarify,

ideas shape how we conceive of politics and the international world and provides actors with an instrument to communicate politics. By defining our values and preferences, ideas give us an interpretive framework and render some facts more important than others. This in turn has consequences for how we understand the importance of interests in politics (Nilssen, 2015, p. 22). The main tenet in constructivism is the view that agency and structure are mutually constituted. From this follows structures' influence on agency and agency influencing structure. Agency relates to the ability of actors to act upon structure (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 3).

How people act and how society shape their actions is mutually constituted. Klotz and Lynch illustrates an important point when they assert as follows:

"Yet the simultaneity of this interaction creates difficulties for capturing both the self-reinforcing nature of structures and the ways in which people sometimes overturn social order. People consciously and unintentionally replicate and challenge institutionalized routines and prevailing assumptions" (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 7).

Separating constructivism from neo-liberal and neo-realist reasoning is its attention to context and intersubjective understanding of international relations. Where neo-realists and neo-liberals maintain material structures are defining in explaining political action, constructivists argue ideational structures, such as history and context, cannot be separated from the material ones: *"Material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded"* (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). Indeed, material capabilities and balance of power do not explain why the United States or Denmark is Norway's close allies and why Russia is not. Therefore, identities are crucial in understanding international society since *"identities are the basis of interests"* (Wendt, 1992, p. 398).

As such, states may be self-interested, rational actors operating in an anarchic international system, but how they conduct themselves, who their allies are, and who their enemies are depends on their intersubjective understanding of history. So, how we define ourselves connects with our interest. Interests and identities are intertwined, so an individual or a state's identity are shaped by interactions with others (ibid, p. 406). Intersubjective understandings apply to individuals just as much as it applies to states, but it also makes up structure and agents.

For instance, norms, discourse, ideas, culture, ideology and meanings *"are social phenomena that create identities and guide actions. More than one person needs to accept these social phenomena in order for them to exist, and people define themselves in reference to them (. . .) Particular meaning become stable over time, creating social orders that constructivists call structures or institution"* (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 7-8). The meaning of a phenomena or practice, for instance a region or diplomacy, becoming stable is the basis for social order. Thus, these practices or phenomena can be contested, overturned, or evolve by people able to transform them (ibid. p. 8). Intersubjective understandings of how the world works change across time, space, and context. The alliances during the Cold War were a stable understanding and tapped into people's identities. When the Cold War ended abruptly, so did the dominant understanding and the discourses it produced. Few people saw this change coming, and most

struggled to explain it. However, the end of the Cold War did not just materialize, it evolved through the efforts of reconstructing discourse and shape practices and is an example of agency changing intersubjective meanings and in turn shaping structure (ibid., p. 11, 24).

2.4 Spectrum of Constructivism

Different scholars put different labels on distinctive approaches within constructivism. Correspondingly, it is a notable tendency for IR scholars to evade the same categorical labels. This is especially so, since constructivism is such a broad and rich theory, which encompasses several intellectual traditions, such as Weberian interpretive sociology and post-structuralism according to Palan (2000, p. 576). This section is an attempt to provide some clarity to the variety of labels and situate my own approach.

'Anarchy is what states make of it' was a 'landmark' in IR, and especially an important contribution to constructivism, which positioned the theory within the mainstream of IR. The article has received criticism for *"adopting too many of the assumptions of the mainstream it was criticizing, including the continuing emphasis on the states as unitary actors and the failure to deal the role of language in constituting intersubjective structures"* (Fierke and Jørgensen 2001, p. 32). To be sure, great variety is to be found within the constructivist tradition. For instance, clear variation is to be found between 'conventional' constructivists and 'critical' constructivist (Reus-Smit, 2013, p. 233, Hopf 1998, p. 181-185). These are also distinguished as 'thin' or 'thick', and 'modernist' or 'post-modernist', and between 'soft' and 'hard' (Katzenstein, 1996, Katzenstein & Keohane & Krasner p. 682, Price and Reus-Smit, 1198, p. 267-268, Palan, 2000, p. 576). Reus-Smit distinguishes the two approaches by focusing on what types of question they ask. Conventional constructivism commonly ask 'what' type questions, in contrast to critical constructivists who typically ask 'how' type of questions (Reus-Smit, 2013, p. 233). Wendt and Adler position themselves within the thin or conventional strand of constructivism. Adler refers to it as the middle-ground between rationalist and post-positivist approaches (1997). It's the effort of bridge-building that critical constructivist often criticizes. Adopting too many of the scientific methods of the mainstream traditional theories, they simultaneously abandon insights from the 'linguistic turn' (Fierke & Jørgensen, 2001, p. 26). This distinction can also be drawn between the thick and thin or conventional/critical. Palan suggests the thin, or soft as he calls it, is anyone showing interest in identities, culture and norms, and adheres to the notion that interests are not fixed, but socially constructed.

As mentioned above, the criticism of Wendt's essay shares the same critic aimed at conventional constructivism in general, namely adopting too many of the assumptions of the mainstream, with too much emphasis on states *"at the expense of critical practice"*, scrutinizing social structures, and the role of language in analyzing politics (Fierke & Jørgensen 2001, p. 32). Critical constructivism moves towards post-positivism, and post-structuralism can be labelled as 'reflective' (Keohane, 1988, p. 389-392). Scholars identified with critical constructivism, with special attention to language are Nicholas Onuf and Friedrich Kratochwil.

Thus, this thesis leans towards the critical approach by asking a 'how' question, and turning to the importance of role of language. Accordingly, this approach opens up the field of actors, and broadens the scope from the state-

centric approach usually associated with the traditional, positivist approaches in IR. The diversity of actors in post-positivist research accentuates international relations are constructed and acquired meaning by actors. What they say, and what they do matters. Therefore, we can compare what specific actors have said and written, and the meaning they wished to create to what is being said and assessed today. In the analysis section of this thesis, I focus on language and identity. Therefore, I also draw on Lene Hansen's work "Security as practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War". Hansen is, as mentioned, typically recognized as a poststructuralist within IR. From this follows identifying within the post-positivist branch of IR scholarship, moving away from the middle-ground where Adler places constructivism. As such, this theoretical chapter is crossing boundaries between theories. However, critical constructivism moves more towards the post-positivist branch, and therefore the gaps between the two theories are not as wide and arguably become more fluid.

2.4.1 *Identity and Foreign Policy*

Identities are shaped by interactions with other and the collective self-understanding of actors affects their perception and understanding of their environments and their behaviors. Combined with poststructuralism's focus on discourse is beneficial when studying phenomena which handle issues relating to identity. Hansen (2006, p.211) argues that "*the ontological starting point for poststructuralist discourse analysis is a conceptualization of policy as always dependent upon the articulation of identity, while identity is simultaneously produced and reproduced through the formulation and legitimation of policy*".

Language, and discourse takes front row within poststructuralism and in particular critical constructivist work and cannot be equated with conventional constructivism's concept of ideas, since "*discourse incorporates material as well as ideational factors*" (Hansen, 2006, p. 15). Using Lene Hansen's framework benefits my analysis as she articulates how discourse and language is intertwined, but also how language becomes social and political: "*an unstable system of signs that generate meaning through a simultaneous construction of identity and difference*" (Hansen, 2006, p. 17). Identity is not fixed, but fluid. The changes in identity over time appears through foreign policy discourse (Jensen, 2017, p. 4). Lene Hansen's approach informs my analysis, on how language and discourse informed narratives that is very relevant and clear in the Barents-cooperation. Material structures, objects, nation-states among others are only given meaning through language. Language is not a neutral instrument, but rather an interplay between agents producing social and political practice through representation (ibid., p. 16). Furthermore, agents in communication with others and their surroundings convey not only what they want to achieve, but also what they deem possible and appropriate. Different definitions of discourse capture different nuances depending on what kind of study you are conducting. Both poststructuralists and critical constructivists seek to understand and possibly challenge what "*meanings get taken for granted or dominate while others remain unspoken or marginalized*" (Klotz & Lynch, 2014 p 22). As such, universal truths or facts are challenged, and the theories rather seek to uncover assumptions about the social world, and narrative created through discourse.

Identities are mutual constituting and are constructed and shaped in relations to others. Seeing that identity and foreign policy is inseparable, foreign policy articulation rests upon a "Self" in relation to the "Other" (Hansen, 2006,

p. 6). The juxtaposition between the Self and Other, need not to be "*radically different*" Hansen continues (ibid.). It does require some difference; the definition of self is only possible through the definition, and differentiation of the other (Milliken, 2001, p. 336). For example, Neumann argues European identities are formed in relation to the othering of Russia (1999).

Commonly shared, is the view that discourse is the most important tool in attempting to legitimize policy and practice. When analysing foreign policy as a "discursive practice", Hansen asserts that:

"policy and identity are seen as ontologically interlinked: it is only through the discursive enactment of foreign policy, or in Judith Butler's terms 'performances,' that identity comes into being, but this identity is at the same time constructed as the legitimization for the policy proposed (Butler 1990:25; Campbell 1992:8-9; Weber 1998). Identities are thus articulated as the reason why policies should be enacted, but they are also (re)produced through these very policy discourses: they are simultaneously (discursive) foundation and product" (Hansen, 2006, p. 19).

