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# **The Barents-cooperation amidst geopolitical tensions: A discourse analysis of Norwegian experiences**

Jonas Ekkeren Onsager  
International Relations

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Jonaseo24@gmail.com

Noragric

Department of International Environment and Development Studies

P.O. Box 5003

N-1432 Ås

Norway

Tel.: +47 67 23 00 00

Website: <https://www.nmbu.no/om/fakulteter/samvit/institutter/noragric>

## Declaration

I, Jonas Ekkeren Onsager, 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 *Jonas Ekkeren Onsager*

Date.....

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Whereas the outcomes of this thesis relied on those mentioned above, any errors are my own.

## Abstract

The Barents-cooperation, a multilateral cross-border collaboration including Norway and Russia, currently finds itself surrounded by an increased geopolitical tension. Recent years have seen a deteriorating relationship between the West and Russia, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The increased tension has also impacted the Norwegian-Russian relationship. In 2015, the Norwegian defense minister at the time Ine Eriksen Sørensen acknowledged that increased geopolitical tension between the West and Russia had become the 'new normal'. Yet, the Barents-cooperation has sustained its cross-border activity.

In this thesis, I analyze interviews I have conducted with practitioners in the Barents-cooperation. In context of their interaction with Russia, I explore how they experience the geopolitical tensions that surrounds the cooperation. I conduct this exploration by applying a discourse theoretical approach. This allows me to analyze how the practitioners link geopolitical tension to the Barents-cooperation, what tensions are experienced, and how they reflect on themselves, other relevant actors, and possible challenges to the cooperation. I highlight empirical observations emerging from the interviews and find that practitioners in the Barents-cooperation use political tensions to articulate and revive justifications for the collaboration. The informants represent the Barents-cooperation as an increasingly important facilitator for dialogue between Norway and Russia – constructing it as a counterweight to interstate tensions. As the informants reflect upon political events and developments in recent years, my analysis reveals the politics of the Barents-cooperation and how it becomes a tool from which the practitioners articulate opinions, values, and ambitions.



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# 1 Introduction

Since its inception in 1993 the Barents-cooperation and the Barents Euro-Arctic Region – hereby the Barents-region – have been a part of Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia. Two of the Barents-cooperation's outspoken goals has been to enhance stability and security between western allies and Russia in the region (Eriksson, 1995). Due to its institutional structure, including both an inter-governmental and an inter-regional level, and the coaction between the two, the cooperation is promoted as a unique type of international cooperation (Regjeringen, 2015). Here, collaboration is sought through cultural, educational and social projects, furthering trade, commerce and regional political cooperation. Paramount to the cooperation are the people living in the Barents-region, who take part in cross-border projects and participate in the regional institution-building. In this thesis, I refer to such activities as everyday foreign policy practices and to the people enacting them as practitioners. The cooperation also provides a platform for regional politicians, as well as foreign ministers and diplomats, to meet and engage in dialogue. In that sense, the Barents-cooperation has been an arena for constructive and cooperative everyday practice in a region that used to be highly militarized and of high tension during the Cold War.

However, while in the early post-Cold War years there were signs of optimism and demilitarization, the previous decade saw the Russian-Western relationship grow increasingly contentious. NATO-enlargement and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent sanctions-regime stand out as the major developments contributing to increased tension between the former Cold War enemies. The Arctic region (which the Barents-region is part of) is simultaneously gaining increased international attention because of the melting polar ice cap, its vast natural resources, and geopolitical significance. Recent years have also seen an increased militarization in the Arctic region – for example made visible through major NATO-exercises or Russian expansion of military infrastructure (Wilhelmsen & Gjerde, 2018). Moreover, events directly related to the bilateral relationship between Norway and Russia have unfolded, for example the arrest of Frode Berg convicted in Russia for spying on behalf of the Norwegian intelligence service. All of this considered, the Barents-cooperation finds itself situated in a part of the world where geopolitical tensions are back on the rise. It is these tensions surrounding the cooperation that is the entry point to my analysis of the Barents-cooperation in this thesis.



Despite a geopolitically turbulent decade, the cooperation has retained its cross-border project activity. Importantly, the Norwegian government has continued its support to the cooperation – both financially and rhetorically. The Norwegian foreign minister Ine Eriksen Søreide is adamant that the Barents-cooperation remains an important part of Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia:

“The people-to-people cooperation undoubtedly means a lot for people in the north. But it also means a lot for Norway as a whole. The great activity is a positive force in our relationship with Russia. [...] Here in Kirkenes, foreign policy quickly turns into local politics with concrete results and consequences – for better or worse. And in very few places are local politics as significant for foreign policy as they are here.”  
(Søreide, 2019)

This quote demonstrates that the foreign minister acknowledges the Barents-cooperation as a special kind of foreign policy practice which is significant to Norway’s relationship to Russia. It is also an expression of how the local everyday practitioners are central to the implementation of this positive force in Norway’s foreign policy. It is therefore curious to notice a gap in the literature with regard to investigations of subjective viewpoints of local practitioners of that policy. One possible explanation for that could be the bias in foreign policy research and security analyses towards elite actors (Gjørsv, p. 845). There is a divide in the field of IR between analyses of elite actors and non-elite actors, and between state-centric perspectives and perspectives focusing on a plurality of actors and agencies in IR. While traditional IR-theories, such as realism, continues to be centered on states, international political sociology, the practice-approach, and feminist IR theories have an actor-perspective that is more open and flexible regarding what actors, whether states, institutions, corporations, elites, NGOs or individuals, have power in regard to particular international political issues. Therefore, I argue that it is of political and academic relevance to explore how the local practitioners of the Barents-cooperation experience and interpret political tension, the current Norwegian Russia-policy, and its effects on the Barents-cooperation. Here, they are understood as foreign policy actors with a unique insight into an important pillar of Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia. In this thesis, I analyze twelve interviews I have conducted with practitioners of the cooperation.

To analyze the interviews, I apply discourse analysis in order to study how the informants make sense of and link the Barents-cooperation the geopolitical tension in recent years. Central to my choice of discourse as analytical approach is the poststructuralist theorization of

foreign policy. I draw particularly on the work of Lene Hansen (2006), who emphasizes how articulations of foreign policies entails discursive legitimizations of the given policy. In my analysis, this is important as I draw attention to how the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation reflect on the geopolitical tensions that in their view makes it challenging but all the more necessary to justify and legitimize their own foreign policy practice. The discourse theoretical perspective also draws attention to the construction of identities through the legitimization of foreign policies. Uncovering identities concerns the identification of ideas about the Self and the Other in the articulation of foreign policy and is then central to how policies are shaped (Hansen, 2006, p.6). Thus, in the discourse analysis of interviews with practitioners of the Barents-cooperation, I draw attention to how they link the cooperation to geopolitical tensions, assess their own role vis-à-vis other relevant actors, and construct threats and challenges.

As geopolitical and interstate tensions in and around the Norwegian-Russian relationship is showing no signs of abating, it is likely to believe that new events and developments will continue to make its mark on the Barents-cooperation as well as Norwegian Russian relations in the future. This makes it relevant to reflect on how the people who make out this important pillar in Norwegian Russia-policy understand and represent themselves, other actors, and geopolitical tensions. Therefore, the research question is formulated as follows:

- *How is the Barents-cooperation discursively represented by its Norwegian practitioners, and what identities are thereby produced?*

## 1.1 Outline of the thesis

Following this introductory chapter, **chapter two** outlines the theoretical framework of the thesis. Building on poststructuralist IR-theory, the discourse theoretical foundation of the thesis is presented. Central to this chapter is establishing my actor-perspective and discourse theoretical approach to foreign policy analysis. Whereas the discourse theoretical foundation was laid in chapter two, in **chapter three** I discuss the methodological implications of conducting discourse analysis and how I have solved these. This chapter presents how I collected primary data through semi-structured interviews. Moreover, it aims to provide for a transparent research process and critical scrutiny by including reflections on validity and ethical considerations. **Chapter four** looks at the three trends in the Norwegian-Russian relationship that are important to understand the Barents-cooperation as Norwegian foreign

policy. In **chapter five** the discourse analysis of the interviews with the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation is conducted. Hence, this is where I seek to answer my research question. Drawing on the experiences articulated in the interviews, the chapter is divided into four subsections from which geopolitics is linked with the Barents-cooperation. Central to the analysis is how the informants represent the cooperation amidst geopolitical tension, how they legitimize the cooperation, construct identities, and where they identify potential threats and challenges to the cooperation. Finally, in **chapter six** I conclude this thesis by emphasizing and reflecting on the main analytical points from the preceding chapter.

## 2 Foreign policy, actors, and discourse

In this thesis I seek to explore how the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation give meaning to the cooperation, construct identities, and how these ideas and experiences can be situated within a wider Norwegian foreign policy field. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to present the conceptual lens through which I conduct this exploration. As I address the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation as foreign policy actors, I situate my approach within the actor-debate in IR. In doing so, I highlight contributions to IR literature that direct focus towards and establish the relevance of non-state and non-dominant actors to political issues. Moreover, I discuss my poststructuralist discourse theoretical approach to foreign policy analysis. The poststructuralist discourse theory provides me with the analytical tools to approach subjective viewpoints of the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation. Here, the way in which the poststructuralist approach theorizes the constitutive relationship between representations of identity and foreign policy is central.

### 2.1 Foreign policy and conceptual debates in IR

The ways in which foreign policy is studied differs within the theoretical spectrum of IR. Traditionally the field of IR has been occupied with states and the structures that shape their behavior. This follows especially from realist IR theories holding that the state is the principle actor in international politics. The state-centric view is backed up by a series of assumptions about international relations. One of those assumptions is that the state is a rational actor driven by self-interest in order to survive or to maximize its material power (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014; 2016). This follows from another assumption - that of a divide between the inside, the state, and the outside, the international realm. In this view, the inside is characterized as a place for order where progress is possible and the outside as a place of

anarchy in which no progress is possible (Neumann, 2019, p.49). From this division between inside and outside follows a separation between domestic policy as policies to reach goals in the ordered realm, and foreign policy as policies for reaching goals outside the ordered realm (Neumann, 2019, p.50). Foreign policy is then primarily understood in terms of ensuring that the order and progress within the state is secured against the anarchical and threatening outside. For a long while this dominant IR theory has been central to how foreign policy and security have been understood by scholars. Therefore, it is unsurprising that much of the literature on foreign policy and security has revolved around state-centric approaches.

In this thesis, I approach the study of the Barents-cooperation with the practitioners of the cooperation at the crux of my analysis. The state-centric and materialist focus of the traditional approaches to the study of foreign policy is therefore insufficient to my study because it fails to consider other agencies than that of a unitary state. While the influence of realism and state-centric theories remains strong, the field of IR has over the past decades been increasingly interested in other actors and agencies.

For example, various perspectives and theoretical approaches that emerged from what is often called the fourth debate in IR during the 1980s and 1990s, has expanded the actor perspective within the field. The debate saw IR divided between positivists, such as realism, and post-positivists branches. Some of the post-positivist approaches that arose from the metatheoretical debates in this period are constructivism, poststructuralism, feminist IR-theories, critical theory, and international political sociology (Kurki & Wight, 2016). While these approaches differ in many ways, they are linked through their critique of positivist assumptions about international relations. The positivist philosophy of science is broad and not easily compartmentalized, however a common feature is its adherence to seeing “facts” through empirical observation (Kurki & Wight, 2016, p.21). Post-positivist approaches on the other hand, has a different epistemological starting point for studying foreign policy asserting that “accounts of the world are shaped by subjective preferences” (Hill, 2016, p.49). It follows from this post-positivist line of thought the relevance of subjective viewpoints and experiences to the study of international politics.

In his book *Concepts of International Relations* (2019), Iver Neumann formulate an understanding of the study of foreign policy as:

“the study of agents: what states do and how people within them think. It follows that IR studies relations not only as such but also as these relations are planned, executed

and experienced by the agents that are party to those relations. We call this the study of foreign policy” (Neumann, 2019, p.1).

Thus, he argues that IR is not exclusively about the study of states and state-interaction. Rather, it is the study of the relations between all political units – which he terms *polity/polities* – and the thoughts and experiences of the people within these polities (Neumann, 2019, p.2). Neumann goes on to write that: “the key thing to note about the international is that it embraces not only state-to-state relations but also all other relations between agents that are based in different states” (2019, p.77). This relational perspective opens for a diversity of actors, as opposed to what the traditional approaches to IR allow for. The point is not to say that the state does not matter, rather it is to highlight how other agencies makes a difference and are relevant to foreign policy and international politics. It then becomes necessary to ask what actors are relevant, in terms of power and significance, within specific political issues – in the case of this thesis: the Barents-cooperation as part of Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia. Therefore, in the following subchapters I discuss IR-literature and theoretical approaches to foreign policy that open for a more diverse actor perspective.

## 2.2 “Everyday” practitioners in foreign policy

The Pierre Bourdieu inspired practice-turn and subfield of international political sociology that emerged in the early 2000s has provided an alternative actor-perspective within the field of IR (Montsion, 2018, p.9). This Bourdieu-inspired approach has been deployed to empirical research on different international relationships or potential security communities, such as for example Private Military Companies (PMCs) (Leander, 2005), NATO-EU (Græger, 2016) and NATO-Russia (Pouliot, 2007; 2010). Instead of the conventional focus on the unitary state-actor, the practice-turn is an analytical concept that directs attention towards the political practices that constitutes international politics and foreign policy, e.g. the practice of diplomacy. I use the actor-perspective of this practice-turn as an inspiration to my analytical inquiry into the contemporary experiences of the everyday practitioners of the Barents-cooperation.