Contrary to 'The End of History', the Barents-cooperation was primarily a pragmatic attempt at the end of the Cold War to reinvent history and to try to relax tensions between East and West. Nordic IR scholars and Norwegian foreign policy actors came together and 'reinvented' the Barents Region. We can trace the usage of constructivism's concept of ideas and identity to produce a discourse that laid a foundation for the Barents region and cooperation. As Neumann put it, "*regions are defined in terms of speech acts; they are talked and written into existence*" (1994, 59). Neumann along with other scholars from the New Europe study group and foreign policy practitioners applied this method themselves to lay the foundation of the Barents Region (Tunander 2008: 164). As such, both foreign policy practitioners and scholars participated in the legitimization of the region, they did this with reference a shared identity (Hansen, 2006, p. 33). Adding to this, Tunander claims the same scholars who had participated in this project had to reflect upon the fact that political actors actually had been able to manipulate the identity discourse. The ability to invent a new discourse had to be explained in one way or another. The practitioners therefore applied historical narratives in order to legitimize the project. Tunander argues a shift from constructivism to poststructuralism became evident in the debate and discourse in the 90's.

Iver B. Neumann added to this the element of culture and thereby proposed a model "*of culture as a mutually conditioned play between discourse and practice*". Neumann uses this model to study the changing diplomatic practice in the High North after the Cold War in his article "Returning Practices to the Linguistic Turn - The case of Diplomacy" (1996). In the study, Neumann, claims that centralised capital-based diplomatic practices were supplemented by local practices in the northern region. The diplomatic practice was changed from being centralised and capital-based to being a multifaced practice, including regional actors. Neumann's model underscores that change is always possible, although he writes "*practices tend to preserve the status quo of discourse*". Neumann defines discourse as preconditions for action and "*a system for the formation of statements*" and practice as "*socially recognised forms of activity, done based on what members learn from each other, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly*" or a "*socialised pattern of action*".

3 METHODOLOGY – MY INTERVIEW PROJECT

“What initially excites us as researchers and makes us pursue grad school are questions that bedevil or anger us, regions that fascinate us, and puzzles that remain unresolved. Treat methods as tools to put the pieces together, not as the puzzle itself” (Prakash, 2008, p. 236).

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is written with the intent to clarify each step of my research project and serve as a roadmap to my approach of studying the Barents-cooperation. Additionally, this chapter seeks to explore and justify the research strategies deployed to answer the research question.

The research question I seek to answer is whether early expectations of the Barents-cooperation compare to assessments of the cooperation today. My personal interest for the Barents-cooperation started this process. After reading Neumann’s “Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy” (2002), I started reflecting on how the cooperation is holding up today amidst geopolitical turmoil and the expanding gap between Russia and the West. I chose a qualitative research approach as it emphasizes the use of words in data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2016). Given the nature of my research topic, I deemed the qualitative approach expedient as it allows an exploratory approach and values the interviewee’s point of view (Bryman, 2016, p. 466). Social research should generate insights and improve our understandings of what goes on in the real world.

Characteristics of qualitative research are the recognition that meaning is not objectively discovered. Instead, meaning is defined and constructed by people and context and is always subject to change. In this thesis, the social world is understood through the participants’ interpretations, with particular attention to a changing context. The role of the researcher should also be addressed, as the researcher themselves performs a role in observing the world around them and interpreting the participants’ interpretations. Therefore, reality and data are observed subjectively.

This chapter proceeds as follows: Firstly, I present the qualitative approach used in the research and explain my research strategy and how I conducted the research. Lastly, I evaluate the quality of my data and its limitations and issues that impinge on ethical considerations, reliability, and validity.

3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

I decided early on that I wanted to collect my own data. In view of my interest in the Barents-cooperation, and the views and interpretations of people who are closely connected to it, I decided to conduct interviews.

There are different forms of data and different approaches to collecting them (Bryman, 2016). I decided to conduct interviews and gather primary data also because I wanted to challenge myself and push myself outside my comfort zone. Furthermore, I wanted to speak with people with real-life experience and knowledge about the

Barents Region and Cooperation. In-depth interviews are beneficial for the researcher by helping to explain, understand and explore respondents' experiences and assessments.

I focus on the representation of a region through 30 years. Reliance on language and discourse, and ideas and culture, are central. For this research, I wanted to access people with a high level of information or experience with the case, in order to add value and insight that I may not have been able to attain by solely reading literature or documents. Primary data is collected directly by the researcher rather than relying on data collected through previous research. In this case, the source of data comes from in-depth interviews. By contrast, secondary data are data collected from previous research, government documents, books, articles, policy reports, and so on.

3.2.1 *Sampling*

The pool of informants consists of individuals linked to the Norwegian side of the Barents cooperation. Among the people interviewed includes a former diplomat from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry who served in Russia, the leader of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat in Kirkenes, the mayor of Sør-Varanger county, and local experts by the notion of their current or former profession, in the local industry, within media, and academia. The informants are all Norwegian. All through the Barents-cooperation spans across several countries and counties, my interest lies in the Norwegian-Russian relations in the border region, and the informants reflect that. The informants share broad knowledge and practical experience of the border region and the cooperation.

I interviewed a total of eight people and had two conversations with individuals that connected me to my informants. The time frame stretched from March to May 2018. Seven of the eight interviews were conducted over Skype and one in person. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian and recorded following consent from the informants. Subsequently, the recordings were transcribed and translated to English (by myself). I will also mention that I had two phone calls with Thorvald Stoltenberg, who proved to be a door-opener for this thesis.

I needed to find a way to access the field and identify relevant informants. Therefore, I spoke to someone I was recommended to contact. This person was valuable as a bridge to the field. I got relevant contacts and information on how to get in contact with them. This is a "breaking point" of field work as everyone needs someone to provide some information that ensures access. In the telephone call, I presented my project, which was followed by a broad and informative discussion on the topic, where this person suggested people I could contact and offered me advice on how to do so. This source was important at this early stage of data collection, as it helped me construct an outline of topics and trends to supplement the information and notions I already had been working on. The phone call was not an interview and does not serve as a primary data source in this thesis. Instead, it was a conversation on the topic, outlining major themes, stakeholders, and suggestions of other people to contact. After our talk, I formulated a cover letter explaining the nature of the research, which was e-mailed to two potential informants. I also began designing a semi-structured interview guide.

As such, the first person I was in contact with set me on the path of a 'snowballing' method. Snowball sampling is described as a technique where the researcher contacts an individual, which then puts the researcher in contact with other relevant individuals, which then repeats this course (Bryman, 2016, p. 415). The technique is closely

linked to purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling (ibid. p. 408). The goal of purposive sampling is to strategically gather a sample of participants deemed relevant to the case and, therefore, relay data relevant to answer the research question. The nature of purposive sampling is not to generalize to a larger population. Instead, it seeks to shed light on a specific case or phenomena through the participants' eyes, where context is critical. Since this study sought to understand expectations and assessments of the Barents-cooperation, I aimed at gathering a sample of willing, well-informed and articulate practitioners.

Since I do not have any connections in the north or the Barents Cooperation, I relied heavily on gaining contact with people who would suggest other people connect with me. The people I reached out to were therefore chosen based on recommendations from others. Hence, in addition to a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy, the above-described approach was also sequential, as the sample expanded along the way and was not fixed from the start (Bryman, 2016, p. 410).

Gaining access to people turned out relatively easy. Most of the people I reached out to were enthusiastic about talking about the region and the Barents-cooperation. Not only did they share their own interpretations, but they also introduced me to other informants and allowed me to benefit from their network and knowledge of the region and its dynamics. I am grateful for the generosity and hospitality I was met with, even though most instances were from afar and over Skype or telephone.

3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Interviewing is one of the most common methods of collecting data in qualitative research. It can be defined as a conversation with the purpose of collecting valuable information (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 65). The method is beneficial as it allows for flexibility and seeks to uncover subjective interpretations of the participants (Bryman, 2016, p. 466).

The methodological approach to collecting data in this research was conducted through semi-structured interviews. This interview form relies on a fixed set of themes and/or open-ended questions, but allows the interviewer to slightly diverge from the guide as the interview unfolds (Bryman, 2016, p.468). I wanted the informants to answer my questions by taking their own personal, specialized experience as the starting point.

For example, the initial questions about political tension surrounding the Barents-cooperation were formulated to allow the informant to interpret what political tension, if any, they linked with the cooperation. In this way, the aim was to facilitate a flexible interview process (Bryman, 2016, p.468). Facilitating a flexible interview process meant that my informants, experts on the Barents-cooperation, could speak relatively freely and share tacit knowledge that I could use in order to enhance my knowledge and widen my repertoire about the topic. To develop the interview guides, I drew upon and reviewed prior conversations and interviews as well as secondary literature and news articles.

I experienced that the methodological approach allowed flexibility and enabled me to better understand what the research participants find important, as they could speak more freely than in a structured interview form. For

example, the notion of the Soviet Union as liberators came up in the first interview and the last. It did not change my interview guide. However, it made me aware that this dimension was meaningful to the respondents. In the coding and analysis, it was a clear pattern in the discourse of the Barents Region.

3.3.1 *The Interviews: Reflecting on IRL versus Skype Interviews*

I conducted eight interviews. One of these was conducted in person in Oslo and three were conducted on Skype, and four by telephone. All interviews were recorded based on an oral consent from the respondents. The in-person interview lasted the longest, approximately 1.5 hours. This respondent gave detailed and lengthy answers, and the conversation flowed. The Skype and telephone interviews lasted between 15-40 minutes.

Nonverbal cues, such as body gestures, facial expressions, and other visible signals, were lost in the telephone interviews and can affect the ability to pace the interview. However, interview by telephone and Skype proved to be very convenient and cost-effective, which also partly explains why some of the interviews were conducted in that manner. Further, I wanted to be as flexible as possible, and if any of the respondents preferred Skype or telephone, I wanted to accommodate this. Interviewing via phone and Skype made scheduling the interviews easier and contributed to reduce costs. All the respondents interviewed by telephone or Skype are located in Northern Norway. The person I conducted the in-person interview with lives in Oslo. Thus, the geographical distance also affected the choice. Although certain visual aids were missed in the digital meetings, I found that the method met the purpose of this thesis since my interest lies in the respondents' perspectives and viewpoints.