A central contribution to international political sociology comes from Vincent Pouliot (2007;2010). The Frenchman approaches the constructivist concept of the security community as a type of community of practice. A security community understood as a ‘community of practice’ demands a focus on what the actors of the community *do* – “the concrete ways in

which state representatives handle disputes in and through practice” (Pouliot, 2010, p.5). This directs focus towards how security is produced through everyday practice. That way, Pouliot challenges the traditional conception of security as limited to the material sphere of military, defense, and the use of force. With Pouliot’s conception of communities of practice, he pays particular attention to the practitioners of such communities. In order to uncover subjective viewpoints and analyze the why the practitioners act the way they do, Pouliot opts to combine qualitative interviews with practitioners, participant observation and textual sources such as e.g. memoirs from meetings (Pouliot, 2010, p.66). Thus, he devotes empirical attention to the subjective viewpoints of the actors – or practitioners – of a given political community. While Pouliot primarily focus on policy-elites (e.g. state diplomats), approaching the study of a multilateral cooperation such as the Barents-cooperation with a focus on its everyday practitioners allows for an actor perspective that includes more than dominant actors such as e.g. diplomats. The everyday practitioners of the Barents-cooperation include everything from local people participating in cross-border projects, to people employed in the different institutions of the cooperation, as well as politicians.

An important point of the Pouliot’s approach to practitioners of international relations is the concept of background knowledge. Central to understanding this concept is Bourdieu’s thinking tools of habitus and doxa. Referring to what actors think *from*, rather than what they think *about*, background knowledge is the inarticulate know-how that informs practices (Adler, 2008, p.202). Related to habitus, part of the background knowledge informing practice is the actors’ dispositions; past interactions and experiences (Pouliot, 2010, p.33). According to Pouliot this implies that practice is normally tacitly learned – e.g. ways of conducting diplomacy in a specific transnational relationship are picked up and reproduced by new generations of diplomats (2010, p.30). Furthermore, background knowledge pertains to doxa because its inarticulate character makes it appear self-evident (Pouliot, 2010, p.28). In other words, practice in this view becomes self-evident when its *doing* doesn’t follow any reflection over its consequences or appropriateness. Being aware of how certain assessments of relations and practices are made can therefore reveal underlying logics to how actors operate and perceive of their social world. In the analysis of this thesis I argue that the way the practitioners assess their relationship to Russia amid authoritative developments in the Russian state, is driven by an underlying logic, or background knowledge, that is not articulated explicitly, but that my analysis of the interviews with the practitioners reveals.

As such, Pouliot's approach informs my actor-perspective in this thesis and his concept of background knowledge is relevant as I in the analysis point out an underlying logic within the Barents-cooperation. However, in terms of analyzing the experiences and representations of the everyday practitioners in the Barents-cooperation I draw on a poststructuralist discourse theoretical approach. Therefore, in this thesis I direct analytical attention towards the linguistic practices that constitutes our world and informs politics – as opposed to the subfield of international political sociology in which practice is conceptualized as primarily social action (Adler & Pouliot, 2011).

### 2.3 Language as practice

Emerged out of the fourth debate in IR, poststructuralism positions itself as a critical approach to social explanation. Poststructuralists challenges central assumptions and taken-for-granted perspectives of mainstream IR and has especially been engaged in critique of realism. A central feature of poststructuralist approaches has therefore been to analytically scrutinize how the state has come to be viewed upon as the most important actor in international politics (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.199). As David Campbell and Roland Bleiker writes “Poststructuralism began with an ethical concern to include those who had been overlooked or excluded by the mainstream of IR” (2016, p.199). Accepting, without analytical scrutiny, the world as a system of states, the analyst neglects other possibilities and runs the risk of preserving the current state of affairs (Neumann, 2002, p.638). The poststructuralist approach to the position of the state is to analyze the “*practices of statecraft*” that made the state and its importance seem both natural and necessary (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.199). Relevant in analyzing this is the concept of discourse, understood as “a specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities constituted, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made more or less possible” (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.208). With regard to the role of the state in IR, the poststructuralist approach therefore analyses the discursive production of the role of the state. It follows from this that the poststructuralist discursive approach also attends to other agencies and the identification of their power.

Embedded in the concern with language, discourse and meanings, a central notion of poststructuralism is that ‘everything is language’. This has led to a critique arguing that poststructuralism therefore rejects the existence of an external reality. However, as put by Laclau and Mouffe (1985): “What is denied is not that . . . objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of

any discursive condition of emergence.” (as cited in Campbell, 1998, p.351). This is what separates the poststructuralist approach to that of e.g. constructivism which accepts a distinction between the ideational and the material. Hence, the interest in discourse does not reject the existence of a material world. Rather, by refusing the distinction between the discursive/non-discursive, poststructuralists engage in the interplay between the ideational and material (Campbell, 1998, p.352). Conceptualizing discourse as entailing both the ideational and the material, leads to an understanding of discourse as performative. Performative means that through discursive practices, the subjects and objects articulated are not only described, they are constituted (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.209). Thus, in this view language is not mere utterance, it has “real world”-consequences.

Lene Hansen is a pivotal researcher involved in contemporary debates on foreign policy, identity, discourse and poststructuralism in IR. In her book *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* she argues that language is a field of social and political practice (2006, p.18). Social in that language is a series of codes necessary for making oneself comprehensible, and political in that it is a site for production and reproduction of identities where some are included and others are excluded (Hansen, 2006, p.18). This idea makes it important to acknowledge the relationship between language and power. Because with the ability of discourses to include, exclude, enable and constrain, comes power. Embedded in the practice of exclusion and inclusion is the power to determine what is viewed as commonsensical and as such; accepted as knowledge (Neumann & Dunne, 2016). Hence, discourse analysis gives struggles over power analytical primacy (Neumann & Dunne, 2016, p.54). Adopting this approach can therefore make us attentive to what power relations the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation foreground in my interviews with them. In the analysis (chapter five), we shall see how power relations become especially apparent when the informants link a Norwegian center-periphery dynamic to the Norwegian government’s foreign policy practice in recent years.

With interest in power structures and how discourses include and exclude, feminist IR theories have made essential contributions and been especially insightful in its reconceptualization of security, challenging the conventional notion of the state as a security-provider (e.g Tickner, 1992). While there exists several approaches of feminist IR theory, asking different epistemological and ontological questions, they are bound by their interest in understanding women’s subordination (Tickner & Sjoberg, 2016, p.182). Concerned with how dichotomous linguistic constructions, e.g. strong/weak or rational/emotional, serve to



empower the masculine over the feminine, poststructuralist feminist IR theory deconstruct social hierarchies and bring marginalized experiences to the fore (Tickner & Sjoberg, 2016, p.185). In that way, feminist IR theory have provided important perspectives by attending to the political relevance and agency of non-dominant actors.

While in my analysis I do not take gender dynamics into account, feminist IR theories are relevant as they are occupied with the everyday experiences of non-state and marginalized actors. Feminist approaches to IR argues that those in non-dominant positions have experiences that are relevant to understanding how power relations are produced and reproduced (Tickner & Sjoberg, 2016). Whereas the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation are not marginalized in the sense that feminist theories are concerned, their voices and experiences have been overlooked in literature on Norwegian foreign policy. Yet, as we shall see in chapter four, when the Barents-cooperation was formalized and made part of Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia, regional actors and institutions were made a central part of the policy. Therefore, by situating the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation at the center of my analysis, their opinions and everyday experiences are given the attention befitting their political relevance.

As we have seen in this subchapter, understanding language as practice makes visible the political and constitutive nature of linguistic practices. It allows us to scrutinize the state as the unitary actor in international relations and makes us attentive to the construction of power relations in politics and society. Theorizing linguistic practices as constitutive of our social and political world, also informs how foreign policy is studied by poststructuralists – of which I go into greater detail now.

## 2.4 Identity and foreign policy

Occupied with the linguistic practices that constitutes our social world, poststructuralists argue that foreign policy should be understood as a discursive practice (Hansen, 2016, p.109). Hansen writes that “foreign policies need to ascribe meaning to the situation and to construct objects within it” (2006, p.6). Therefore, in articulations of foreign policies there is a discursive production of identities through which the particular policies are legitimized. Or more precisely, as we shall see, an idea that representations of identity and legitimization of foreign policies are in a constitutive relationship (Hansen, 2006, p.6). In this view, foreign policy is seen first and foremost as a practice that constitutes who “we” are, as opposed to the traditional understanding of foreign policy as policies aimed at achieving a set of goals

(Neumann, 2019, p.56). Identity construction is therefore a central part of poststructuralist understanding of foreign policy as a discursive practice. This is central to my analytical undertaking of the Barents-cooperation because by uncovering how identities are constructed, we gain insight into how the agents of polities assess and make sense of their own role vis-à-vis other actors, and how foreign policy action is legitimized. The understanding of identity as relational has been deployed to develop poststructuralist approaches to the study of foreign policy as discursive and political practice (Campbell, 1992; 1998; Hansen, 2006).

A landmark contribution to poststructuralist literature is made by David Campbell (1992; 1998) and his analysis of state identity and foreign policy of the US. Campbell is occupied with foreign policy constructed in terms of security - security discourses - as he scrutinizes the state's construction of dangers and threats, presented to and consumed by its citizens. Foreign policy articulated as security discourses is by Campbell seen as a political practice articulating and locating external threats and conveying these threats to the internal audience. For example, by articulating an external threat to one's freedom, the internal is juxtaposed with the external, and the (internal) state's identity as "free" is constructed. As such, the state's identity is dependent on a demarcation of boundaries that separates the "inside" from the "outside" or "Self" from the "Other" – a demarcation articulated in policy (Campbell, 1998, p.352). Following this logic, the construction of one's identity, idea of Self, is dependent on the construction of an Other; claiming that one political entity is weak is essential to the claim that another is powerful. Thus, objects are given meaning and identity in their difference to other objects. For example, in his article *Russia's Europe, 1991–2016: inferiority to superiority* (2016) Neumann shows how the idea of Europe historically has played a role as Russia's constitutive Other. Meaning that in the discourse on Russia's international standing and idea of Self as a "great power", the European Other plays a central part. As we shall see in the analysis of the interviews in this thesis, the construction of the Russian state as authoritative and undemocratic, is central to my informants representation of the Self (the Barents-cooperation) as liberal and democratic.

Hansen (2006) provides a thorough account of her poststructuralist theorization of the constitutive relationship between foreign policy discourses and identity. In Hansen's words: "[...] identity is not something states, or other collectives, have independently of the discursive practices mobilized in presenting and implementing foreign policy" (2006, p.1). In this view, identities are not fixed or neutral accounts of what subjects or objects "really are"; they are social constructs produced and reproduced through the articulation of policies

(Hansen, 2006, p.xvii). It follows from this the possibility of multiple Selves and Others, meaning that the representation of Self is dependent on who the Other is. In the interviews with practitioners from the Barents-cooperation multiple Selves and Others are constructed. For example, they represent their idea of Self differently in relation to Russian civil society than what they do in relation to Norwegian central authorities – revealing different dynamics and ideas within the cooperation. Moreover, while simultaneously including and excluding, discourses enable and constrain action. Therefore, seeing foreign policies as a discursive practice also implies an understanding of foreign policy discourses as directions for action (Hansen, 2006, p.21). Political statements such as articulations of foreign policies are not mere rhetoric, they enable and constrain state action and interaction. As we shall see in chapter four, Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia and the changes it has gone through have come hand in hand with different representations of a Russian Other, legitimizing the policy. Similarly, in the analysis of this thesis (chapter five), I show how the discourse on the Barents-cooperation entails identity construction and legitimization of a specific type of cooperative foreign policy practice.

Moreover, Hansen suggests to study what she terms “wider foreign policy fields” (2006, p.62). While official foreign policies are articulated and declared by heads of states and their foreign ministers, Hansen argues that official foreign policy discourses should be situated in a broader political field. This is because there might be competing discourses articulating opinions and ideas that are at odds or simply different from the official discourse (2006, p.61). This serves as a way of uncovering the different viewpoints and debates regarding a state’s foreign policy. Competing or non-dominant discourses are relevant because they do not exist in a vacuum. In fact, Hansen (2006) explains their relevance to official discourse as decision-makers draw on a wider pool of opinions in their articulation of foreign policies. Competing discourses are a part of how identities and the legitimization of policies are unceasingly produced, reproduced, contested, and renegotiated. As Neumann notes, “Societal debates do not determine foreign policy moves, but the general tenor of policy debates has the effect of making certain moves easier to legitimate than others” (2016, p.1394). By looking beyond the scope of official state discourses, Hansen opens for the inclusion of alternative or non-dominant voices and experiences to the study of foreign policy. It is within this ‘wider foreign policy field’ that the experiences and representations of the practitioners in the Barents-cooperation is situated. In the following chapter, as I discuss how I developed my interview project and my methodological approach to the analysis their contemporary experiences.

### 3 Reflecting on methods: Interviewing and text analysis

This chapter intends to clarify the methodological and practical steps of research undertaken in the study of the Barents-cooperation. With the intention of creating transparency and opening for critical consideration, I explain how I designed an interview-based project, how and why I prepared and conducted interviews with practitioners in the Barents-cooperation. As the method and theoretical framework in this thesis is in close interplay, this chapter draws on the discussions from the previous chapter where I introduced the discourse theoretical perspective that guides my study. I discuss the methodological implications of conducting a discourse analysis and how I solved them. This includes a discussion on the analysis of texts and how discourses and the construction of identities are interpreted and identified within them. Finally, I assess the quality of my data and address the issue of validity before the ethical considerations I have made along the way are accounted for.

#### 3.1 Data collection

How did I approach gathering the data needed in order to answer my research questions? My interest in the Barents-cooperation and the politics surrounding it was from the outset geared towards the experiences of the people enacting the cooperation on an everyday basis. My idea was that these people could offer unique insights into how the geopolitical turmoil of the recent decade was experienced within the Barents-cooperation. Following Neumann (2002), that discourse analysis should be supplemented by data from the field, I therefore entered the field and collected my own interview data. This was done by going to Kirkenes from 11/02/20 to 21/02/20, making contact with potential informants and designing a semi-structured interview guide. This enabled me to study the subjective viewpoints, experiences and subsequently uncover discourses within the Barents-cooperation.