Qualitative data collection by telephone or Skype was perhaps less attractive before the Covid-19 pandemic. At least some would suggest telephone interviews were looked upon as inferior to in-person interviews (Novick, 2008, p. 394). I cannot say what it has meant to my interviewees. Some would say I have been missing out on something very relevant: to be present in the Norwegian/Russian environment, experiencing events like 'Barents Spektakel' and missing what is sometimes referred to as the 'Barents feeling', which is written and talked about.

"Kirkenes really is a kind of state within the state. Where else can you experience China's ambassador accusing Norway of making mistakes, hearing people from the south described as naive and paranoid and seeing Frode Berg sitting in a Soviet spy bar?" writes a commentator in a lead-in in Norway's largest newspaper (Aglen, 2020). Yet, I can access the perspectives of the experts assessing the cooperation, which is my primary objective, not getting neutral descriptions of how things are. On the other hand, interviewing from afar and being detached from the Barents spirit myself arguably made me less prone to becoming 'home blind' (Neumann, 2008, p. 64). That is not to say I am stripped from having biases, these are inevitable and something to take into consideration and contemplate as a researcher.

Conducting research and interviewing from afar from my home office in Oslo strengthened the already existing 'insider/outsider' dynamic. This is evident in my analysis as dichotomies between center and periphery, North and South, and Oslo and Kirkenes or the Barents region at large. A potential downside of entering research as an outsider relates to the risk of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias concerns the way in which a researcher seeks supporting evidence for their existing expectations, which can affect how we process and recall information.

When I started this research project, I was intrigued by politicians' efforts in separating the Barents-cooperation, and in some way shielding it, from the bilateral tension between Norway and Russia following the Ukraine crisis, and the following sanction regime. It was therefore natural for me, especially in the start of this project, to cue into factors that possibly could contradict that the separation was possible. Throughout this process, I have never felt overconfident of my own opinions, and I constantly circled back and reminded myself that what I first and foremost should be interested in identifying and understanding the respondents' subjective viewpoints.

3.4 Data Analysis

How did I go about analyzing my data? The role of language has an important place in the analysis. Giving language an important role calls for commentary on how intersubjectivity is understood. Taking a critical constructivist approach to my analysis, I adopt an interpretive epistemology, and an ideational and linguistic ontology. When applying an interpretive method of analyzing data, the researcher aims to capture the intersubjective conceptions of reality, often rooted in historical or social contexts (Klotz & Lynch, 2014, p. 11). The representation of the Barents-cooperation was formulated and accessed through language, in form of transcripts of interviews with the practitioners. Their interpretations have been transcribed and codified, and then interpreted and analyzed.

When working on interpreting the interviews, which form the main source of my data, articulation of Self and Other in defining identities became evident. Comparing what was said and written about the cooperation in the beginning, and what they wanted to create, and what is being said today. A key part of the analysis seeks to shed light on the presence and impact of identities on the Barents-cooperation, and the Barents-cooperation impact on identity through discursive practices. In this process, context is central, as the cooperation emerged in a particular period in history and has endured to through changing international dynamics up until this day. How the respondents make sense of this is what I seek to get a better understanding of.

3.5 Trustworthiness

A fundamental assumption of this thesis is that the world at large does not present itself as self-evident. I am not neutral, therefore running the risk of interpretive bias is always present. However, certain steps are possible to take in order to mitigate running that risk or at least provide a 'good analysis' as Kevin C. Dunne puts it (Dunne, 2008, p. 91). Throughout this process I have "acted in good faith" (Bryman, 2016, p. 386).

First, is the need for supporting evidence. I base my thesis on multiple sources, including primary and secondary data, which enables cross-checking the data. Additionally, several theoretical perspectives are introduced in the theory section of this thesis. This constitutes triangulation of data (Bryman, 2016, p. 386, Prakash, 2008, p. 227). Instead of evoking and establishing a notion of truth, I do follow steps in order to assure internal validity. The conclusions I draw make sense to me and are supported by other sources. I therefore expect and hope they are convincing to others. Although no "*correct interpretation of an objective reality*" is what I am striving for, I do intend to convey that my interpretations are valid and the analyses that follow from them (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 20).

I use a number of quotes from the interviews, with the aim of showing systematically interpreted meaning-making practices and thus, providing transparency to my analysis, which is the basis of trustworthiness and thus the reliability of my analysis. However, I wish to recognize in an attempt of being self-reflexive, that in the exercise of interpreting the interviews, I am myself involved with “conducting my own representation of the representations I am studying” and therefore “very much part of the process of knowledge construction that I am investigating” (Dunne, 2008, p. 92).

How people attribute meaning to their environment is an underlying premiss of most qualitative studies (Bryman, 2016, p. 392-393). The interviews are about the subjective viewpoints of the people being interviewed. How they see the Barents-cooperation and attach meaning to it is therefore my point of departure. I believe the findings in the analysis are transferable to the same context at some other point in time (Bryman, 2016, p. 384). A potential pitfall with this kind of research, is running the risk of ‘going native’, namely to “lose sight of what you are studying” (ibid. p. 394). At times it has felt like I was losing sight, but at least I have been aware of that fact and taken steps to remind myself what I am studying and attempting to do.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

3.6.1 Ethical Considerations

A study based on qualitative interviews raises several ethical considerations the researcher must contemplate and manage throughout the process. Especially when dealing with personal accounts of social life and line of work in a sensitive political context, taking place in a local community, where mutual trust and good relations are the mantra. In the interviews, matters of political sensitivities are present.

Ethical considerations pertaining to the respondents' anonymity has been an important feature and has presented challenges pertaining to the wish of presenting rich and detailed accounts, while also conducting research in a way to ensure no harm to the participants.

Prior to the interviews, I e-mailed all the respondents with a cover letter, presenting myself and my research together with an interview guide. I decided to include the interview guide to be upfront about the questions to be asked and letting them have the opportunity to reflect on whether they wanted to take part and reflect on the questions. I made sure that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withstand from answering particular questions. I also asked if they agreed to be recorded. At the end of each interview, I asked whether they preferred being anonymized or not. I provided them with contact information if they had any questions and asked if I could contact them, if necessary, with any follow-up questions. Two out of the eight respondents wished to be anonymized. However, I have nonetheless decided to anonymize all, except for two respondents.

The ethical challenges associated with anonymity are far ranging. Most important is the aspect of doing no harm to the participants. I do not believe I risk harming anyone participating in this study. However, since the topic of analysis considers personal assessments and access the interviewee's point of view, anonymization felt right upon reflection.

Yet, I decided to disclose the names of two of the participants, namely Thomas Nilsen from the independent Barents Observer and Rune Rafaelsen, Mayor of the municipality of Sør-Varanger (at the time of the interview). Both Nilsen and Rafaelsen were adamant that whatever they said, they agreed to be quoted on. Nilsen, as journalist, and Rafaelsen, as Mayor, both partake in the public discourse on the cooperation and border-region in their daily work. Additionally, they are both known in their local community and for most people who are interested in the Norwegian cross-border activities. For these reasons, I decided not to anonymize them.

3.6.2 *Limitations*

To conclude this chapter, I wish to call attention to certain limitations of this study that I have identified.

Firstly, for different (personal) reasons, this research project has been significantly delayed. The interviews were conducted in the spring/summer of 2018 and the thesis is being completed and handed in much later.

At the time of the interviews, controversies surrounding the Frode Berg case were high. There was much focus on whether he had been innocently apprehended, or in fact whether he could be seen as an intelligent agent. The outcome of the criminal prosecution against him in Russia was uncertain, but likely to end in some sort of conviction. His arrest gave grounds for uncertainty with regard to the relations between Norway and Russia.

However, despite the rather long time since spring/summer of 2018, I cannot see that any significant events have occurred since then which would be likely to have any significant impact on the respondents' answers.

Secondly, looking back, I do wish that I had decided to make contact with even more informants, which would have strengthened my data collection and perhaps given access to more diverging views on various topics.

4 THE RELATIONS BETWEEN NORWAY AND RUSSIA

4.1 Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to establish an understanding of the aim of the multilateral Barents project, and appreciation of the optimism that initially characterised the cooperation, celebrating and end of an era.

First, I briefly describe Norwegian-Russian relations before the Cold War. Second, I present the articulated goals in the establishment of the cooperation and a closer look at the discourses that served as a legitimation of the cooperation. The last part of this chapter concerns rough features of Norway's policy concerning its relationship with Russia, and how the Barents-cooperation was framed in light of the larger political environments in the post-Cold War period over the past 30 years alongside the cooperation's mention in, *inter alia*, public debate.

4.2 Background

The High North or the Arctic, which are more or less synonymous, has historically occupied an important role in Norwegian foreign policy. During the Cold War, Norway and the Soviet Union managed to collaborate in the management of marine resources in the Barents Sea (Hønneland, 2017, p. 16). Further, the Arctic region was a

highly militarized area with Russia's Northern Flank and atomic submarines located at the Kola Peninsula. Its geographical position between East and West made the area of strategic importance to NATO allies.

For Norway, this context produced two ramifications for its policy towards Russia: first, the willingness to engage in bilateral agreements with Russia remained cautionary, and second, balancing deterrence through NATO, and reassurance through self-imposed restrictions to avoid conflict (Hønneland and Rowe, 2010, p. 10-12). Both the first and second point are still evident in Norwegian policy to Russia, but the second remains today the cornerstone of the Norwegian policy.

Despite the high tension and insecurity, Norwegian-Russian relations remained stable. Norway's foreign policy towards Russia balanced between deterrence through NATO and reassurance based on self-imposed restrictions. These included denying nuclear weapons and foreign military bases on Norwegian soil in peacetime and military exercises with NATO countries east for the 24th longitude (Hønneland & Rowe, 2010, p. 12).

However, since the Cold War, the High North has widened in scope, and now encompasses more than the self-imposed measures. The more modern reassurance policy rests upon the politically institutionalized cooperation between the two countries, which opened channels of communication. It also encompasses joint military exercises. The modern reassurance policy rests upon the politically institutionalized cooperation between the two countries, which opened channels of communication. Norway's traditional foreign policy towards Russia balances between deterrence through NATO and reassurance through cooperation that contributes to lower tensions. Although mutual sanctions between the West and Russia were enforced and high-level political contact was broken, the two countries agreed that the Barents Cooperation would be shielded.

However, recent events, such as the arrest and subsequent release of Frode Berg, a local cross-border advocate, entry-ban to Russia of editor of the Barents Observer Thomas Nilsen and expulsion of businessman Atle Berge, signal that the Cooperation is not shielded.

4.3 The Barents Euro-Arctic Region – Norwegian foreign and security policy

The High North is at the centre of Norwegian foreign and security policy. In consequence, Norway's relationship with Russia is at the centre of Norwegian High North Policy (Hønneland, 2012, p. 29). The region is written and talked about, and has a prominent status in research institutions, in the media, and in public debate. It is also important in discussions on management and business. In the public debate, "Nordområdepolitikk" and "nomad" are Norwegian concepts that do not have any immediate translation to English. "Nordområdepolitikk" is a wide concept, that encompasses Norwegian foreign and domestic policies. Geographically, "nærområde" encircles the Norwegian areas of the northern counties, the Norwegian Sea, the Barents Sea, Svalbard, and the border areas to Russia (Hønneland & Rowe, 2010, p. 10). The two terms especially gained prominence in Norwegian discourse in the early 2000's. As the Cold War ended, measures were taken to reframe the Arctic as an area of cooperation and a bridge to Russia. One measure was the initiative taken by then foreign minister

Thorvald Stoltenberg in 1993 to establish the Barents-cooperation. In the beginning of the 1990's Norwegian foreign policy directed at the Arctic was above all a strategy to further build relations or a new practice with Russia. The strategy was made possible by the decentralisation that took place in Russia in the early years of the 1990's. The policy of decentralization gave the regions (oblast, okruger) more autonomy (Rowe, 2017, p. 59).

Hence, in the 1990's the emergence of cooperative regimes flourished in the region. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thorvald Stoltenberg, enthusiastically embraced the idea of a "Barents Region", and after consulting with Russia, Sweden and Finland, the idea was formalized in the Kirkenes Declaration of 1993, and the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) was established. Mr Stoltenberg imagined a future "*where relations between neighbours in the North resemble those we have with other countries*" (1994, p. xi). The changed geopolitical landscape opened a window of opportunity of reshaping relations with Russia that Norwegian diplomats were happy to seize.

The timely initiative also followed the Norwegian preference of dealing with Russia in a multilateral forum, and not bilaterally. The main reason for the collaboration was that common challenges faced the region. These included environmental protection, nuclear safety, a harsh climate, long distances, and scattered populations. Large deposits of natural resources such as oil, gas, forests, fish, and minerals were also a strong driver. The initiative sent an important political signal to Russia that its neighbors in the west were willing to invite closer regional cooperation in key areas (Hønneland, 2012, p. 87; Hønneland 2017, p. 25). As such, the safety dimension was also toned down. In general, one does not want co-operation to be associated with power politics, but rather to focus on common challenges and common interests. For Norwegian politicians the region building initiative also served as an instrument to "*managing Euro-scepticism in the North, and Russia-scepticism in the South*" (Stokke & Tunander, 1994, p. 4).

The purpose and expressed intent of BEAR were to promote stability and progress through partnership and cooperation, which in turn would reduce tension and division, and thereby promote peace and security (Kirkenes Deceleration, 1993). The objectives of the BEAR are broad, encompassing narrowing the East/West gap in standards of living, reducing military tension, environmental protection, regional infrastructure, culture, science and technology and indigenous people. Delegating responsibility to the periphery served as a measure for cross-border interaction to support regional development (Stokke & Tunander, 1994, p. 230).

4.4 The early expectations and goals of the Barents Cooperation (BEAR)

We can divide Norwegian goals of the cooperation in the early 90's in three categories (Holst, 1994, p. 12);

1. Normalization – Establish cross-border relations with Russia resembling relations we have with the other Nordic countries;
2. Stabilization – Promote cooperation and stability to reduce military tensions, reduce environmental threats and narrow East-West gap in standards of living; and
3. Regionalization – Create a multilateral framework for regional cooperation, drawing the region into the European integration project.

In furtherance of this, Holst summarises the aims of the BEAR as follows:

"The aim of cooperation between governments and counties in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region is to create meeting-places for governments, regional and local authorities, and business and industry where contact can be established, and networks developed which can provide a basis for mutually advantageous cooperation. A primary objective is to achieve as great a degree of openness and as much contact as possible across national borders, thereby promoting normalization and stabilization in an area where the Cold War was at times extremely cold" (Holst, 1994, p. 12).

The aim of the cooperation articulated above captures the need for a framework to build trust and developing a more prosperous region. The liberal idea that increased welfare would in turn drive Russia to become more like liberal democracies was not directly expressed but shines through the statement. The objectives are very broad and ambitious, which Hansen argues, makes them difficult to measure (Hansen, 2015, p. 1028).

The three categories outlined above are retrieved from Stokke and Tunander's Barents Region book (1994). Later, Tunander writes the book which can be seen as a foreign policy project just as much a scholarly one, as the initiative and finance of the book came from the Foreign Ministry (Tunander, 2008, p. 172). As such, he claims that leaders and scholars were embedded in the discursive practice of inventing a region. He further stipulates the following:

"Geography is certainly an objective entity, but to the human mind it cannot be conceptualized outside a given discourse that can be recreated and manipulated to serve certain political interests or visions." (ibid).

What Tunander refers to is the conscious usage of a shared identity. Creating a region based on historical myths and narratives was intended to unite the neighbouring local populations, member states and spectators of the legitimacy and, natural essence of the region. For the discourse to take hold, it had to be recognised by its surrounding as an authentic depiction of reality. The political vision this discourse was to serve, concerned the idea that a shared identity which would further reduce tension and prevent conflict.

Frequent usage of "historical myths" traced back to the time before the Cold War, to the time of the Pomor trade between Norway and Russia (Hønneland, 2017, p. 28-29). This time was painted as a natural state rather than the conflictual Cold War. This shared history was meant to rationalize a natural unity and common Barents identity. This political undertaking was important to overcome Cold War mentality and to justify the initiative (Tunander, 1994, p. 34-36).

The initial discourse on the cooperation centred on enthusiasm and optimism of what this project could become. From the onset, Norwegian hopes were high that the region would become fertile ground for cross-border business partnerships, which in turn would lower military tensions, increase stability and foster mutual understanding. The range of focus areas also meant a diversity of actors. Additionally, ambitions that the cooperation might draw Russia into Europe, to alter the Russian society, and normalize relations in the region

by turning Russia towards Western values of democracy. While some experts warned that future Russian westward orientation is not a given, it was difficult in middle of the “Arctic Euphoria” to anticipate the internal political changes to come, put forward by Putin (Hønneland, 2017, p. 47).

Shortly after the inception of the BEAR, ambitions on Russian westward orientations were met with backlash, as Russian scepticism started growing regarding the actual intent behind several of the development projects. In several instances, projects failed, and as a result, the BEAR turned its focus to smaller, regional projects and to people-to-people cooperation. At the turn of the century, the decentralization policy also came to an end, when Vladimir Putin took over as Prime Minister. Putin initiated his leadership by consolidating power at the top. The continued effort to centralize power was only made possible by the economic growth by the turn of the century (Rowe, 2015, p. 552). Consequently, the Russian bureaucracy, and lower-level management lost its leeway. The scepticism of Western intentions and the fundamental change in Russian political organization were consequential for the cooperation. Suspicion developed in step with the internal changes taking place in Russia, which affected both the Russian effectiveness and interest (Rowe, 2017, p. 61). However, the Barents Cooperation proved dynamic enough to survive the domestic changes within Russia.

In Norway, a change in attitude towards the cooperation was also possible to notice. This was perhaps not especially unexpected considering the high expectations the Barents-cooperation had from its beginning. This was mainly due to issues concerning business cooperation and that financial gains did not materialize. These barriers pertained to judicial challenges, and different business cultures, ethics, and organization (Hønneland, 2017, p. 8-9, 36-37).

The 1990's were years characterized by regional cooperative initiatives. Many of these were occupied with fighting environmental threats and stimulate business and industry cooperation (Hansen, 2015, p. 1068). By the turn of the century expectations of petroleum extraction in the Arctic that might drive economic and regional development gave rise to international attention for the region. In Norway, especially the heightened interest and economic growth increased between the first and second Stoltenberg government. According to the former prime minister Stoltenberg, «[n]ordområdene vil være Norges viktigste strategiske satsingsområde i årene som kommer» (Stoltenberg, 2000, 2005).

4.5 The recent development of the Barents Cooperation

In 2003, the Norwegian government appointed an expert committee to identify challenges and opportunities in in the High North, the committee is known as the Orheim Committee, after the member, and then director of the Polar Institute. Their findings and recommendations took the form of an official government inquiry (NOU). The committee recommended to tone down the Barents-cooperation, and suggested that only the regional tier should remain, as the governmental level was deemed redundant. The harsh conclusion drawn by the committee was soon met with backlash, and the criticism was rejected by the practitioners of the cooperation, such as spokesperson Rune Rafaelsen, and the founder Thorvald Stoltenberg. The report never resulted in a downgrade in line with its recommendations, but it took a couple of years before it got an upgrade.