In the present thesis the practitioners working with the Barents cooperation from Norway is the area of study. The discourses studied and analyzed here is therefore limited to the Norwegian part of the Barents cooperation. Importantly, 10 out of 12 interviews are conducted with people living and operating from Kirkenes. I choice to go to Kirkenes because that is where some of the core institutions of the cooperation are located – such as the Norwegian Barents Secretariat and the International Barents Secretariat. Kirkenes is also the location of several festivals and conferences related to the Barents-cooperation. For example, during my stay in Kirkenes the annual culture festival the Barents-Spektakel was underway. Due to its proximity and shared history with Russia, Kirkenes also has a symbolic role in the

cooperation. It is where the Norwegian and Russian foreign ministers meet to symbolically mark the anniversaries of the Soviet liberation of Northern Norway during world war two.

In order to identify informants and conduct interviews, I applied a combination of purposive sampling and snowballing. Purposive sampling is an approach where identification of informants is made in reference to the research question (Bryman, 2016, p.410). In addition, the purposive sampling followed a sequential approach, meaning that the sampling evolved and changed as the research went along (Bryman, 2016, p.410). Upon going to Kirkenes I had sent emails to potential informants, informed about my arrival and research project, and requested and planned interviews. At the end of each interview I asked if the informant could think of someone that it would be interesting and relevant for me to talk to. Applying snowball sampling that way was especially useful as it allowed me to benefit from the informants contact networks and knowledge of the Barents-cooperation. Four of the interviews I conducted, including three local experts within various fields in the Barents-cooperation, and one expert from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, followed this sampling strategy.

Moreover, because the cooperation consists of a vast array of branches, I have interviewed 12 people with special expertise and practical experience from the Barents-cooperation. The informants are local experts, including consultants working in the Norwegian Barents Secretariat in Kirkenes, for the northern Norwegian regions in the EU, and journalists reporting on cross-border developments, as well as ministerial expertise located in Oslo, and the mayor of Sør-Varanger. Thus, the informants represent a broad variety of experiences and insights from the cooperation. While I could always have included more, these 12 informants represent a broad selection in terms of their expertise and experience in and around the Barents-cooperation.

Out of the 12 interviews, 7 were conducted face-to-face during my fieldtrip to Kirkenes, one face-to-face in Oslo, three over Skype, and one over the phone due to the informants lack access to Skype or similar technology. In the months and weeks that followed the interviews, I kept in touch with the informants and asked three of them follow-up questions via email. All of the interviews were conducted in Norwegian and they were recorded following oral consent from the informants. The recordings allowed me to transcribe and later systematically analyze the interviews. I transcribed the interviews in Norwegian, however, when quotations

from the interviews are used in this thesis, I have translated them to English. A list of the interviews is included in the appendix at the very end of the thesis.

### 3.2 Interview guides

The methodological approach to the collection of data in this research was conducted through semi-structured interviews. This form of interview 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 as the starting point their own personal, specialized experience. For example, the initial questions about political tension surrounding the Barents-cooperation was formulated in a way that allowed the informant to interpret what political tension, if any, they linked with the cooperation (See appendix 8.2 for a general version of the interview guide). 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 that I could use the meetings to enhance my knowledge about the topic. For the purpose of developing the interview guides, I drew upon and reviewed prior conversations and interviews as well as secondary literature and news articles.

The principal topics of the interview guides followed a similar structure, allowing me to uncover common tendencies or disparities in the informants' answers. Therefore, my overarching interest to draw on the informants' experiences, linking the Barents-cooperation to increased geopolitical tension, was always at the crux of the interviews. An important stage in designing the interview-guides was converting my theoretical and academic interest into practical questions. In order to grapple with the everyday practices of the Barents-cooperation, I would initially ask the informants to tell me about their own specific role and what they do on a daily basis. I also asked the informants about their own personal motivation for working with cross-border cooperation, often instigating rich descriptions of the informants upbringing in the Barents-region, and how proximity and friendship with Russia had always been a part of their lives. For example, one informant said:

“I grew up close to the border and I took part in sports tournaments that included both Russians and Norwegians. I did not see Russia as something scary. Rather, Russians were our friends and neighbors - someone I did sports with. It was first when I got older that I realized that if it had not been for the Barents-cooperation many of the sports tournaments I went to would not have happened” (Interview, 20/02).

As I moved on from the introductory questions, I directed attention towards the institution or specific project(s) the informant was a part of and asked them to elaborate on its function and objective. I also asked about activities and the practical forms of the Barents-cooperation. As an entry point to questions about political tensions, I would ask the informants how they experienced that the cooperation (or the informants field of cooperation, e.g. education cooperation) has developed since they started working with it.

In what I categorized as the third stage of the interview, I asked about politics, in particular increased international tension, Norwegian Russia-policy, and current state of the Norwegian-Russian relationship. Albeit, sometimes the informant would direct attention towards these topics her-/himself before I even asked the questions. This was the most loosely structured part of the interview as it was primarily based on how the informants assessed the political context surrounding them. And, as mentioned, to begin with I did not name any specific political events in my question. Therefore, I formulated questions that begun with phrases like “How do you asses...” and “In your experience...”. As the interview moved on, I also asked about specific events and developments within the themes of Russian ‘foreign agent’-legislation, Russian annexation of Crimea, Norwegian center-periphery dynamic, and Barents in the Arctic. I also wanted to understand if and how the politics surrounding the cooperation had affected their work. If the informants expressed that their activities were unaffected by political tensions, I asked why and how they thought it was that way. In the final stages of the interviews I would repeat some descriptions of challenges and/or problems the informant had articulated during the interview and ask them to elaborate. As such, the interviews followed a general structure of: (1) personal background and everyday practices, (2) organization/project practices, objectives and development, (3) linking the Barents-cooperation with (geo)political tension (see appendix 8.2). Explaining this part of my research process is a way of further creating trustworthiness and providing for critical examination of my work.

While the interview guides followed a similar structure, I would adjust the interview guides somewhat for each informant. This allowed me to adapt the questions to the concrete context from which the informant operated. It was also a consequence of how my knowledge and interest in the Barents-cooperation developed continuously throughout the interview project.

### 3.3 Analyzing texts and identifying discourse(s)

In this study my aim was to learn from the experiences of practitioners in the Barents-cooperation and how they give meaning to their social world. Therefore, following

poststructuralist discourse theoretical approach discussed in the chapter two, the present thesis commits to an interpretivist epistemology and a linguistic ontology. Adhering to the post-positivist idea that it is through language we access and produce knowledge of the world; language is the means from which the informants' interpretations are accessed. Therefore, the ontological approach to this study follows the poststructuralist idea of language as ontologically significant (Hansen, 2006, p.18).

Following the poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis, texts are how we access subjective interpretations and linguistic constructions of the social world. The main source of text in this thesis are the transcriptions of the interviews I have conducted<sup>1</sup>. They serve as subjective interpretations and manifestations of the social world described by the informants. The analysis of this thesis therefore relies on the transcriptions of the interviews I have conducted. However, the text itself is not the object of study. Rather, as Iver Neumann & Kevin Dunne (2016, p.44) reminds us, discourse analysis uses texts as a vehicle for understanding social, political, and cultural phenomena. I do not aim to explain causally what has led to change, possible disruptions or simply changes to the cooperation. Rather, I am interested how the practitioners view and make sense of change. The “impossibility of causality”, as articulated by Hansen (2006, p.25), follows naturally from a poststructuralist discourse analysis where the material world is seen as discursively constituted. Therefore, what is of interest is not *what* the text argues, but *how* it argues (Wæver, 2004, p.41).

How then do we study discourse within the transcribed interviews? Avoiding subjective interpretations when analyzing texts is impossible, but by approaching the texts systematically the credibility of my interpretations and analysis is strengthened. After transcribing the interviews, I have gone through several steps in order to analyze the transcripts. However, the first step was already taken when I was transcribing, a process which gave me a broad idea and reminder of the content of the interviews. Second, when all the interviews were transcribed, I read through each of them while writing small summaries of what I deemed most interesting and important at the time. On the second, more thorough, read-through I

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<sup>1</sup> Adding to the transcriptions of the interviews, are a small proportion of answers to follow-up questions received by email in the period after the field trip to Kirkenes. On one occasion I sent one follow-up question to two different informants per email. In chapter five, I use two quotes from this email correspondence. When doing so they are referred to as “email interview”.



started to categorize the main representations and common tendencies in the interviews. What terms the informants used to describe the Barents-cooperation, how they perceived of Russian and other Norwegian actors - i.e. reflections over their relations with other actors, and what geopolitical events they talked about are examples of the main categories I was concerned with. The objective of identifying dominant discourse(s) is to illuminate how meaning is structured and to examine how it is linked to the implementation of practices (Neumann & Dunne, 2016, p.51). Hence, the central method of this thesis is to analyze and locate representations, dominant and marginalized, within the transcriptions of my interviews.

Moreover, following the idea that foreign policy and identity are co-constitutive, discourse analysis provides us with the principal analytical tool for understanding this relationship. In mapping and categorizing the discourses and constructions of Self and the Other, I studied the texts following the process of linking and differentiation (Hansen, 2006). This process is defined by Hansen (2006, p.41) through how “[...] meaning and identity are constructed through a series of signs that are linked to each other constitute relations of sameness as well as through a differentiation to another series of juxtaposed signs”. This may entail constructions of what Hansen terms “radical Other(s)”, in which the articulated differences between the Self and the Other are stark (Hansen 2006, p.38). It may also entail relations of linking, from which difference is less emphasized than sameness. In that way, I have analyzed what signs, words, or arguments are used to describe the Self in relation to the Other, and vice versa. For example, how the informants tied words like “knowledge” and “understanding” of Russia to where in Norway people are from – as one informant said: *“Outside the of the Barents-region people probably sleep bad at night thinking about Russia. In my opinion, their understanding of Russians is skewed. Up here we see things differently.”* (Interview, 14/02). By being paying attention to Self/Other-dynamics like this, I have been able to uncover how the informants refer to identity in their understanding of the Barents-cooperation and the geopolitics surrounding them. This follows the poststructuralist argument discussed in the previous chapter, that foreign policy discourses entail legitimizations of the policy with reference to identities.

Central to the poststructuralist understanding of discourse is the significance of history (Hansen, 2006; Neumann & Dunne, 2016). History is especially essential to the uncovering of discursive stability and hegemonic or dominant discourses. Traditionally, the role of history in discourses and texts is identified through what is often referred to as intertextuality, meaning that all texts make references to previous texts and this way establish re-representations and

new meanings (Hansen, 2006, p.55). This thesis bases its discourse analysis on the transcriptions of interviews conducted once, and not texts from an extended timeframe. However, by drawing on how informants articulate common historical reference points and re-represent previous events and practices, the role of history is included in the analysis. This is for example evident in chapter 5.3 of the analysis when the informants refer to historical events to explain their special relationship with Russia.

In order to go more in-depth of text material it is normal to delimit the timeframe from which texts are collected when doing discourse analysis. In the case of this thesis, the text material are transcriptions based on interviews that have been conducted recently. In these interviews the informants reflect on changes to the Barents-cooperation and Norwegian-Russian relations in recent years. The year of 2014 stands out as a reference point due to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the effects it had on international relations, however the informants also reflect on situations and observations they have made that are not directly linked to the events of 2014 – for example developments in the relationship between the Russian state and the Russian civil society and increased international interest in the Arctic region. Therefore, it is no concrete delimitation of time in this thesis. Rather, the discourse analysis is of the contemporary experiences and observations that the informants themselves link with the Norwegian-Russian relationship.

### 3.4 Assessing data quality

When doing social research, we must check for validity in order to ensure the trustworthiness of our findings. This is an essential part of providing transparency and facilitating critical examination of one's research. Patrick T. Jackson (2010, p.22) refers to *internal validity* of social science when arguing that our conclusions must follow from logical arguments and the evidence we provide. As transcripts are my interpretations and representations of the informants' own representations, I actively engage in knowledge production. Hence, the interpretations made from the interviews in this study needs to follow from logical and coherent arguments. To assure this, throughout my process of interpreting, analyzing, and writing I have been guided by the following questions, articulated by Neumann & Dunne (2016, p.129): "Do your interpretations make sense to you and your readers? Do they provide a reasonable answer for the questions you were trying to answer? Are they more convincing than alternative interpretations?". By constantly reflecting over these questions and scrutinizing my own interpretations, the aim has been to assure logical and coherent arguments – and thus, internal validity.

Moreover, it is essential to reflect on how oneself – the researcher – is situated within different discourses and contexts and how this may impact the research process. As Neumann & Dunne reminds us, “[...] researchers are not neutral observers, but often are intimately related to the power hierarchies at play” (2016, p.58). For the present thesis, this is relevant both in my interaction with informants and in interpreting their experiences. In order to further provide for a transparent research process, it is therefore important to reflect on my own position and my relation to the informants. Importantly, I entered the field as an “outsider” and was originally situated within a “Oslo-context”. As will become apparent in the following analysis, the informants articulated a center-periphery dynamic in the interviews, from which the Other was someone situated in Oslo. It is possible that it in some cases had a negative effect on my credibility. My bias as an “outsider” may also have affected how I conducted myself. In most instances though, I believe the main outcome of this “insider”-“outsider”/“northerner”-“southerner” dynamic was that the informant sought to explain their experiences and situations more thoroughly. As to make me an “outsider”, better understand what I had no prior experience from myself.

As researchers, we may tend to favor outcomes that correspond with our expectations. This pertains to the possibility of confirmation bias, meaning “the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand” (Nickerson, 1998, p. 175). In my case, for example by being too insistent on uncovering possible problems and challenges in the Barents-cooperation residing from geopolitical tension. To avoid this, I made sure I was aware of the danger of falling into the trap of confirmation bias, and I reminded myself that I was not looking for causality between geopolitical tension and challenges and/or disruptions in the cooperation (as explained above). Rather, as I have explained above, I was after the subjective experiences and opinions of my informants.

### 3.5 Ethical considerations of field work

This study has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Prior to every interview the informant was either emailed or given by hand an information letter about my research project (see appendix 8.3 for a translated version of the information letter). This way they knew about the overarching topic of my research and if they agreed to participate, sign a consent form. Before each interview the informants were informed about their rights, told that participation is voluntary, and that they could deny answering individual questions. I also

informed them that they could contact me with question and/or withdraw from the project at any time after the interview.

One of the most important and challenging ethical considerations I have made during this project is related to the issue of anonymization. I made the decision to anonymize all my informants but two. Nevertheless, regarding the type of interview-based research conducted here there have been several issues and implications to consider. An important aspect affecting my decision was the fact that the Barents-cooperation is a relatively small field of analysis. In Kirkenes, where a large proportion of my informants work and live, people in and around the cooperation generally all know each other or know who each other is.

Anonymizing while simultaneously providing the context from which the informant could say what she/he said is a challenge. Yet, the small field of analysis made anonymization the ethically responsible choice as the informants were asked to reflect on politics related to their line of work. Although, my research process itself may not have caused harm to anyone, harm could be done as the findings are made public. Working in and around the Barents-cooperation means building amicable cross-border relations. As one informant said: *“The Barents cooperation is part of a greater Norwegian Arctic strategy for peace and stability in the Arctic. This is achieved through good and constructive relations with Russia on a practical level – something we invest in every day”* (Interview, 03/03). Talking about possible disruptions and challenges to the cooperation residing from political tensions is therefore considered sensitive. As a result of that, the decision to anonymize most of the informants was taken. The most frequently quoted anonymized informants have been given pseudonyms.

However, I decided after consent not to anonymize Rune Rafaelsen who is the mayor in Sør-Varanger and Thomas Nilsen who is a journalist in the Independent Barents Observer. There are a couple of reasons for this. First of all, they are both outspoken and public figures in the local community and in the Barents-region. They are therefore used to expressing their opinions in the public. Secondly, seeing as how they are both relatively known figures in the community, to some even nationally, hiding their identity would be difficult and arguably counter-productive. They are both key actors in the Barents-region and by using their real names their statements used here gain credibility. Both have been sent transcripts of the quotes I’ve used from their interviews, giving them the opportunity to revise their statements, reject the usage of them and/or give consent. In both cases consent was given per email to use their quotes without any alterations or objections.

## 4 Norway-Russia relations: Three trends

In this chapter, I discuss three trends in the Norwegian-Russian relationship in order to contextualize the role of the Barents-cooperation in Norwegian foreign policy. I point how cross-border cooperation between Norwegians and Russians during the Cold War-era preceded and laid the foundation for establishing the Barents-cooperation in 1993. Particular attention is also paid to how a central argument for making the Barents-cooperation part of the Norwegian Russia policy was to engage local and regional actors in foreign policy practice. Finally, I argue that recent years have seen a (re)turn to a colder and more tense relationship between Norway, its western allies, and Russia.

### 4.1 Formalizing Cold War cooperation

In 1949, Norway became one of the founding members of NATO as they signed the Atlantic Treaty. As such, Norway became part of its neighbor the Soviet Union's antipole during the Cold War. Therefore, a strategy of deterrence was sought by Norway through its NATO membership during the Cold War years and focus on interstate collaboration was limited (Wilhelmsen & Gjerde, 2018, p.387). However, as Norway shared a border with the Soviet Union, it was seen as essential to combine the policy of deterrence with that of reassurance (Holtmark, 2015). As such, Norway implemented a self-restraining base policy in 1949 that was meant to reassure Soviet that although Norway was allied with the US, they did not need to fear US military bases in Norway (Holtmark, 2015, p.315).

Importantly, the Norwegian-Russian relations during the cold war far from exclusively confrontational. Cooperation within marine research and fisheries in the Barents-sea between Norway and Russia has roots going back to the early 1900s. But it wasn't until in 1975 that the two neighbors established the Fisheries Commission from which they have jointly managed the fish stocks in the Barents-sea since (Hønneland, 2006; Joint Russian-Norwegian Fisheries Commission, n.d.). On the regional level, cooperation had also begun during the Cold War (Landsem, 2012; Holtmark, 2015, p.538). After years of regional informal contact, trade, and building relations across the Norwegian-Russian border, a friendship agreement between Sør-Varanger municipality and Petchenga municipality was signed in 1976. In 1988, Finnmark county and Murmansk oblast also signed a friendship agreement (Holtmark, 2015, p.540). These agreements laid the foundation for increased economic cooperation, and also other relevant fields. However, while it is important to point out that here was cooperation across the Norwegian-Russian border during the Cold-War, it is also essential to be aware of

the changing international political context in the 1980s and early 1990s that made the creation of the Barents-cooperation possible.

As the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991 and the Cold War came to an end, the opportunity to expand cooperation to the national level emerged. Norwegian minister of foreign affairs at the time, Thorvald Stoltenberg, wanted to seize the moment of a Russia that was open and positive towards international dialogue and cooperation (Holtmark, 2015, p.557). This moment of possibility was expressed and made possible a couple of years earlier in 1987, when Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party at the time, Mikhail Gorbachev, made a series of foreign policy proposals for the Arctic region in what has later come to be called the Murmansk Initiative (Holtmark, 2015, p.531). Adding to the list of strategic political symbolism contributing to goodwill between Norway and Russia during this period, is the fact that Norway was the first country to acknowledge Russia as a sovereign state in 1991 (Holtmark, 2015 p.547). Furthermore, as the Cold War came to an end, NATO became less of a military presence in Russia's near abroad, including in Norway. Although Russia maintained a significant military presence in its northwest region, this was seen as a part of a balancing act with the USA without having regional implications hampering the Barents initiative (Kvistad, 1995, p.24; Fawcett, 2018, p.288). Moreover, NATO had to reinvent itself, and cooperative security became part of the agenda (Adler, 2008, p.212). The end of the Cold war also signaled a move towards increased regionalism in Europe (Kvistad, 1995, p.38). Hence, the Barents initiative followed an international trend with a cooperative security agenda, as opposed to the confrontational security strategy of the Cold-War years (Eriksson, 1995, p.260). All of this, together with the cooperative foundation that was already built between regional entities in Northern Norway and Northwestern Russia, added up to an international political context where cooperation with Russia was possible and seemed logical.

The opportunity was eventually seized upon when in 1993, the Kirkenes declaration was signed by Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the European Commission (EC) – officially initiating the Barents-cooperation. This meant to unite the northern-European areas, ease the aftershock of the cold war, and create renewed trust between Russia and its neighbors (Holtmark, 2015, p.615). The three concepts of stabilization, normalization and regionalization were fundamental and outspoken goals of the regional cooperation (Eriksson, 1995, p.273). This was to be achieved through cooperation in a range of fields: environment, economy, science and technology, regional infrastructure,

indigenous peoples, human contact and cultural relations, and tourism were all mentioned specifically (Kirkenes Declaration, 1993). An important driver for establishing the cooperation was the desire to enhance economic development in the region – specially to address the gap in living standards between people in the region (Eriksson, 1995, p.274). As such, traditional security-issues, such as military and defense, were excluded from the cooperation. Rather, it was the ambition of the Norwegian MFA that security (stabilization, normalization and regionalization) would be achieved as an extended consequence of the everyday practices of cooperation within the aforementioned fields. This pertains to an idea of ‘low-politics’ with spillover-effect to ‘high-politics’<sup>2</sup> (Eriksson, 1995, p.271; Kvistad, 1995, p.40).

As we have seen, the creation of the Barents-cooperation was a continuation and formalization of collaboration between Norway and Russia that had been going before the Soviet had dissolved. In the following subchapter, it becomes apparent how these historical ties of cooperation between Russia and Norway both before and during the Cold War was an essential component as the Norwegian MFA sought to legitimize the Barents-cooperation.

#### 4.2 Decentralizing Norwegian foreign policy practice

The Norwegian MFA put a lot of effort into legitimizing the cooperation when it started. This was done by drawing on historical connections. While the creation of the Barents-region signaled the start of a formalized Barents cooperation, as we saw above the people-to-people cooperation across the border had been going on long before the Kirkenes declaration in 1993 (Holtmark, 2015). The Norwegian MFA ordered reports articulating an account of how cooperation between Russia and Norway was a natural consequence of the end of the Cold War (Eriksson, 1995, p.273; Neumann, 2002, p.64). One important historical connection is the pomor trade, between what is now Northwestern Russians and Northern Norwegians, that started in the seventeen-hundreds and lasted for more than a century (Schrader, 1988, p.111). Another central historical focal point is the fact that Soviets Red Army liberated Finnmark from Nazi Germany in 1945. Drawing on stories of a friendly cross-border relationship only disrupted by the years of Cold War and communism, the creation of the Barents-region was

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hoffman made a distinction between ‘low politics’ and ‘high politics’ in his article from 1966. ‘Low politics’ represent social and human security, while sovereignty i.e. state security is defined as ‘high politics’. Despite its critique, these concepts have been frequently used since. E.g. Andreas Østhagen (2016, p.91) makes use of these concepts in order to highlight how bilateral coast guard cooperation in the Behring and Barents Seas, defined as ‘low politics’, have been able to continue despite conflict in the realm of ‘high politics’.

articulated as merely “re-establishing” the relationship (Neumann, 2002, p.64). Hence, following Hansen that foreign policies are legitimized through references to identity, the Russian Other was constructed as less of a threat and more of a natural and logical cooperation-partner. And it was done by drawing on the local Northern Norwegian relationship with Northwestern Russia – as such co-opting this as part of the history of the bilateral relationship between the two neighbors. Thus, the creation of the Barents-cooperation entailed a politically initiated identity-formation project of the people in the region and across the borders (Hønneland, 1998, p.280).

Some Norwegian politicians were skeptical to bilaterally engage with Russia, as it was perceived as a break with the Norwegian tradition of interacting with the eastern neighbor through multilateral channels (Holtmark, 2015, p.617). Skepticism was also expressed among politicians in Northern Norway, as the security tension, potential confrontation with Russia and the subsequent militarization of the region was a source of employment (Holtmark, 2015, p.617). Nevertheless, there was generally a broad political agreement that cross-border cooperation would be beneficial.

As the cooperation became a reality, skepticism still lingered amongst politicians within the central Norwegian government who were against the institutional structure of the cooperation that included key people in foreign affairs. (Neumann, 2002; Holtmark, 2015). In their view the structure of the Barents-cooperation was perceived as a deviation of normal foreign policy practice (Neumann, 2002, p.641). An essential aspect of the Barents-cooperation was the decentralization of Norwegian foreign policy. Meaning that a fundamental part of making the Barents-cooperation part of Norway’s Russia policy was, and still is, engaging local and regional actors in the foreign policy practice. The aim was to include civil society, indigenous communities, and business actors into collaboration on the many issues encompassed by the Barents-cooperation. Actors from all the northernmost regions in Norway included in the Barents-region - Nordland, Troms and Finnmark - could apply for projects including partners from Russia (as well as Finland and Sweden). The local people-to-people engagement is often termed as the “motor” of the Barents-cooperation. Thorvald Stoltenberg said, *“it was the very idea that the motor of the cooperation should be tended to by the people in the North”* (As cited by Neumann, 2002, p.642). Kirkenes, the administrative center of Sør-Varanger municipality, became a regional hotspot. So much so, that “the Barents Capital” is a commonly used nickname for the town – neatly underscoring the entanglement between the local and international in Kirkenes.



Hence, the creation of the Barents-cooperation entailed building an institutional structure centered in northern Norway. The Norwegian Barents Secretariat – hereby the NBS – was established in 1993 and is an intermunicipal corporation owned by Nordland, and Troms and Finnmark. Their office is in Kirkenes with 12 full-time employees (in 2020). The employees have different areas of expertise and responsibility - from culture projects to business and industry projects. As such, the NBS is by one of the informants termed a regional center of competence<sup>3</sup>. The main activity of the secretariat is administering and distributing project funds from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Their mission is to create broad activity between the people living in the Norwegian and Russian Barents region<sup>4</sup>. Annually they receive a letter of assignment from the MFA, which instructs their work and distribution of funds. While being responsible for coordinating and granting project funds, the secretariat also often serves as a middleman between actors across the border putting Russians and Norwegians in contact. In the very same building as the Norwegian Secretariat is the International Barents Secretariat which was established in 2008. Their role is to facilitate meetings and support activity in the BEAC and the BRC and serve as a mediator between the regional and governmental levels (Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation, 2020).

At the inter-regional level is the Barents Regional Council (BRC) consisting of the thirteen regional entities that make up the Barents-region<sup>5</sup> and representatives from the indigenous peoples in the region (Regjeringen, 2015). Like the BEAC, the regional council also has rotating chairmanship. In the Norwegian part of the region are the counties Nordland and Troms & Finnmark. While not exclusively a part of the Barents cooperation, the counties have important ownership roles in several of the Barents-institutions including their position in the regional council. Moreover, Troms & Finnmark is the only Norwegian county bordering Russia. At the municipal level, the mayor of Sør-Varanger, the only Norwegian municipality bordering Russia, has traditionally taken on an active and vocal role in promoting the Barents-cooperation and the interests of the local population in relation to Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia. The current mayor of Sør-Varanger, Rune Rafaelsen, has for many years been a powerful political figure in the Barents-region, both as head of the NBS from 2003 to 2015 and as mayor from 2016. His active role in promoting the

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with anonymous 1, 20/02, Kirkenes

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Håvard, a practitioner with several years of experience from the official Barents-cooperation institutions. 26/02, Kirkenes.