The years 2007-2008 marked a shift in the European security environment. President Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich summit reminded foreign powers that the Russian bear still has sharp claws. Furthermore, he emphasized a sharp division between the West and Russia. Later that same year, Russian flag planting on the North pole gave rise to international attention and worry (Parfitt, 2007).

In 2005, the Barents Cooperation gained relevance, lifted by the new Norwegian government and its policy. After several years with the collaboration receiving little attention, with the exception of the criticism that ensued the Orheim committee, the collaboration was highlighted (Hansen, 2015, p. 1035-1036). This also took place discursively and moved from the margins to the centre of the debate.

Hansen describes this renewed focus on strengthening a communication channel as follows:

"Given the very asymmetrical power relationship between Norway and Russia, accompanied by increased self-assertion on the part of Russia, it appeared from around 2005 that it was rational to strengthen a channel intended to create good relations. The security motive was often downplayed and often implicitly emphasized in favour of other motives in order not to create insecurity among the people" (Hansen, 2015, p. 1018-1019).

Among other things, potential oil and gas reserves in the Barents Sea increased the international interest in the Arctic and the northern areas. Arguably, it was important for Norwegian authorities to underscore Norway as an important stakeholder in the development of the region. Furthermore, Barents co-operation was considered an important and good foreign policy tool. Potential for petroleum cooperation with Russia further increased the relevance of the cooperation since it could potentially contribute to facilitating cooperation (ibid., p. 1019-1020).

Since 2010 until today, the tensions between Russia and the West, and accordingly between Russia and Norway, have increased. More recently, since 2014, Europe has been subjected to a changing security context, due to the Russian annexation of Crimea. Russian breaches of international law have evoked sanctions, which Norway is party to. Russia is both Norway's neighbour and a major player at the international scene. As such, the Norwegian government has a dual foreign policy, resting on two pillars in its bilateral relationship to Russia (Brende 2017). The first pillar rests on the close relationship with its allies and partners in NATO, which makes up the Norwegian security doctrine. This also includes a strong reliance on international law and being part of the sanction's regime because of Russia's breaches to this institution. The second pillar rests upon the close neighbourly relations despite the sanction regime. These relations include regional and local cooperation, across the Northern borders, "people to people cooperation", the Arctic Council and the Barents Cooperation which operates both on the capital, regional and local level. As such, the Norwegian government upholds territorial integrity while also maintaining and engaging in cooperative relations. Despite the two pillars which Norwegian foreign policy is based on, the Norwegian government insists on being "clear, consistent, and predictable" as well as "clear and firm" in its dialogue with Russia.

It can be noted that Wilhelmsen and Gjerde (2018) have analysed Norwegian and Russian narratives on the relations between the countries in the period 2012-2016. Based on their research, they conclude that what *some refer to as 'the New Cold War's is indeed spreading to the Arctic'*. As to narratives, they observe that Norwegian official discourse has *"shifted toward a juxtaposition of threat/protection, and bad/god"*, and that Norwegian policies have *"changed substantially since 2014, becoming increasingly realist and security-oriented"*. This is also observed in Russia.

Most recently, the security policy situation has been significantly challenged by Russia's military threats towards Ukraine, to the effect that we can read daily headings in the news regarding a potential 'war in Europe'. At the time of completing this thesis, meetings between USA and Russia and between NATO and Russia are taking place in an attempt to resolve the conflict regarding Ukraine. Naturally, Norway has in this case no other choice than following NATO's and EUs' course, without any particular room for putting weight on Norway's cooperation with Russia in the North.

Against this background, the recent developments give grounds for certain scepticism regarding the Barents-cooperation. Norway will continue to express opinions to the dissatisfaction of Russia, including condemnation of Russia's military conduct, and (if necessary) be part of financial and political sanctions. Clearly, this may affect the relations between Norway and Russia, and accordingly, certain aspects of the Barents-cooperation.

5 ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

Assessments of the cooperation today compared to assessments of the cooperation in the beginning must be seen in relations to the major political changes that have occurred the past 30 years. Geopolitical and interstate tensions affect the border-region. Through the stories from respondents, it is difficult to shy away from the political realities that shape the lenses through which cooperation is presented, understood, and assessed.

Following the empirical data, three trends appear: 1) Regional history and historical identity; 2) Authoritative turn in Russia; and 3) External events – e.g. Ukraine and the heightened geopolitical tensions. Therefore, the chapter is divided into three sections based on time periods or events.

The empirical observations are linked to the three categories pointed out by Holst in the 1990s which described the Norwegian goals and pillars of the Barents-cooperation. The first one, 'Normalization', entailed the cross-border relations with Russia resembling relations Norway has with its other neighbouring countries, and return to its historical relationship before the Cold War (Eriksson, 1995, p. 273). This goal never came to fruition, but the narrative of a regional identity remains a trend in the empirical data, which several of the respondents reflected upon. The second goal, 'Stabilization', refers to the goal of promoting cooperation and stability to reduce military tensions, environmental threats (ibid., p. 275). The third goal, 'Regionalization', is aiming at creating a multilateral framework for regional cooperation, drawing the region into the European integration project. The overall goal of the cooperation concerned security, all though never explicitly stated (ibid, p. 270).

Seeing the cooperation being a “top-down” initiative, how do the local practitioners perceive the cooperation today?

5.2 Established narratives of regional history – the formative years

Historical perspectives inform identity today. Through textual analysis of interviews with practitioners of the Barents-cooperation this thesis seeks to uncover how the Barents-cooperation was represented in its early days and how respondents articulate their understandings and expectations of the cooperation today. The role construction of the Barents region, depictions, stories, and accounts of the cooperation, it is evident that the language was and still is central to the construction of the region (Diez 1999, p. 599). In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, measures were taken to reframe the Arctic as an area of cooperation and a bridge to Russia. Frequent usage of “historical myths” helped trace a shared history which was meant to rationalize a natural unity and common Barents identity (Tunander, 1994, p. 34-36, Eriksson, 1995, p. 273). This was a conscious move to legitimize the endeavour. As such, the region was “*talked and written into existence*” (Neumann 1994, p. 59).

Several of the respondents point to differences between Northern Norway (Self) in contrast to the South (constituting Other) of Norway in relation to Russia (Hansen, 2006, p. 33-34). Relational identity can be traced to remarks as “people in Oslo”, “Victoria Terrasse” which stand in “binary opposition” to the people in the Barents Region (Milliken, 2001, p. 336). Especially one of the respondents is very clear in his statements of a distance not only in miles, but also in understanding of the region and cooperation (Interview, 1/6).

In the following section I will present and explain how the respondents’ direct attention to Russian-Norwegian history as a starting point. It became evident that a common thread was notion of a shared history. The discursive intervention from the 90’s remains today and suggests an established local discourse.

Lene Hansen (2006, p. 71) describes basic discourses “*as often centred around representations of identities with particular conceptual histories*”. Storytelling and shared histories were central in the formation of the Barents region. Key terms recurring in almost all the interviews which are subject to analyses in this thesis were the notions of ‘complex’ and ‘complicated’ when asked about the Russian neighbour. Moreover, the respondents direct attention to shared history – the pomor trade and the Soviet Union as liberators. Such narratives were common in the formative years of the Barents-cooperation. The following quotes suggest that the conceptual histories still have a strong presence when talking and writing about the region.

Furthermore, these narratives also discern a North versus South perspective. Norwegian/Russian neighbourliness is challenging and changing. Thomas Nilsen reflects on how ‘naboskapet’ is looked upon differently in the border region than in the rest of Norway. In fact, two of the respondents directly make a point of distinguishing a difference in relations Northern Norway had to the Soviet Union, and today Russia, compared to the rest of Norway. Nilsen states as follows:

"We had a slightly different relationship with the Soviet Union here in the north, than, for example, the rest of Norway, the USSR was looked upon as liberators here in the border region and had a slightly more positive relationship than Oslo had."

Peder also stressed the important and positive narrative in a similar manner:

"Norway-Russia has never been at war. I was told while I was ambassador in Moscow, Norway is the only neighbouring country Russia has never been at war with. Furthermore, the Soviet Red Army liberated Øst-Finnmark. It is an historical event that constantly emits positive vibrations, you name it, in our general relationship. An important factor today but a factor few Norwegians are particularly aware of. Most Norwegians believe Norway was liberated on May 8, 1945, but it was at the cost of nearly 1000 Soviet soldiers' lives that fell for Norway, we were allies. Another little-known fact is that on Norwegian soil there are buried more Soviet soldiers than Norwegians dying in the Second World War." (Interview, 1/6)

Both Peder's and Nilsen's quotes represent positive reflections surrounding the Cold War history.