<sup>5</sup> Nordland, Troms & Finnmark in Norway. Västerbotten and Norrbotten in Sweden. Lapland, Oulu and Kainuu in Finland. Murmansk, Karelen, Arkhangelsk, Komi, and Nenets in Russia.

cooperation and his regional political ambitions both nationally and internationally led one of the informants to describe him as a “local foreign minister”<sup>6</sup>.

At the state-level with exclusive involvement in the Barents Cooperation is the Barents Euro Arctic Council (BEAC) which is the intergovernmental organ of the cooperation. This is where the foreign ministries of the countries within the region sit, as well as Iceland and the EU commission. The countries that make up the geographic Barents-region are Norway, Russia, Sweden and Finland. The chairmanship of the council rotates every four years between the four member states. From 2019 to 2021 Norway has the chairmanship with people-to-people, health, and knowledge as the stated focus areas. Under BEAC is several working groups with responsibility for different fields of cooperation (e.g. culture, sports, education etc.).

Following from the observations in this subchapter, the creation of the Barents-cooperation entailed an institutionalizing the decentralization of foreign policy practice. Kirkenes became a new node in Norwegian foreign policy and the people-to-people contact that had been a part of Northern Norwegians and Northwestern Russians lives for many years was made part of official Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the optimism that characterized the interstate Norwegian-Russian relationship when the cold war came to an end (exemplified by the creation of the Barents-cooperation) has in recent years been overshadowed and influenced by increased tension in the Western-Russian relationship.

### 4.3 Increased tension: The ‘new normal’?

The international climate and political transformations within Russia as the Cold War came to an end enabled Norwegian and Russian decision-makers to engage in institution-building in the North. However, since then the relationship between Western states and Russia have spiraled into new confrontations reviving divisions between the Cold war enemies – also influencing Norwegian-Russian interstate relations. Thus, the geopolitical context within which the Barents-cooperation and its practitioners operates has changed. I argue here, that this is apparent both in terms of concrete events and in rhetoric.

Drawing on securitization theory, Leif C. Jensen (2012) argues that Norwegian threat narratives about Russia have been revived in Norway in the 2000s. He shows how Norwegian government white papers and statements made references to security in order to legitimize its

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Anonymous 4, 14/02, Kirkenes.

strategy in the High North<sup>7</sup> in the early 2000s. In 2005 the Norwegian government at the time launched its High North Initiative which centered on resource exploitation of the oil and gas reserves in the area (Jensen, 2012, p.82). This followed a speech by foreign minister at the time, Jonas Gahr Støre, in which he framed the ability to secure stable supplies of energy as central to security and stability in the region. According to Jensen (2012, p.94), while Støre's speech and the government initiative did not articulate Norwegian 'state security' as under threat from Russia, different security conceptions draw on each other, and the securitization of energy in the High North made security dominate the national discourse on the High North. Embedded in this discourse was a (re)construction of Russia as a radical Other in the "collective Norwegian mind" by discursive constructions by politicians and in the media of Norway as a tiny and vulnerable country juxtaposed with the "massive Russia ("The Russian Bear")" (Jensen, 2012, p. 94).

Nevertheless, it is the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 that stands out as the landmark event in the Western-Russian and Norwegian-Russian relationship since the end of the Cold War. It led to an acknowledgement that European security situation had changed when five Nordic ministers wrote in a collaborate chronicle: "We must realize that it is no longer business as usual, and that a new normal is upon us"<sup>8</sup> (Aftenposten, April 9<sup>th</sup> 2015). Norway, unsurprisingly due its membership in NATO, close ties to the US and EU, and adherence to the principles of the liberal international order, joined the subsequent sanctions-regime towards Russia. Western sanctions were met with counter sanctions by Russia. While perceiving and articulating Russia as an enemy is not a new practice, the years following 2014 saw a sharpening of the Norwegian rhetoric towards Russia (Rowe, 2018). According to Lars Rowe, since 2014 Norwegian media is increasingly speculating and constructing threat narratives about Russian ambitions, intentions, and methods (2018, p.11). Rowe refers to examples from headlines from Norwegian newspapers such as: "New and old enemies threaten Norway" and "This is how Russia can Attack Norway" (2018, p.5)<sup>9</sup>. Norwegian threat narratives about Russia has therefore continued to rise after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Rowe, 2018; Wilhelsen & Gjerde, 2018).

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<sup>7</sup> In this thesis I use three geopolitical terms – the Barents-region, the Arctic, and the High North. The Barents-region was outlined in chapter 4.2. The Arctic refers to the area within the Arctic circle – the whole circumpolar territory. The High North is a more politized area and does not have a set definition. However, in this thesis it refers to Norwegian territory in the Arctic region.

<sup>8</sup> My translation

<sup>9</sup> These are my translations of the headlines written in Norwegian as presented in Rowe's article.

Simultaneously, in the past decade there has been an increased militarization in and around the Barents-region. As part of the balancing act that is, and has been for decades, the Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia, Norway has not allowed its allies in NATO to establish military bases on its territory. As seen above, this used to be a welcomed and valued principle of reassurance in the eyes of Russia. Already in the 1990s this self-imposed restriction policy was slightly cut back (Holtsmak, 2015, p.562). The move away from this policy has continued since, for example visible through NATO-led exercises on Norwegian territory in recent years. Thereby, the Norwegian approach to the north has become increasingly militarized and, as we saw above, securitized. Concurrently, Russia has increased militarization in the Northern Norwegian vicinity, all together leading to a more tense dynamic between the two neighbors (Vestvik & Rosenby, 2019).

As such, what we have seen the past decades up until today is an increased geopolitical tension. I argue therefore, that increasing geopolitical tension post 2014 has stabilized as the 'new normal', in the words of the foreign minister and her Nordic colleagues. This 'new normal' expresses a change in the political context within which the Barents-cooperation operates. As seen above, the period in which cooperation was established, reflected a different sentiment: as the Soviet Union dissolved the discursive representation of Russia in Norwegian public discourse changed. Central to this change was historical narratives of pomor-trade and the Soviet saviors of Finnmark in WWII. The communist era appeared as an exception in history, although during the Soviet-period, relationships of cooperation were also nurtured regionally. Politically, the opportunity to define and create a cross-border region for business exchange, including cultural and social interaction, was seized in the early 1990s. Three decades later, the liberal world order is crumbling and the geopolitical tension between the West and Russia has deteriorated partly due to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This is the 'new normal' in global politics. Yet, the Barents-cooperation sustains, in everyday activities, collaboration and exchanges. How do the people working with Barents-cooperation in a day to day business make sense of this 'new normal'? It is with that question in mind that the thesis now turns to the practitioners of the cooperation, as the following chapter puts the people enacting the everyday practices of the cooperation at the center of the analysis.

## 5 The Barents-cooperation and geopolitical tension

In order to understand how practitioners in the Barents-cooperation experience and make sense of the recent geopolitical and interstate tensions surrounding the cooperation, I will now direct attention towards their own stories. Here, my interviews with practitioners are used to show how they link geopolitical tension in contemporary Norwegian-Russian relations with the Barents-cooperation. Their experiences will be analyzed on the basis of the discourse analytical approach outlined in chapter two and three. In this way, I illustrate how geopolitics can be interpreted from the interviews and how geopolitical tension is reflected in discourse within the Barents-cooperation. As the practitioners link the cooperation to geopolitical tension the analysis reveals how the cooperation is legitimized, and identities and challenges are constructed.

In terms of structure, the chapter is divided into four sub-sections following empirical observations emerging from the interviews. These are highlighted as the following political events and developments that the informants reflected upon: (5.1) the annexation of Crimea, consequent sanctions-regime in 2014, and a colder political climate, (5.2) authoritative turns in Russian politics and consequences for civil society cooperation, (5.3) the Frode Berg-case and Fokus 2020-report, and (5.4) the increasing international interest in the Arctic region.

### 5.1 Reviving justifications for the Barents-cooperation post-2014

In the following analysis I explain how the informants use the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent geopolitical tension to emphasize the uniqueness and importance of the Barents-cooperation. They describe a collaboration that has been able to retain its cooperative activities and articulate a series of justifications for why the cooperation is needed now more than ever. As a geopolitical event, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 is arguably the toughest test the post-Cold War relationship between the transatlantic allies and Russia has had to endure. In many ways, it is yet to recover from it. It is an event that raises questions about sovereignty, state behavior, and international law. As discussed in chapter four, the annexation and subsequent sanctions had, and still have, an impact on the bilateral Norwegian-Russian relationship.

However, the informants repeatedly emphasized how the Barents-cooperation has steered clear of disruptions after the annexation of Crimea. For example, an informant from the

Norwegian MFA with experience from working with the Barents-cooperation – hereby called the MFA source<sup>10</sup> – said that:

“There is no basis today for saying that Barents cooperation is hampered or characterized by a slightly more complicated geopolitical situation. It is in a way a collaboration that has been spared the great controversies.” (Interview, 03/03).

Also informants working with education, sport and theatre respectively, all express that their cooperative practice remained unaffected and steered clear of political tension amid 2014. Pål, a local with decades of experience from education cooperation in the region, said that “*We [people working with education projects] have never been affected by any disputes between the countries*” (Interview, 28/02). He also explained how in the months after Russia annexed Crimea he met with Russian and Swedish representatives in order to expand ongoing education projects. The meeting resulted in the creation of “Arctic Skills” – an annual competition in vocational skills with participants from Finnmark in Norway, Lapland in Finland, and Murmansk in Russia. While the motivation for ‘Arctic Skills’ was unrelated to the increased geopolitical tension, Pål uses it as an example of how education cooperation continued to develop despite increased tension after the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Yet, cooperation activity did not go entirely unaffected after 2014. The sanctions-regime that followed the annexation led to a more difficult business environment across the Russian-Norwegian border. Especially as Russia stopped the import of fish from Norway. As a direct reaction to the sanctions, the county mayor of Finnmark at the time publicly stated her opposition to Norwegian adherence to the sanctions-regime as it was harming local trade (Dagsavisen, 2019). According to the experienced cooperation practitioner Håvard, the sanctions have become “a factor” influencing business and industry cooperation<sup>11</sup>. This is also expressed in the interview with an expert on business and industry cooperation in the Barents-region: “*During the 90s, business was flourishing compared to today. There is less, way less business and industry cooperation now which is partly due to the annexation of Crimea and increased geopolitical tension.*” (Anonymous 1, 20/02). Importantly, according to several of the informants, business and industry cooperation was already considered difficult before 2014 due to what they term differences in business culture<sup>12</sup>. Further, according to the

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<sup>10</sup> “The MFA source” is the informant’s own desired nickname. In the interview appendix the informant is referred to as anonymous 2.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, 07/02, Skype.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, 20/02, Kirkenes (Anonymous 1) & Interview, 20/02, Kirkenes (Anonymous 3).

business and industry expert, the general escalation of tension in inter-state relations in recent years, have dampened interest amongst Norwegian actors to invest in business with Russian partners. Hence, the past decade has seen the development of an unpredictable investment environment for this type of profit-seeking cooperation. This has led the NBS to take on a more active role in promoting cooperation investment possibilities and initiating projects, more so than what they do within the other fields of cooperation, according to several informants. However, as expressed by both Håvard and the expert on business and industry in the region, the NBS is facing an uphill struggle in trying to foster interest from Norwegian actors at present.

Moreover, the informants often refer to how the Norwegian government has shown its commitment to the cooperation. This is presented as essential because support from central authorities legitimizes and justifies the practitioners and their work. After the annexation of Crimea and implementation of the sanctions-regime, some of the informants explain how they were interested to see how the central government would communicate the situation to them. As we have seen, at the time minister of defense Eriksen Søreide, called the increased tension a 'new normal'. However, the informants say they received, and continue to receive, support and reassurance from a Norwegian government that remains committed to the cooperation in the Barents-region. Clara, an informant with several years of experience with allocation of project funds at the NBS and culture cooperation, explained that,

“even though the international political context is colder, and Norway adheres to the sanctions-regime, Norwegian politicians tell us to keep going like before. I mean, after 2014 there’s never been talk of reducing our activity or changing course. On the contrary, the Norwegian government said that the people-to-people cooperation in the North shall endure as usual.” (Interview, 19/02).

As Clara expresses in this quote, she does not mind that the Norwegian government adheres to the sanctions regime as long as their support to the Barents-cooperation remains. Also Nina, an informant with more than two decades of experience from theater and culture cooperation, emphasizes the importance of being supported by the government when geopolitical tension is on the rise. She refers to a statement from foreign minister at the time Børge Brende, when in 2017 the Samovar-theater received the Barents Scholarship for Culture Cooperation, where he emphasized the importance of cultural cooperation to appease

bilateral relations with Russia<sup>13</sup>: *“Børge Brende’s statement was very important to us. Since, we have used it in applications for funding and grants”* (Interview, 19/02). As such, linking their cultural practices and giving the people-to-people collaboration they engage in an extended meaning as part of Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia is a strategic way for practitioners to legitimize the cooperative practices and being able to retain them.

With the backdrop of retained cooperation activity after 2014, the informants construe the Barents-cooperation as standing in contrast to other types of cooperative platforms that broke down after the annexation: *“At national level there has been a decrease in inter-governmental meetings as well as decreased cooperation amid 2014. For example, defense-cooperation has completely broken down [...]. However, we’ve seen a slight increase in the number of Barents-cooperation projects”* (Håvard, 07/02). In explaining why he believes the Barents-cooperation has been retained, as opposed to for example defense-cooperation, Håvard paints a picture of a unique cooperation. The emphasis on the uniqueness of the Barents-cooperation when talking about the deteriorating political climate after 2014 is a common trait in the interviews. Clara also reflects on what makes the cooperation unique when asked about what she believes have made the Barents-cooperation able to continue as before after the events of 2014: *“It’s the people-to-people element of the Barents-cooperation. The fact that ordinary people participate in a foreign policy cooperation, makes it unique in an international context.”* (Interview, 19/02). In that way, it is not just about continued governmental support; to the informants, the Barents-cooperation is unique and able to maintain the status quo despite geopolitical tension due to its involvement of “ordinary people”.

From Knut’s understanding, a local practitioner with decades of experience from cross-border sports cooperation, the friendships created across the border are too strong for them to break down due to geopolitical tension<sup>14</sup>. This idea is also articulated by mayor Rafaelsen: *“The Barents-cooperation is retained despite polarization because it has created trust. When you’re cooperating with Russia you need to build a relationship over time. And that’s why I think the Barents-cooperation is so great; it builds trust between people”* (Interview, 21/02). As such, geopolitical tension and the retained cooperative activity after 2014 are used to reaffirm the uniqueness of the cooperation. In order to make sense of how they have been able to retain cooperative activity amidst geopolitical tension, the informants emphasize the

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<sup>13</sup> Børge Brende’s quotes from this occasion are cited here: <https://samimag.no/nb/nyheter/samovarteateret-et-storpolitisk-pluss/>

<sup>14</sup> Interview, 08/06



decentralized foreign policy practice and people-to-people aspect as unique elements of the Barents-cooperation.

Furthermore, it often emerged in the interviews how the practitioners see the Barents-cooperation as a soft-security mechanism. They see themselves and their work as not only contributing to amicable relations between people across the border, but as producing long-term security through their everyday practice. For example, one informant said that “*What we do is soft-security in practice. So I would say that the Barents-cooperation is a security policy – and it works.*” (Anonymous 1, 20/02). Clara augmented this view, saying:

“We contribute to creating generations of Norwegian and Russians who in the future might be leaders in their countries or regions, and due to our contribution, they might know each other. That leads to a normalized relationship. So, with small steps, we contribute to a more stable society – and stability is security.” (Interview, 19/02)

Here, cooperation projects involving local youngsters are understood as a practice contributing in the long run to a generation of friends across the border. This relates to the idea of a “Barents-generation” and a “Barents-identity” (Hønneland, 1998, p.289). The generations growing up in the region after the creation of the Barents-cooperation are thus said to embody a Barents-identity, securing peaceful relations across the border in the years to come. That way, the Barents-cooperation, its practitioners and their everyday cooperative practice are represented as a security mechanism.

The informants believe that the Barents-cooperation’s security mechanism becomes increasingly important and fruitful during geopolitical tension. This is because it provides people, from locals to government officials, with a meeting place. As Marius, an informant with several years of experience from working at the Northern Norwegian European Office (NNEO) in Brussels said, “*the Barents-cooperation has become a framework for upholding contact after 2014*” (Interview, 22/04). In Brussels, the promotion of the Barents-cooperation has continued after 2014. Marius explains why continued promotion of the cooperation is important:

“Although there are disagreements between Oslo and Moscow, the cooperation across the border needs to go on as normal. People can disagree whether the annexation was a violation of international law but you still have to manage the fishing resources in the Barents Sea and you still have to remove all the nuclear waste on the Kola Peninsula, you still need to engage in cultural exchange, and sports. Things going on as normal is

essential – the people living close to the border haven't done anything wrong.”

(Interview, 22/04)

Marius also said that promoting the Barents-cooperation in Brussel has become increasingly difficult amid the Russian annexation of Crimea. This, according to him, is because other European states have grown increasingly tired of Russia's actions in the past decade. Yet, the NNEO continues to promote the cooperation and its benefits. After 2014 they have continued organizing seminars in Brussels on the Barents region and cooperation, just as they had been doing in the years prior to the annexation, according to Marius. Based on the experiences and reflections of the practitioners interviewed, the idea that the cooperation “needs to go on as normal” highlights a general concurrence within the Barents-cooperation.

Håvard, also emphasized the importance of the cooperation during times of tension, as he is *“convinced that the Barents cooperation is an important platform making it easier to maintain dialogue, especially in times of conflict. [...] In my opinion the Barents-cooperation reduce conflict and is as such a soft security policy”* (Interview, 07/02). Central to this idea is the notion that the cooperation at the regional level transcends to the inter-governmental:

“This is important on a regional level, but in fact there is so much activity that it transcends to the national level. For example, [Norwegian foreign minister at the time] Børge Brende had three official meetings with Lavrov after 2014 and they were all related to the Barents cooperation. We know that when the foreign ministers meet through the Barents cooperation, such as the World War II liberation anniversary, it is possible for them to talk politics.” (Interview, 07/02)

This quote underscores how the informants portray the cooperation with enhanced meaning and relevance. The “unique” Barents-cooperation facilitates meetings between people (from locals to government officials) despite being surrounded by a cold geopolitical climate. For example, in the quote above, Håvard argues that after 2014 the Barents-cooperation has provided the Norwegian and the Russian foreign ministers with a platform from which they can engage in dialogue. As such, the informants represent the Barents-cooperation as a platform for normalization in the relationship between Norway and Russia. Mayor Rafaelsen, who was head of the NBS from 2003 to 2015 and therefore at the time when Russia annexed Crimea, concurs with this framing of the Barents-cooperation as an important platform in times of inter-governmental tension:

“The Barents-cooperation has been an extremely important factor maintaining dialogue between Russia and Norway. We fully understand the sanctions that came after Russia... Went into Crimea. But you need to look forward and maintain dialogue. You may call it peace-communication, because if you don’t talk to each other, relations will get more tense” (Interview, 21/02).

In this pragmatic statement, Rafaelsen uses the increased tension after 2014 to emphasize the importance of the Barents-cooperation. The cooperation is represented as a means, or “foundation”, from which interstate tension can be kept at a tolerable level. Following Hansen (2006), it is stipulated that foreign policy discourses entail legitimizations of the policy. This is evident in the discourse uncovered here, as it is apparent in the interviews how the events of 2014 are used to revive justification of the Barents-cooperation by saying something positive about it. They use words and phrases such as “soft-security mechanism”, “normalization”, “platform maintaining dialogue”, “peace-communication” when talking about the cooperation in the context of geopolitical tension after 2014. That way, the cooperation and the different activities that falls under it are construed with the enhanced meaning of a security mechanism. This underlines a representation of the Barents-cooperation as a mediator for peaceful relations between Norway and Russia and as a tool to maintain this aspect of Norwegian foreign policy despite a complicated relationship after 2014.

My observation in this subchapter is that the informants almost exclusively use the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to revive justification of and thus legitimize the Barents-cooperation cooperation. They respond to increased inter-governmental tension after 2014 by constructing arguments for more and continued Barents-cooperation. This is a central part of the discourse constructed by the informants accentuating their role as foreign policy practitioners and representing the Barents-cooperation as a proactive force in the relationship between the countries. A notion that is backed up and legitimized by the construction of the Barents-cooperation as a soft-security mechanism contributing to de-escalation in the face of deteriorating interstate relationships. As such, this subchapter provided insight into the practitioners understanding of the Barents-cooperation and their own role in a colder international political climate. The discourse conveys a representation of the Barents-cooperation that is adapted to the ‘new normal’ – making it relevant and more important *because* inter-governmental tension is on the rise. By arguing that everything “needs to go on as normal”, as articulated by one of the informants, they argue to maintain the status quo and

in that way the Barents-cooperation is represented as a counterweight to the increased tension between Norway and Russia.

Now that we have seen how the events of 2014 sharpens the informants justifications of the cooperation, it is relevant to go more into depth and analyze how the practitioners see themselves and their own role. In the next section I direct attention towards more concrete events and developments that the informants brought up in the interviews. As we shall see, when the informants talk about the relationship between Russian state and Russian civil society, they represent domestic politics in Russia as a challenge to the cooperation, and simultaneously construct an idea of Self.

## 5.2 The Self as a “supporter” of the “vulnerable” Russian civil society

Authoritative developments in Russian politics and the effect it has on Russian civil society frequently emerged in the interviews. This caught my interest because the informants noted how the Russian ‘foreign agent’-legislation from 2012 has had consequences for the Barents-cooperation and made it more difficult to collaborate across the Norwegian-Russian border. The ‘foreign agent’-legislation stipulating that NGOs receiving funding from abroad can be labeled ‘foreign agent’. This means that a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate civil society in Russia is made (Stuvøy, 2020, p.1). Moreover, the legislation forces NGOs to self-identify within the rigid civil-society categories defined by the Russian state. This way, state dominance narrows NGO identity and space for agency (Stuvøy, 2020, p.7). In 2015, the ‘foreign agent’-legislation was followed by an ‘undesirable organizations’ law, allowing the Russian state to label a foreign or international NGO “undesirable” if it is deemed to be a threat to the state (Lipman, 2016, p. 346). In this subchapter, I analyze how this Russian national context is represented in relation to the Barents-cooperation. Specifically, I explain how informants construct the Self as a “supporter” of a “weak” Russian civil society, thereby constructing the Russian civil society in their own image and earning a coherent construction of Self. This reveals an underlying logic, or a general expectation, amongst the Norwegian practitioners of the Barents-cooperation that it is Russia who should adapt to the liberal and democratic values the Norwegian practitioners themselves represent.

The NBS intends to focus on what they perceive as apolitical and therefore uncomplicated. Clara said that:

“We try to stay away from the politically complicated...Sports and culture are the fields that it is least complicated to facilitate cooperation because it isn’t so politically

laden or politically complicated. In that sense, it is important because it can serve as a catalyst for other types of activity – maybe you begin with culture and then move on to more difficult areas.” (Interview, 19/02)

According to Clara, culture and sports are fields that are perceived as not “politically laden” and “politically uncomplicated”. As a consequence, it is those fields of cooperation that are most heavily funded. These fields also generally steer clear of ‘foreign agent’-legislation, as they are not considered political in the Russian context. As such, what may be termed the core activity of the Barents-cooperation remains unaffected by the repressive legislation on Russian NGOs. Yet, with the mandate of funding cooperation projects across the border, the NBS finds itself in a quandary due to the ‘foreign agent’-legislation. In fact, promoting liberal values and ideals such as democracy is according to Clara part of the NBS’ internal action plan: *“In the action plan for 2020 it says that projects on civil society contributes to create active citizenship and provides the basis for and maintains democracy”* (Email interview, 15/06). While their letters of assignment from the MFA clearly states that funds should be directed towards civil society cooperation, Russian project partners risk being given the ‘foreign agent’-label if they receive funds from the secretariat. Clara explained:

“The NBS tries to manage the project funds in a way that avoids creating problems for the actors that receive the funding. For example, we never grant funds directly to Russian civil society organizations. That way we avoid them being affected by ‘foreign agent’ legislation” (Interview, 19/02).

Hence, the NBS has slightly altered its practices. While they do not send funds directly to Russian civil society organizations, NBS funds find their way to Russian organizations indirectly:

“We do see however, that Russian organizations may indirectly receive funding from us through our Northern Norwegian actors transferring funds that are from our grants. Therefore, we have a clause in our grant letters, stipulating that contracts must be signed between the partners if our grants are to be transferred, and that we must approve these contracts. This allows us to influence and advise the partners on how to avoid problems for the Russian party.” (Interview, 19/02)

However, the restrictions on civil society in Russia are not always circumvented. Clara refers to concrete examples: One where an environmental project was delayed due to extra paperwork amid fears of ramifications from ‘foreign agent’-labeling. Another where the

Norwegian organization FRI, often granted funds by the NBS, has reported of an increasingly repressive situation for the LGBT community in Russia – subsequently hampering possibilities for them to reach out the community and initiate cooperation. Clara said that,

“Within civil society, environmental issues, NGOs working with sensitive topics like for example LGBT, and journalism, cooperation has become more difficult. People working within these fields are facing great challenges and experience that due to new laws on Russian side, cooperation is more complicated.” (Interview, 19/02 2020).

This quote underlines the dominant representation of the Russian state-civil society relationship within the Barents-cooperation. The informants are in concurrence in their perception that Russian civil society is weakened by an oppressive and authoritative Russian state. They believe this has complicated civil-society cooperation across the border.

According to Håvard, the experienced cooperation practitioner, *“the foreign-agent law in Russia has made cooperation within civil society more difficult and complicated”* (Interview 07/02). Hence, the informants describe the “foreign agent”-legislation as an obstacle and a challenge that has made civil society cooperation “complicated”. This is expressed in the quotes above and is echoed by journalist and former deputy head of the NBS Thomas Nilsen:

“It all started in 2012 when Putin was elected for the third time. After that the Barents-cooperation changed character. [...] Russia started clamping down on civil society with the famous ‘foreign-agent’-legislation. This quickly affected the Barents-cooperation. 11 Russian NGOs that had been cooperating with corresponding Norwegian NGOs were given the foreign-agent mark.” (Interview, 14/02)

Although the informants emphasize the ‘foreign agent’-legislation as a hindrance to people-to-people cooperation, in practice the experience is often more nuanced. Within the fields of education and culture the informants explain that the cooperation is not affected by the politics surrounding the legislation. Pål sums up this perception: *“Overall, education-cooperation steers clear of authoritative turns in Russia. However, civil society movements are affected by the foreign agent legislation”* (Interview, 28/02).

Some informants uphold the idea that the ‘foreign-agent’-legislation is a hindrance to the Barents-cooperation but fail to come up with concrete examples. Marius, the informant from the NNEO, is convinced that the ‘foreign agent’-legislation has severely hampered the cooperation. Yet, when asked about concrete examples the only one that emerges is the case of Ølen Betong which is related to business and industry – fields that do not fall under the

civil society domain that the ‘foreign agent’ legislation pertains to<sup>15</sup>. Allegedly, Norwegian intelligence service tried to recruit two employees of Ølen Betong – a firm with factories in both the Norwegian and Russian part of the Barents-region. Although the employees declined the recruitment attempts, their contact with the Norwegian Intelligence service was enough for the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) to expel them from Russia (Jentoft, 2017; Nordvåg & Wormdal, 2020). As such, the Ølen Betong-case was not related to the ‘foreign agent’-legislation at all, but to the Norwegian Intelligence Service attempts at recruiting spies from within the Barents-region. The lack of reference to concrete examples indicates that the discursive production of Russian civil society as increasingly vulnerable has become a dominant discourse. In other words, this is a narrative that has become an accepted “truth” that renders further scrutiny of specific situations – e.g. that of the Ølen Betong-case – unnecessary.