Lisa also mentions this period and remarks the Soviet Union a liberator, but also mentions *"partisans in retrospect were mocked and looked down upon in the local community. There are many facets of who you are locally"*. She recalls the time when the border resident's certificate came: *"there are still people who have not dared to take it while those who have moved from the outside, who do not have the Cold War history, they think it is a fantastic opportunity"*. (Interview, 22/3). Lisa's statement reflects on the same history but focus on negative aspects. The mayor of Sør-Varanger, Rune Rafaelsen, also refers to the liberation of Øst-Finnmark and remarks Russian appreciation of Norway honouring the memorial of this shared history. Rafaelsen expands on the history of the Norwegian-Russian border, and the adoption of the St. Petersburg Protocol, and remarks that *"in Kristiania they knew nothing, and I usually say – they still don't"*. In this statement, Rafaelsen asserts a gap between Kirkenes and Oslo, and is clearly concerned with central authorities not understanding the Barents-cooperation's' importance and the priority it should be given. He follows up on this:

"Keep in mind the (Oslo) diplomacy strongly opposed the establishment of the Barents-cooperation – a good example dating 10 or so years back, a position as an economic attaché or so in Murmansk was announced and no one in Norwegian diplomacy applied for the job. This says something about having Norwegian diplomacy that does not know what is most important for Norwegian foreign policy." (Interview, 28/6)

This quote highlights the constructing of Self in opposition to the Other. Rafaelsen criticizes the lack of understanding from central authorities and elites, to accentuate Kirkenes and the local population as the knowledge-capital and centre of geopolitical relations in Norway. Whereas Rafaelsen emphasizes that the Barents-cooperation maintains strong, in fact he goes on saying: *"Norway's most important peace project is cooperation with Russia. This is where Norway meets the world. The geopolitical center is in Kirkenes, and no other places. In Oslo, nothing geopolitical happens, here you meet a difficult, complex neighbor."* (Interview 28/6).

Lisa paints a different picture, stating that *"We always used to have ministerial meetings, working meetings in Kirkenes or Russia. (Norwegian) Ministers still attend the Kirkenes Conference, but they do not meet any Russian ministers there, so they visit the outskirts of their own kingdom and not the centre of the Barents region."* (Interview, 22/3).

This quote illustrates a negative change in the cooperation. The quotes also draw attention to what Thorvald Stoltenberg argued to be the 'motor of the cooperation', namely that the traditionally capital-based foreign policy practice, was given a regional and local dimension (Neumann, 2002, p. 642). Rafaelsen emphasizes the local population and attributes the good relationship between Russians and Norwegian in the North to ordinary people and residents in the border-region. These are the "big foreign policy thinkers in Norway". Furthermore, he claims the delineation line in the Barents Sea would never have happened if it were not for the local population engaging in popular diplomacy, the Norwegian foreign policy practitioners should be grateful.

"During the Cold War period the neighbourly relation was very stable, you knew where you had each other. By and large, it was a calm and stable period with little cross-border activity. The border opened before the Barents-cooperation was established, the first large flows of people started to cross the border already in 1989. In 1993, the formal Barents cooperation was established and for the first time, an intergovernmental relationship was anchored at the regional level, with the Kirkenes Declaration. But what is important and what many forget, was that the international contact, the collaboration, started long before the Barents Cooperation." (Interview, 9/5)

With this statement, Nilsen notes not all cooperation across the border can be attributed to the Barents-cooperation. He warns to not explain all contact across the border as Barents-cooperation and emphasized the contact between people is very much in private. Ties have been forged over the years since the border opened in the 1980's. For those who have been travelling back and forth since the borders open, being a citizen in the border-region is a "natural part of everyday life", i.e., crossing the border, playing football, and going to shops, cafés and visiting friends, *"I do not think you should push everything in the term Barents-cooperation but being a resident of a border area."* (Interview, 9/5)

Another differentiation regards the division between the Labour Party and the Conservative coalitions over the years. Lisa is concerned that the cooperation has been toned down and draws attention to the stark "Labour Party stamp" attributed to the cooperation (Interview 22/3). She suggests this may have an influence on the Conservative coalition, and that they instead focus on the other cooperative regimes, such as the Arctic Council. This comment also invites whether we are dealing with a party effect. In this sense, this also relates to identity. The co-operation was at one time an initiative of Thorvald Stoltenberg, who sat as foreign minister in a Labor-led government. However, the collaboration has had broad political support. Allocations for co-operation have generally been stable across party politics (Hansen, 2015, p- 1016-1017). In a statement to NRK, the current mayor of Sør-Varanger, Lene Norum Bereng, believes the newly installed Labour coalition, headed by Jonas Gahr Støre, may be the "key" for bettering relations in the border-area. In the same article Julie Wilhemsen

refutes this belief, arguing the conflict between Russia in NATO “overshadows” other areas of cooperation, such as the Barents-cooperation (NRK, 2021).

5.3 Authoritarian turn in Russia

Russia did not only turn more assertive in the beginning of the 2000's, but the country also turned more authoritative towards its own population. In 2012/2013, attention grew concerned with human rights violations, and the direction the Russian society was headed. This is reflected in the interviews, but also in official discourse. Notably, the official discourse changed prior to the Ukraine crisis. At this time a new conservative coalition came to power.

Wilhelmsen and Gjerde find notions of Russia as a partner was less evident, although emphasis still was put on collaboration and good-neighborly relations in the High North (2018, p. 2). In the interviews, notions of the foreign-agent legislation frequently appeared in association to Russian civil society and spill-over to the cooperation. Another element in this regard, was the notion of ‘Othering’ Russia. Whereas Norway often was pictured as a cooperative and supporting partner, much of the blame for the cooperation not moving forward – and perhaps rather moving backwards – was allocated to Russia.

Thomas Nilsen from the Independent Barents Observer emphasizes that the view Moscow has of the Barents-cooperation are positive in areas where Norway and Russia have mutual interests:

“In other words, the Barents-cooperation is seen as something very good from Russia, but they handpick what type of cooperation it should be. They focus on the formal, i.e. that between public agencies, and very strongly against voluntary organizations. They want the control, not ordinary people themselves initiating contact and cooperation across borders. So, there is a slightly different definition of what one thinks about Barents-cooperation. We in Norway think the popular, but on the Russian side the thoughts are inter-public authorities and not so many ordinary people.” (Interview, 9/5).

Nilsen says that the Barents-cooperation and the people-to-people cooperation remain present, but that the cooperation has “*changed dramatically*” over the last 10 years. This change is further explained as follows:

“And I would say that it applies in particular, very much of how the cooperation today is formalized, the public agencies keep in touch, there are county municipalities on the Norwegian side, which talk to county administrations in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. Contact between organizations and NGOs has declined the past 10 years ago. And that is largely due to changes internally in Russia, with Russian NGOs being branded as foreign agents, if they receive support from abroad” (Interview 9/5).

Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, it may be considered that Russia values areas which can be controlled, and not areas where ordinary people may express themselves, potentially in conflict with the official view. In furtherance of this, Russian NGO's receiving funds through the Barents-cooperation have been declared *foreign agents* by Russian legislation. A practitioner from the Norwegian Barents Secretariat adamantly expresses big

changes following this legislation, it is difficult to cooperate in areas pertaining to civil society, and smoother to cooperate within the *"harmless cooperation areas such as sports culture and sports"* (Interview, 15/5).

This complicates the cooperation across the border, and it is also affecting the local population. Nilsen reflects on how this authoritative turn in Russia not only is felt within the Russian border, but also crossing over the Norwegian side. Nilsen himself is denied entry into Russia. One of my anonymous sources shares that there is a sense of worry: *"I am very restrictive in exposing myself to travel to Russia. I do not want to get in a difficult situation"* (interview 22/3). This interview was conducted in 2018 when the case of Frode Berg still was not settled. As mentioned in chapter 3, this case attracted a lot of attention and was felt in the local community. The informant further expresses how the build-up of the Barents-cooperation has been set back over the last years:

"it's quite depressing to see that things are weathering so fast, that one has spent decades building up. It is not that political or practical restrictions are placed on it, but why should one expose oneself to the extra work when it is opposed in other areas" (interview 22/3).

This quote underlines the perception of clampdown on Russian civil society as an obstacle to cooperation. Not only concerning projects directly linked through the Barents-cooperation, but the feeling of worry in the local community that unsettles the 'good-neighborly' relations.

Noteworthy, Thomas Nilsen makes a point that this is just as much the case on the other side of the border, all though that fear seems to be more a result of what Russian authorities want their people to believe:

"Many have become more afraid. On the Russian side, it is even stronger, more negative today. And it is propaganda that works, the Russian state emphasizes that Norway is a NATO country that plans to attack, constantly looking to take Russia. When you sit and hear this on Russian TV, you start to believe this. There is much greater skepticism among ordinary Russians in the border areas today for cooperation with Norway, than there was 7-8 years ago."

Andreas, a representative from the Norwegian Barents Secretariat (NBS) confirms skepticism has grown on both sides of the border. (Interview 15/5). This development has also had an impact on cross-border business activities. In this regard, Marius, an informant associated with business cooperation states as follows about how businesses are controlled on the Russian side: *"Maybe sometime in the future it will yield results. But today, one sees that everything is centrally controlled from Moscow. Those in Murmansk have nothing to say, they make no decisions."* (Interview 4/5)

Further, Andreas questions the "strategy" with both sanctions and funding of the cooperation:

"I do not quite understand the strategy. I mean, when you first sanction, you should sanction harder against Russia. And it will be tough, and I think you will see that it will be much worse between the West and Russia before it gets better. The best way to get Russia, is to spend more money and take care of their own fence instead of pouring money into the Barents-cooperation, when Russia distances itself from us. You can also see Innovation

Norway, which has given a lot of funds to Russia for many years to start business development. Huge sums have been spent, without having achieved anything with it. What's the point?" (Interview 4/5)

In addition to the fact that "*corruption in Russia has become worse and worse*", with requirements of, *inter alia*, special licenses, which in practical terms means that "*you need the right contacts with the authorities*", the informant is not optimistic with regard to the future development of transparency and democracy in Russia.

Rafaelsen shares his view on the situation:

"I have no illusions about civil society and the development of democracy in Russia. Russia will never become a type of Nordic democracy in any way. There are lots of challenges, and it is not easy. But the alternative, not having any contact, is much worse. So, it is in Norwegian interests to foster good conditions at the border" (Interview 28/6)

This view fits well with the so-called notion of duality adopted and maintained by the Norwegian government. Maintaining good relations with Russia is beneficial, even in a time where expanding issues regarding, *inter alia*, human rights can be observed. The alternative is, as Rafaelsen says, "*much worse*" and therefore not a good alternative for Norway's current and future strategy for the Barents-cooperation.