While there is little doubt that the Russian civil society is maneuvering within a narrower space for agency, it is shaped by discursive production. Thus, we can reflect on and problematize the dominant construction of Russian civil society as vulnerable and weak. In a recent article, Stuvøy showed how Russian civil society activists carve out space for themselves from which they legitimize their position, despite repressive state legislation (Stuvøy, 2020, p.6). In her article, it becomes apparent how the EU through its civil society network ‘EU-Russia Civil Society Forum’ fails to identify this agency which Russian activists have and create amid state dominance (Stuvøy, 2020, p.18). Among the practitioners in the Barents-cooperation the dominant discourse on the Russian civil society similarly portrays it as weak, and as such disregards the innovative and strategic ways in which activists circumvent the repressive legislation and adapt their activities. In fact, there are also examples of NGOs participating in the Barents-cooperation (receiving funds from NBS) where adaptation and changes to organizational structure allowed the NGO to continue as before. For example, the environmental organization Bellona in Murmansk was addressed by informants. The focus was how they were subject to the ‘foreign agent’-label, not on how they strategically adapted by re-organizing “along new bureaucratic lines” and thus retained their activities in Murmansk (Digges, 2019). Following this, I ask how the dominant portrayal of civil society development in Russia reflects on the identity of the Barents-cooperation.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview 22/04

From a discursive analytical standpoint, as the informants describe the Russian state-civil society relationship, they sub-consciously produce an image of Self. They express a belief that through the different cooperation projects with Russian civil society, the Barents-cooperation is supporting the Russian civil society repressed by the authoritative Russian state. Here, the informant's discourse on Russian civil society is constructing an idea of the Self as supporters of the 'weak' Russian civil society.

When asked why it is important for the NBS to fund civil society cooperation between Norwegian and Russian actors, Håvard answered:

“To us, it is important to retain a broad civil society cooperation across the borders. Therefore, it is important to us that it is possible for Russians to be able to spend time doing activities they're interested in. In the Norwegian society there's a broad civil society – and we want them to be able to cooperate with Russian people who share similar interests. It gives more breadth to the cooperation that it also includes Russian civil society. Our opinion is that it is valuable having space to talk about societal topics that the people living there are occupied with” (Email interview, 15/06)

Hence, with the objective of retaining a “broad civil society cooperation” the NBS seeks to facilitate for Russians to be able to do “activities they're interested in”. Following how their action plan gives the NBS mandate to facilitate democracy, their support of Russian civil society is justified. A similar tendency is expressed by the MFA source. When asked about what challenges the Barents-cooperation is facing the MFA source immediately mentions challenges with Russian civil society, emphasizing it as something the Norwegian MFA try to direct focus towards through their chairmanship in BEAC. Moreover, perceptions and constructions of the Russian civil society are expressed by juxtaposing it with the Self (here: Norwegian civil society). For example, the theater practitioner Nina said that, “*We belong to the free field; no such thing exists in Russia*” (Interview, 19/02). As such, constructing the Russian civil society as the Other situated in an illiberal political and societal context, the informants construct a Self, situated in a liberal political and societal context, as the supporter of the Other.

Moreover, a recurring theme in the interviews with people working within the formalized Barents-cooperation is the telling of success-stories. While the informants reveal how the telling of success-stories is a conscious tactic when promoting the cooperation, they also turn to success-stories in my interviews with them. Thus, the success stories also serve as a



discursive production of Self. For example, when talking about authoritative turns in Russia, Håvard mentions BarentsPress as a successful project<sup>16</sup>. BarentsPress is an organization funded by the NBS where journalist from across the Barents-region participates. He adds that, due to the anti-liberal legislation and difficult situation for journalists in Russia, cooperation that includes civil-society and journalism is especially challenging. BarentsPress is therefore a project that directly challenges the difficulties of being a journalist in Russia by encouraging and supporting Russian journalism. It is represented as a successful project of cross-border cooperation *despite* a difficult context in Russia. This way, the NBS emerges from the ‘politically uncomplicated’ by promoting a set of liberal values.

The differentiation between the liberal Self and the Russian state is also an important identity dynamic I draw from the interviews. Mayor of Sør-Varanger Rune Rafaelsen, a key local actor, furthers the dominant representation of the Russian civil society as weak or even non-existent: *“Everything that has to do with civil society in Russia has gone wrong. The critical press is gone, the workers unions that used to be so strong are pulverized... many cases like these.”* (Interview, 21/02). However, he believes *“the stupidest thing you can do in international cooperation is taking a moralizing attitude”* (Interview, 21/02). Instead, as is consistent with most of the informants, Rafaelsen directs focus towards how the Barents-cooperation continues to be a constructive force despite political and societal differences between Norway and Russia:

“Unfortunately, they’ll never be like us. The longest political journey you can embark upon in Europe today is from Kirkenes to Murmansk – politically, historically, socially, economically... there are major differences. But the Barents-cooperation has made it easier, it has created a foundation. I don’t think there’s a Norwegian politician with as much contact with Russia as I have.” (Interview, 21/02)

In this statement, Rafaelsen establishes that the differences between Russia and Norway are too big for them to ever be alike. He indicates that the idea of Russia transforming towards Western ideals is unrealistic, and therefore differences need to be accepted. The mayor seems to neglect how Russia in the early 1990s embarked on a capitalist transformation and also how changes to Russian foreign policy approach in the Arctic opening for cooperation. As seen in chapter four, was a factor in making the formalization of the Barents-cooperation possible. Importantly, the emphasis on the differences between “us” and “them” serves as a

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, 07/02

construction of a radical Other – in this case the Russian state. And instead of “taking a moralizing attitude” towards this radical Other, the cooperation in and through its cooperative practice facilitates collaboration despite the “political, historical, social, economic” differences, according to the mayor. In that way, Rafaelsen manifests his primary concern: that the Barents-cooperation remains a platform that makes dialogue with Russia possible.

Whereas some of the informants emphasize how the Barents-cooperation through its support of the Russian civil society indirectly challenges what they perceive as an authoritative and illiberal Russian state, journalist Thomas Nilsen believes that Norwegian actors and the Barents cooperation should take on a more proactive and outspoken role against how the Russian state operates. This stands in stark contrast to Rafaelsen’s pragmatic approach of not taking a “moralizing attitude” towards Russia. Nilsen’s concern is how the change in Russian policy towards civil society has fundamentally changed the character of the Barents-cooperation: “*What is left of the cooperation is the official structures – the county council’s cooperation, the foreign ministers, the working groups – but there’s little left of the people-to-people aspect*” (Interview, 14/02). Therefore, he argues that Norway and the Barents-cooperation should critique human-rights violations and weaknesses in the Russian democracy – meaning the emergence of an authoritative Russian state. If not, he fears, the Barents-cooperation may no longer be what he believes it was intended to be:

“Regional leaders and institutions have a twisted understanding of the Barents-cooperation as something that should only reflect what is good. However, if you neglect what is not so good [about Russian politics], you’re walking off a cliff, which I think is what we see today. I mean, it can’t be the Russian intelligence service dictating who can participate in the Barents-cooperation.” (Interview, 14/02)

Nilsen believes there is a tendency to direct focus towards positive sides of the cooperation rather than address what is problematic. The tendency to direct focus towards the positives is also evident in my interviews with practitioners, as illustrated throughout chapter 5.1 and exemplified in this subchapter by the informants use of success stories. Nilsen indicates that the Russian intelligence service is interfering with the way the cooperation is run by dictating who are allowed participate. Furthermore, he states that regional leaders and the Barents-institutions in Norway through their fixation on highlighting “only what is good” neglect how authoritative turns in Russia inflict upon the Barents-cooperation. By focusing on negative aspects to how the cooperation has developed in face of authoritative turns in Russia, Nilsen gives a more dramatic meaning to the developments in domestic Russian politics than the

other informants. He represents the deteriorating state-civil society relationship in Russia as a threat to Norwegian actors' agency in the Barents-cooperation and expresses concerns with the lack of opposition to this tendency from the institutions and owners (the counties) of the Barents-cooperation.

To exemplify the development he is describing, Nilsen refers to his own experience of how Russian officials have interfered with Norwegian Barents institutions. Back in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, the online newspaper The Barents Observer was a part of the NBS and as such incorporated into the official structures of the Barents-cooperation funded by the MFA. But after publishing an article using the word "annexation" about Russia's actions in Crimea, The Barents Observer and Nilsen was accused by Russia's Kirkenes-based consul general, Mikhail Noskov, of damaging bilateral relations between Norway and Russia. In Noskov's view, the fact that the The Barents Observer was part of the MFA-funded NBS meant that it was a mouthpiece for the Norwegian government, and therefore the article was damaging. Subsequently, the owners of the NBS (and The Barents Observer), the three county councils, decided that the newspaper should not be allowed to write anything that could harm bilateral relations. Nilsen protested and was fired for "disloyalty" (Pedersen, 2014; Mathiesen, 2015)<sup>17</sup>. Shortly after this dramatic sequence of events, Nilsen and his two co-journalists moved into an office space across the street from the NBS and established The Independent Barents Observer.

Education practitioner Pål also mentioned the Barents Observer-case and expressed a similar concern to that of Nilsen:

"In my opinion, the situation we had with Thomas Nilsen and the Barents-Observer was an expression of the limits to the autonomy of the Barents-cooperation. In that case, the owners of the Barents secretariat were very clear that they want the Barents-cooperation and region to function as an obedient tool. I mean, perhaps the strongest signals came from Finnmark county." (Interview, 28/02)

To Pål and Nilsen, the Barents Observer-case reflects how the authoritative Russian state is not only repressing civil society and journalists in Russia, but that it also tries to do so in Norway. Due to lack of opposition to this development from the formal Barents institutions they believe the autonomy of the cooperation is limited. In this case, an online newspaper

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<sup>17</sup> This story is a combination of Nilsen's retelling in the interview (19/02/2020) and reporting on the situation in the referenced news articles.

reporting independent news within the formalized Barents-cooperation structure was canceled as a result, re-opening as an independent news agency under the “vær-varsom-poster”<sup>18</sup>.

The discourse on the ‘foreign agent’-legislation uncovered in this subchapter serves a specific purpose by giving meaning to a development in Russian politics and society. It reveals an identity dynamic from which the informants legitimize their foreign policy practice when faced with the challenge of an authoritative Russian state. This follows the idea of Hansen (2006), that foreign policy discourses draw on references to identities in their legitimization of the policy. Here, ideas about the Russian civil society are articulated where the Russian state is seen as strong and authoritative and the Russian civil society as weak, vulnerable or even non-existing. In that way, the dominant discourse on the Russian state-civil society relationship constructs two Others: a radical Other in the authoritative Russian state, and a weak and vulnerable Other in the Russian civil society. A Self is simultaneously constructed – an idea that “we” are the liberal supporters of the threatened Russian civil society. This Self/Other dynamic, where the Norwegian practitioners in the cooperation construe themselves as supporters of groups in Russia they perceive of as weak and threatened, is also a way in which their foreign policy practice and the Barents-cooperation is legitimized.

Moreover, the identity dynamics uncovered in this subchapter illustrates an underlying logic within the Barents-cooperation. While not all of the informants articulate it explicitly, the discourse reveals that the Norwegian side of the cooperation have constructed an identity of themselves as upholding liberal values as opposed to the Russian state. By discursively producing the Russian civil society as weak and vulnerable while simultaneously promoting liberal values through their support to it, the NBS takes on a political role, justified by an “apolitical” commitment to democracy. Mayor Rafaelsen maintains a pragmatic approach to Russia, rejecting what he calls “taking a moralizing attitude” but at the same time he said that “unfortunately, Russia will never be like us” - indicating that Russia becoming more like “us” would be for the better. Journalist Nilsen wants the Barents-cooperation to be more direct in its opposition to authoritative and illiberal developments in Russian politics and society. This is the underlying logic amongst the practitioners in the Barents-cooperation, or background knowledge as termed by Pouliot (2010) due to its common-sensical nature, that Russia are the ones who needs to adapt to “our” liberal values.

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<sup>18</sup> “Vær-varsom-plakaten” is a list of ethical guidelines for the Norwegian press.

This logic demonstrates a link between the Barents-cooperation and the logic of the post-cold war world order as understood by Richard Sakwa in his book *Russia against the rest: The post-cold war crisis of world order* (2017). Sakwa argues that the West and Russia failed to create an inclusive peace order after the end of the Cold War. The Western community perceived themselves as the winners of the Cold war and therefore the Western liberal order as ideologically superior (Sakwa, 2017, p. 4). It was expected that Russia, “the loser” of the cold war, would adapt to the ideals of this liberal order. Therefore, a logic prevailed where the West stayed the same and grew larger, while Russia was expected to change “to reflect the assumed new power and normative realities” (Sakwa, 2017, p.6). According to Sakwa it is due to this logic that the Western-Russian relationship “went full circle and ended up where it begun” with confrontation and division as the core characteristics (2017, p. 10). It is this same logic that the informants express – that only the Russian party in this multilateral cooperation should change and adopt the values of its western counterparts.

Finally, two of the informants refer to the story of The Barents Observer in order to express a concern over what they perceive as a lack of direct opposition within the Barents-cooperation to the developments in Russian politics. Thus, questions about the autonomy of the Barents-cooperation are raised. As we shall see in the following subchapter, the importance of autonomy is emphasized as attention is directed towards matters related to the Norwegian government’s foreign policy practice. This reveals frictions between the Norwegian center and periphery as practical examples of interstate tension is discussed.