As to the current situation, one could attempt to argue that the Barents-cooperation is stronger by referring to, *inter alia*, the increasing number of people who are involved. This may, however, as emphasized by Nilsen, not be a good indicator of how the cooperation works, and in consequence, whether it meets the early expectation. He tells me when I talked to the NBS, they would point out that things are much better now, because the number of people involved has increased, and then makes this analogy:

"if you bring 10 football teams you have 150 people. And when it happens every weekend, you get up the number of people and it is great for the contact and very good for sports, but it does not necessarily reflect the desire that you had in 1993, with the euphoria that you mention surrounding the Barents-cooperation and high hopes of what this inter-ethnic cooperation would entail than what it actually achieves." (Interview 9/5)

Considering the respondents' views, I have referred to above, and considering the analytical vantage point outlined in chapter 2, it becomes evident that the authoritative turn in Russia, produces a discursive representation of the Russian authorities, but also the Russian people, as something other than the 'Self', namely Norwegians, and particularly Norwegians in northern Norway. Circling back to the research question, this clearly stands in sharp contrast to intentions and aspirations formulated in the Kirkenes Declaration (1993), and accordingly, the early expressed expectations of the Barents-cooperation in the 1990s. The informants concurrently view the authoritative turn as something negative. However, they differ on how this negative development influences the Barents-cooperation. People connected to the NBS and Rune Rafaelsen emphasize that overall, the changes internally in Russia do not have major consequences for the day-to-day cooperation and paint a picture of '*business as usual*' in the border-region.

5.4 From 'Normal Relations' to Crises

After the Ukraine crisis, the High North became "*a far more conflictual and security-oriented place than only a few years ago*" (Wilhelmsen and Gjerde, 2018b, p. 1). Former minister of defence Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide labelled the increased tension 'a new normal'. This statement caused havoc and signified a shift between something normal and something else. In this section 5.4, so called 'crises' are topic of analysis.

The geopolitical tensions that arose from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 were a recurrent theme in most interviews. The annexation and subsequent sanctions were a major crisis in international relations, but it also impacted the bilateral relations between Norway and Russia. How the respondents make sense of this event differs. Some are wary of the trajectory, not only concerning the Barents-cooperation, but in general the overall climate in the region. While others describe the mundane and maintain the cooperation has steered clear of the tensions taking place bilaterally and internationally. Despite different subjective perceptions, the geopolitical climate influences the discourse on cooperation.

Following the goals articulated by Holst in 1996, I asked the respondents to reflect on how they view the relations with Russia, with reference to the notion of a "new normal" post 2014 articulated by the former minister of defense Ine Eriksen Søreide. Nilsen shares his view:

"Even though there was a period during the Cold War where things were very clear, there was also a period in the 1990s when things were very chaotic, it calmed down a bit in the 2000s. In 2007-2008 with Jonas Gahr Støre envisioned the High North coming to a 'normal situation'. Things went in such a positive direction, on the border cooperation, people-to-people, economic and intergovernmental cooperation that one saw somewhere ahead on the horizon that we may sense that we can come to a normal situation such as we have with Sweden and Finland" (Interview, 9/5)

Above, Nilsen compares the relations from the Cold War up until the mid-2000's, a period that signified major shifts on the global arena. He references Jonas Gahr Støre, former foreign minister, now prime minister, to visualize a normal relationship with Russia, since the outlook at that time were so positive. He then asks rhetorically if it is possible to be more wrong:

"[...]10 years later, we are so far away from Jonas' horizon [...] one should be very, very careful about predicting the future when it comes to Russia, there is probably nothing to suggest that the Norwegian/Russian relations will stabilize like that" (Interview 9/5).

When asked whether the colder atmosphere between Oslo and Moscow is felt in the border-region, several of the answers I got emphasized that in fact the cooperation was shielded from the tensions. Rune Rafaelsen responds: "*No, not really. Of course, you notice a different temperature on the human level. I do not discuss much politics among Russian friends anymore. You notice something. But on the practical level, we have just as much cooperation*" (Interview, 28/6). Andreas expresses similar thoughts. The practical cooperation continues as

before, while also remarking that the climate to speak about more sensitive subjects is harder, especially topics which are not viewed as mutual interest (Interview, 15/5).

These respondents are most concerned with building bridges between Norwegians and Russians through joint activity. They emphasized the importance of the good-neighborly relations because it is conflict reducing in the long run. Furthermore, they acknowledge more tension and skepticism after Crimea, and the complicated relationship with Russia, but the ongoing cooperation in the north helps the relationship, and as such the cooperation is perceived even more relevant. It appears that the relevance and importance of the cooperation increases in step with Russia's actions, which change the geopolitical order in which the cooperation operates.

Rafaelsen asks rhetorically: *"The question is how should we react? Should we stop cooperating or move on? My conclusion is that in crises like these, we will have even more dialogue and even more cooperation."* (Interview 28/6).

He then adds as follows; *"I believe that Norway's most important peace project is the cooperation we have through the Barents, especially the bilateral relationship we have with Russia. The way ordinary people have taken command here and establish the normal state"* (Interview 28/6). Out of the eight people I interviewed, all but one agreed the importance of leaving the door open for cooperation. The consensus seems to be bridge-building is conflict mitigating in the long run.

5.4.1 Sanctions, Trade, Investment, Business

Since 2014, Norway has been party to EU's sanction regime against Russia, following the illegal annexation. Those involved in import and export experience the sanctions' restrictive measures on their business. Russia hauled import of fish from Norway, which naturally affect those involved in that industry. This is a prominent example of the strained relations internationally having a local effect.

Marius shares: *"We got in trouble when the West introduced sanctions against Russia, which ensued counter-sanctions from Russia"* (Interview 4/5). When asked on thoughts on the sanction-regime Norway is party to, the respondent elaborated on this as follows:

"I do not quite understand the strategy. I mean, when you first sanction, you should sanction Russia harder. I think we will see that the situation will become much worse between the West and Russia before it gets better." (Interview 4/5)

The respondent was right about that, seeing the European security community rattled by Russian advances. However, knowing the effect of the sanctions have on this respondent, and they still wish the sanctions to be harder, suggests an atmosphere that does not capture the intent of the aims of the Cooperation, but rather frustration on a neighbor that does not abide by international norms, and therefore should be punished by the means necessary.

When I spoke to Rafaelsen about the sanctions, he somewhat circumvents the question: *"To put it this way - Norwegian foreign policy, and Norwegian defense policy must be decided in Norway, and not in Russia. We must be clear on what is in Norwegian interests in such a context"* (Interview, 28/6).

He elaborated in an interview with High North News on this matter: *"What the USA is currently doing is conflicting directly with Norway's national interest. We have built up good cooperation with Russia through the Barents cooperation. This cooperation will grow even more important in the future"* (Danilov, 2020). Rafaelsen has been more adamant about the Norwegian sanctions previously. He has stated in newspapers his objections to them, fearing it will hurt the border cooperation (Dagens Næringsliv, 2017). To this point, Nilsen reflects on the media. He believes the Norwegian media provides a balanced and accurate description of the relationship between Norway and Russia. They describe the open border in the north, and *"how people in the border areas look at the relationship with Russia with slightly different eyes than Victoria Terrasse, and that is the role of the media. Show what is happening, and the chilly political relationship."* (Interview, 9/5). His view on county authorities stands in sharp contrast. He characterizes some of them as naïve actors, as they criticize central authorities in Norway for being part of the sanction's regime against Russia. He believes these county politicians have a one-sided view, not seeing the possibility of both think critically while also leaving the door open. A good relationship with Russia is important he continues, but we must dare to *"speak out when social development goes in such a dramatically wrong direction"* (Interview 9/5).

Revisiting earlier critic of the Barents-cooperation, it is specifically the business and industry segment that never lived up to its aspirations. Thus, Lisa, looks back in connection to the 20th anniversary of the cooperation, *"it was a saying - now we have to get from contacts to contracts"* (Interview 22/3). In other words, business collaboration has never been easy. Although the sanctions have made it even more difficult, this area has always been characterized by challenges. Several failures over the years have contributed to a skepticism about investing money and time.

Nilsen mentions the early aspirations - *"there was a very strong belief that it would contribute to increased business work between Norway and Russia, it is perhaps the biggest failure of all failures if one is to say that business cooperation was an indicator of the cooperation's success"* (Interview 9/5). He continues to clarify that he does not believe that business collaboration should be an indicator of the cooperation's success as such.

Seeing almost no Norwegian companies are left in Murmansk is a sobering. He elaborates on the incident with Ølen Betong and concludes that such *"type of incident does not help to encourage others in the Norwegian business community to put their savings and invest them in Russia. So, business cooperation, with good reason, has a bad reputation today"* (Interview, 9/5). Lisa concurs *"geopolitics rings in the back of your mind when you think of new projects, new developments, and it is perhaps easier do something other than with Russia, due to the complications it can lead to both for the individual and the project"* (Interview 22/3). Kathrine from the NBS also confirms challenges: *"Sanctions and foreign agent law present challenges. Not directly for us, but for partners."* (Interview 11/5). Another practitioner from NBS says *"reduced willingness, fear and skepticism due to unpredictable"*

conditions." causes challenges. (Interview, 15/5). When asking whether the NBS must answer for the sanction politics, the practitioner remarks that there are many opinions for and against the national policy, but the NBS are very consistent when regarding these questions: "*We mostly answer that we have no opinions about the sanctions and then you have to call the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*" (Interview, 15/5).

As such, the goal or at least wish to aspire to a region that foster cooperation and potentially financial reward in the mix, the respondents demonstrate these aspirations have not been met. However, these failed expectations should not be a benchmark to measure the overall cooperation by business.

The most important feature of the Barents-cooperation according to Rafaelsen is the "*everyday life between ordinary people, on both sides of the border*" (Interview, 28.06). They are most important for maintaining good relations between Norway and Russia. "*The fact that Olga, Vladimir, Per and Kari have a good cooperation is the prerequisite.*" (Interview, 28.06). Despite failures in the ventures, Rafaelsen suggests the focus going forward "*should be more dialogue and cooperation that can serve both sides, such as oil and gas production*" (Interview, 28.06).

5.4.2 Percieved relevance

Despite the increased tension the Arctic region has gained in recent years, one of the respondents expresses concern of the Barents-cooperation being 'toned down'. Lisa believes the Barents-cooperation and its significance is struggling to maintain its place in the public debate, and that it is being toned down:

"There are also signals that one thinks (central government), just continue with people-to-people, that is very important, and Barents-cooperation is a basic prerequisite for stability and soft Security in the High North, but it has been limited to something other than it was. It has not necessarily been deliberately limited, but it has been toned down." (Interview, 22/3).

Lisa continues to elaborate on her views, suggesting lack of interest from the Russian side of the cooperation is also a factor.

"Locally, there has never been direct political cooperation, but the political framework has been present. And I may be at a different end of the Barents-cooperation now than I was before, but I think it's disappearing more and more. And we have people who are trying to put it back on the agenda, but there must be a desire from both sides if we are to make it happen." (Interview, 22/3).

In the final stage of the interviews, I asked if they had any thoughts on criteria for the collaboration to succeed in the future. Rafaelsen believes making sure there is money for bilateral cooperation is very vital. He especially emphasized the importance the cooperation is governed locally, regionally, and that the decisions are not in Oslo.

Nilsen highlights the cooperation is overall a good thing but warns of being aware of what kind of collaboration it actually is, to avoid getting "*a backlash on it when you discover that we have lost a lot of those thoughts from 1993, Stoltenberg would probably the idea was to be open channels, see where it leads*". He continues saying it

would not be right to adamantly conclude the cooperation did not turn out as imagined *"as far as I remember there was no definite conclusion on how one wanted it to be, one had hope to support the development of democracy in Russia, it certainly did in the 90's and certainly does not do today"*. (Interview 9/5).

Summarizing his view on the cooperation, Peder says: *"Given the differences between Norway and Russia and given the prehistory, the Barents-cooperation must be characterized as a success, as a positive factor contributing to reducing contradictions, creating a real neighbourly relationship"* (Interview 1/6). Still, he reflects that the borders with Russia are very different compared to other neighbouring countries, and borders you see elsewhere in Europe. He also gives credit to the Barents-cooperation for contributing to a more positive relationship and believed that it on a *"a practical level and in general, it has been a great framework around our neighbourhood in a strategically exposed and sensitive region"*. He then summarises his view as follows:

"This is now a well-established collaboration, so it works, but like everything else, like the plant life out in the garden here, it must be nurtured, it must be watered, it must be fertilized and cared for. [...] Within the various major political framework conditions in which we operate at all times, and for the time being, a more demanding situation." (Interview 1/6).

5.5 Summary

Expectations and assessment of the Barents-cooperation is continually changing according to the present climate which it finds itself. Data from the interviews presented and discussed in this thesis shows there are different views regarding expectation early on and today. The Barents-cooperation operates in a complex area where East meets West. Despite minor and greater challenges, all respondents agree it is better to have a cooperation, than not having it at all. Regionalization is the only concept, and goal that can be said meets the early expectation. As the empirical data from the interviews show, nuance is necessary:

The notion of a shared identity informs the discourse today. Through differentiation to others, a regional identity has been established. This identity draws on historical evidence, and a relationship with Russia in the north that was different to the rest of Norway. This view is emphasized by several of the practitioners, but especially by the Rafaelsen, Nilsen and Peder. The value of the local popular diplomacy expresses the goal of regionalization, The intended organization of the cooperation, supplementing the traditional diplomatic practice with local practitioners as the driving force of the entire project. Travelling across the border is a natural part of being a resident in the Barents region. Whether it all can be contributed to the Barents-cooperation remains unknown. However, changes internally in Russia affect the atmosphere in the region and poses a challenge to the shared Barents identity. This applies to both sides of the border. The concept and aim of normalization and stabilization are not met. However, the cooperation is highlighted as a potential positive channel to foster better relations bilaterally. The practitioners differ in their views on this. The most adamant spokesperson I have talked to, Rafaelsen, holds the continued cooperation and cross-border bonds are prerequisite for a more constructive dialogue.

6 CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the current status of the Barents-cooperation thirty years after it was established has been analyzed by comparing ambitions against realities as perceived by practitioners and experts on the cooperation. The subjective viewpoints of perceived realities of local practitioners and experts are at the center of the analysis. By studying the Barents-cooperation through the perspective of practitioners, I have situated my theoretical approach between the critical constructivist and poststructuralist approaches, where language is central in understanding social reality. I have analyzed how the Barents-cooperation – emerging from a foreign policy project articulated by elites – is understood today by local practitioners.

By approaching the study through the constituting relationship of language and identity, my study belongs between critical constructivism and poststructuralism. Through this framework, I have attempted to broaden our understanding of how linguistic narratives can construct identities, and that these change over time.

Additionally, that identities are constructed in opposition to something other. Reading and analyzing the interviews with this in mind, it is evident that the constructed identity by foreign policy elites in the 1990's can be traced to the assessments today. This suggests the discursive framing of the region in fact has taken hold, but not to the extent envisaged in the Kirkenes Declaration.

Although practitioners do not explicitly explain their perception of their own identity, and whether it is a common Barents identity, a Barents discourse clearly emerges. Through discursive representations of Self in opposition to the Other, lines are drawn between Northern Norway and the South, also captured as center / periphery, Kirkenes / Oslo. Some of the practitioners seem to suggest that those outside the Barents region do not really understand the cooperation, at least not the importance aspects of the cooperation. I was told by one of the interviewees that if I did not come to Kirkenes and experience the region and the atmosphere myself, there was no point in continuing this project. Hopefully this view has not turned out to be correct. Nonetheless, the statement emphasizes a divide between Oslo and Kirkenes, and that as an "outsider", it is difficult to understand the whole picture.

Conducting an interview project provided me with unique sources, drawing on knowledge and practical experience from the region in different capacities, business, cross-border activities, academia, diplomacy and local politics. Through semi-structured interviews, I gained access to their subjective assessments of the cooperation, and how they view its development over the past 30 years.

The external conditions that were present in 1993 are still present and are highlighted in the interviews. Namely the distance between the West and Russia. This can be seen as the main motivation behind the establishment of the collaboration, and there is still broad support for it. Although in 1993 the safety element was not explicitly stated in the Kirkenes Declaration.

The practitioners agree that having an open door, facilitating neighborly relations and dialogue is the best way moving forward. But whether the potential effect of having contact surfaces and dialogue between the

Norwegian and Russian in Barents population, will transfer to the bilateral level is there no agreement on. The diplomat, the mayor and Marius from the NBS are the ones who talk most warmly about the collaboration. However, this does not mean that they see any way of influencing the Russian authorities or improving conditions for civil society in Russia.

At the opposite end, attention is drawn to the fact that the cooperation has lost its political power. This is read from one of the correspondents' views that the Norwegian authorities have weakened interest in the co-operation. However, agreement that the cooperation should continue has transcended the left and right political parties. The cooperation has previously been strengthened, partly because of Russian self-assertion at the beginning of the millennium (Hansen, 2015). Two of the practitioners would like to see the same efforts from central authorities again.

Expectations attached to the collaboration in 1993 were high. The practitioners interviewed in this thesis and their descriptions considerably vary in the assessments of the cooperation today. The goals stipulated by Holst are difficult to measure. The goals were vaguely articulated, which perhaps was a deliberate strategy (Hansen, 2015, p. 1107). This is however, pointed out in one of the interviews; the intention was to have open channels.

One of the goals that is undoubtedly agreed upon is the fact that the co-operation has neither brought Russia closer to the West, nor that it has led to better conditions for the development of democracy. Even the Norwegian Barents Secretariat is clear that as far as civil society and human rights are concerned, issues are deliberately avoided. The Foreign Agents Act has made it difficult for Russian NGOs and makes the work of facilitating and supporting projects more demanding.

In conclusion, measuring the degree to which the practitioners' assessments compare to the initial expectations is challenging because of the changing security context. The high ambitions in the 1990's have changed in step with the development of Russia's assertive behavior in international relations. As such, the cooperation is continuing its effort, but it has not developed particularly further. Assessments of the cooperation today lack the high ambitions of the 1990's but hope that the border-cooperation still can provide a platform for bettering relations are still present. Hence, the ambitions are adjusted to fit the realities of today's international context, relying on the experience of almost 30 years.

7 REFERENCES

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8 APPENEDIX

8.1 Interview list

Interviewee	Date	Institution/occupation	Location/communication medium
Rune Rafaelsen	26 June 2018	Mayor (until 2021), Municipality of Sør-Varanger	Skype
Thomas Nilsen	9 May 2018	Journalist, Independent Barents Observer	Oslo (in person)
Lisa*	22 March 2018	Decades of experience with cross-border cooperation	Telephone and email
Marius*	7 May 2018	Business and industry expert (Telephone)	Telephone
Peder*	1 June 2018	Diplomat	Skype
Kathrine*	11 May 2018	NBS	Telephone
Andreas*	15 May 2018	NBS	Telephone
Hans*	20 March 2018	Researcher	Skype

* = pseudonym



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