### 5.3 Frictions between center and periphery

In the interviews, both the Frode Berg-case and the Norwegian intelligence service Fokus-2020 report were common talking points. Frode Berg is a Norwegian citizen who was arrested by the FSB for espionage, the other is an annual public document by the Norwegian intelligence service on current security threats to Norway. While these two cases are in many ways dissimilar, the informants would often talk about them interchangeably: they are used by the informants as examples of what they perceive as a challenge to the Barents-cooperation and the amicable cross-border relations it hinges on; a tendency where interstate tension inflicts upon and impedes cooperation. This illustrate how interstate tensions leads to frictions between the practitioners of the Barents-cooperation and the Norwegian government and its pragmatic approach to Russia. The objective here is to understand the reactions to the Frode Berg-case and the Fokus 2020-report by drawing on representations of the Self and the Other.

Hence, in this subchapter I address identity dynamics in a Norwegian context that inform how practitioners view Norwegian foreign policy in this time of geopolitical tension.

In 2017 Frode Berg was arrested by the FSB, suspected of espionage. Prior to his arrest, Berg had for years been an active practitioner of the Barents-cooperation and familiar face in the local community of Kirkenes. He had been working as border inspector (Norwegian-Russian border) for 24 years, been involved in several Barents-cooperation projects, and since 2016 been board member in the art and culture organization “Pikene På Broen” - sponsored by the NBS (Holmes, Skjetne & Sandblad, 2018). In April 2019 he was convicted to 14 years of prison for espionage by the Moscow City Court. Berg was released in November the same year as part of a spy exchange agreement between Lithuania and Russia that saw him returned to Norway. Ever since the arrest, the case has caught popular interests and gained substantial coverage in Norwegian and international media. It was a case reminiscent of Cold War tactics, and it impacted the bilateral relationship between Norway and Russia (Vestvik & Rosenby, 2019, p.6).

There is a broad concurrence amongst the informants that the Norwegian media’s portrayal of Kirkenes, the border region, and Russia amid the Berg-case is unnuanced. They especially express discontent in how the media portrays Kirkenes as a ‘spy-nest’:

“I think an unbalanced image is portrayed in the media. Although, I fully understand why. Online newspapers are dependent on clicks and why would anyone want to read about the jolly Barents-cooperation when they can read about ‘the spy Frode Berg’ and ‘the spy-nest Kirkenes’? That’s what sells, but it paints an unbalanced and unnuanced picture.” (Anonymous 1, 20/02)

Hence, there is a belief that the focus of the media and the popular perception south of the border region amid the Forde Berg-case is unbalanced. That they are guided by headlines that sell rather than focusing on the importance of the strong relationship and cooperation between the locals around the border. Adding to the dissatisfaction with media portrayal, are reactions to the strategy of the Norwegian intelligence service to recruit from the local population. Knut, the sports cooperation-practitioner, believes that the Norwegian intelligence service is making a mistake when recruiting agents from within the Barents-cooperation. Doing so, he believes, creates conflict within the cooperation and serves to undermine the friendships that have been established between people across the border. The fear is that cases like this will

lead to suspicion towards cooperation practitioners and thus jeopardize the trust and friendships that have been built in the region<sup>19</sup>.

In February 2020, a year after Frode Berg was released, the Norwegian intelligence service released its annual report of current security threats to Norway and its interests – Fokus 2020. What arguably got the most attention in the media was how the intelligence service viewed the Russian threat to Norway. It was reported, as it has been in previous Fokus-reports (Rowe, 2018), that Russia seeks to reinforce conflicting perceptions between northern and southern parts of the country, and between Oslo and the districts, in their view of Russia. The report states that Russian authorities hope to influence political processes and public opinions in Norway:

“[Russian] influence operations may be intended to undermine the public’s trust in election processes, the authorities, politicians or the media. The intention may also be to steer the public debate in a specific direction, sow doubt regarding facts or discredit specific opinions, thereby undermining the foundation of trust on which democratic processes rely” (Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2020, p.69)

The informants express frustration over these threat assessments. Two days after the public presentation of the Fokus 2020-report, mayor Rafaelsen expressed his dissatisfaction in the Norwegian newspaper ‘Klassekampen’: *“This means that anyone who wants good and close cooperation with Russia is perceived as a tool for the Kremlin.”*<sup>20</sup> (Lysberg & Kristiansen, 2020). Nine days later, in his interview with me, Rafaelsen said that he does not

“[...] agree with the threat perception reflected in the intelligence report. [...] Those of us who seek dialogue with Russia can now be labeled as useful idiots, hybrid agents for Russia. You become a victim of suspicion. Up here, I’m surrounded by what the intelligence service sees as Norway’s main enemy – Russia. It complicates cooperation because among other things it may affect border-crossing and visa policy” (Interview, 21/02).

Most of the informants align with the mayor and express frustration over the perception of Russia in the report. Importantly, the frustration is not limited to the threat perceptions articulated in the report. Rather, it follows the same idea expressed in relation to the media and the Frode Berg-case; that ‘outsiders’ construct an unambiguous representation of Russia

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, 08/06

<sup>20</sup> My translation of Rafaelsen’s statement in Klassekampen.

and subsequently Norwegians who work and cooperate across the border. The fear of suspicion is expressed, which in turn, Rafaelsen anticipates, could affect border-crossings. Knut, who expresses strong support of Rafaelsen, is of the opinion that the perception of Russian actions, articulated in the report, is outright wrong. To him, the Frode Berg-case proves that it is more the other way around – that the Norwegian intelligence service is more active in their influence schemes than the Russian<sup>21</sup>. These reactions illustrate frictions and disagreements between practitioners in the Barents-cooperation and the foreign policy practice of Norwegian central authorities. As we shall see, the way the informants reflect on these two cases reveals a domestic Self/Other dynamic.

Following Hansen (2006), ideas of the Self are dependent on the constructions of Other(s). This was apparent in the previous subchapter when the informants reflected on their own role vis-à-vis Russian actors. When the informants directed attention to the two cases discussed in this subchapter, they constructed a relational identity dynamic within a Norwegian context. The Self constructed here is dependent on a construction of a “southern” Other situated in the Norwegian capital and as such a center of power. In the interviews, the construct and categorization of a “southern” Other differs between “people in Oslo” to simply “people in the south”. A couple of the informants would say “you”, referring to me the interviewer, as a representative of the south or of Oslo when talking about the center-periphery dynamic. For example, one informant said: *“It may be hard for you coming up here to understand, but we have a different understanding of Russia than what you have in the south”* (Anonymous 1, 20/02). What is essential here, is what ideas of the Self the construction of a “southern” Other articulates. Identifying the idea of a “northern” Self in relation to the “southern” Other is essential to understand the reactions to both the Frode Berg-case and the Fokus 2020-report.

To the informants, the threat perception of Russia articulated in the report comes down to a lack of understanding of Russia. According to mayor Rafaelsen, this can be explained by proximity to the Russian border: *“The fear of Russia is inversely proportional the further away from the border you get.”* (Interview, 21/02). Hence, the “southern” Other is constructed as having an unreasonable fear of Russia. A fear that is due to the lack of knowledge and experience the “southern” Other has of Russia, as opposed to the “northern” Self. This identity construction through differentiation between the Self and the Other is evident in the two following quotes, the first from theatre and culture expert Nina:

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, 08/06



“Now that there’s been a lot of focus on espionage, and how Kirkenes is a spy-nest... I think that is rather unfortunate. I think it’s a one-sided focus. But it’s obviously more intriguing with a spy-story than a story about how we make kids interact across the border. However, I think a more nuanced image is important. I’m especially thinking about the headlines in the newspapers. But if you’ve never been to the North it is hard to understand how the geography up here works. We are so close to Russia; you can literally walk over.” (Interview, 19/02)

“The unbalanced portrayal of Russia in the media is problematic. Especially for those who do not have the same preconditions as us living up here [at the border], and work with Russia daily, to understand what’s written in the media. For example, people living in Oslo where Russia is distant. For us it’s close.” (Anonymous 1, 20/02)

In similar veins, and showcasing the discrepancy between local and media perceptions of Russia, Knut sums up his feelings: “*Up here we just laugh at the media’s framing of Russia. [...] They sit in Oslo and write about things they don’t understand*” (Interview, 8/06). This way, the informants justify their roles as foreign policy practitioners by reference to their unique understanding of Russia and relationship with Russians. And they continuously do this by juxtaposing their own understanding of Russia with the “southern” Other’s lack of understanding.

Hence, the ‘Northern’ Self is characterized as someone who knows and, at least in a Norwegian context, has a unique relationship with the “the Russian”. Here, history is essential to understand this relationship. A shared history of friendly contact across the border facilitates a narrative that “we know each other, we trust each other, and we need each other”. Through cooperation over many years and geographic proximity, the threat perception is different in the North than what it is South, according to project and culture expert Clara: “*I believe the cross-border contact between people in Northern Norway and Northwest Russia has given people up here a much more positive attitude towards Russia, as opposed to the skepticism we see further South in Norway.*” (Interview, 19/02). A key historical point of reference is the Russian liberation of Northern Norway during World War II, as expressed by theater and culture practitioner Nina:

“I think the people-to-people cooperation works because the border has always been here, we’ve always known that we must get along. We were liberated by the Russians

half a year before the rest of Norway. That experience is stuck in the parent and grandparent generations, and it is inherited in the families up here” (Interview, 19/02)

This way historical roots are used to say something about the unique understanding the people of Finnmark have of Russia and is a central ingredient in the construction of the Norwegian Barents-identity.

Through reference to history, the discourse constructed within the Barents-cooperation in relation to the cases discussed in this subchapter, constructs a northern Norwegian Self and a Russian Other that over time have become less different. A process that was also referred to in chapter 5.1, where the informants emphasized the Barents-cooperation as a security mechanism by creating generations of friends across the border. Education practitioner Pål, sees this process of normalization as a direct consequence of the cross-border cooperation and shared experiences: *“I’ve witnessed a normalization of ‘the Russian’. Both the perception people have of ‘the Russian’ at the other side of the border, but also as ‘the Russian’ has become a part of us.”* (Interview, 28/02). This normalization in which ‘the Russian’ becomes ‘a part of us’ follows an idea that common identity has been fostered through a long history of cooperation. In this case, it is Pål’s experience that years of cooperation across the border has wiped out prejudice and animosity, and in fact, made the Northern Norwegian (Kirkenes) Self and the Russian Other less different. This relationship and the shared history are celebrated and reproduced in various ways. For example, during the World War II liberation anniversaries as well as cultural events and cross-border festivals such as the Pomor Festival in Vardø and the Barents Spektakel in Kirkenes. These events can be seen as (discursive) practices, routinely, e.g. annually, promoting and reproducing the unique cross border relationship and identity.

Thereby, the Frode Berg-case served as a disruption to the idea of Self and its relationship with the Russian Other constructed within the Barents-cooperation. In Kirkenes, the “Barents-Capital”, the case brought the Norwegian foreign policy practice of espionage into a cooperative “Barents sphere” that is supposed to be almost exclusively about unity and cooperation. It stood in stark contrast to the symbolic gestures of friendship often conveyed in the Barents-region. The fact that Berg was not only a local from Kirkenes, but also a practitioner of the Barents-cooperation further strengthened this disruption. In their discursive justification of the Barents-cooperation after 2014, discussed in chapter 5.1, the informants expressed satisfaction with how the Norwegian government remained outspoken in their support of the cooperation after 2014. However, as we have seen here, when the colder

political climate post 2014 is linked with more concrete events, the informants represent Norwegian government foreign policy actions as a challenge to the Barents-cooperation. Through the Frode Berg-case and the threat perception of Russia in the Fokus 2020 report, the informants see their position as foreign policy practitioners as undermined.

As was established in chapter two, discourses include some and simultaneously exclude others. This is the case in the practitioners' discourse following the two cases discussed here. The identity dynamic uncovered here, constructs the Self as more competent to understand and work with Russia than the "southern" Other. Hence, the reference to identity-dynamics serves as a legitimization and reproduction of the foreign policy authority of the practitioners. Yet, this is a point of frustration because central power resides outside of the Barents-region, or more specifically in Oslo. In that way, the center-periphery-divide addresses an uneven power-dynamic. The "southern" Other situated in the center is perceived as wielding national/governmental/media power. Thus, when the government's, the "southern" Other's, foreign policy practices does not reflect the amicable and friendly cross-border relations of the cooperation but rather risks jeopardizing it, the informants react by discursively constructing a divide between themselves (the local) and the national.

Following from how the informants reflects on the two cases discussed in this subchapter, the politics of the Barents-cooperation is made visible. It illustrating how interests and opinions about Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia is articulated within the Barents-cooperation. This is also apparent as the informants underline the importance of the people living nearby the border being allowed to maintain friendly relations. They believe this has traditionally been part of Norwegian foreign policy. This was explicitly articulated by education-practitioner Pål:

"It is obvious [that there exists a North/South divide]. I guess it has always been there. Already in 1905 there was talk of the "Russian threat". It's a threat perception that is inherited in Norwegian foreign policy. However, there is a tradition that people living close to each other are allowed to perceive one another as neighbors, and not as enemies. That is probably the case up here [in Kirkenes]." (Interview, 28/02)

In this quote, Pål explains how Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia has traditionally worked well for the people living close to the Russian border. Whereas threat perceptions of Russia have always been embedded in Norwegian foreign policy, Pål believes that they in Kirkenes have been allowed to nurture a more friendly relationship. In that way, especially

the Frode Berg-case is seen as a deviation from the traditional Norwegian foreign policy practice. Theatre and culture practitioner Nina expressed a similar idea:

“Of course, every country needs to have an intelligence service. It’s just that we live so extremely close to a superpower, but I can’t get myself to see that as threatening, I can’t. I get that we need to have intelligence services, but there also needs to live people here [at the border], and therefore we need cooperation.” (Interview, 19/02)

Thus, both Nina and Pål express a general support of the broader lines in Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia. However, in their reflections over the cases discussed in this subchapter, they express a concern that the current interstate tension is leading to a change in Norwegian foreign policy – a change where the practitioners ability to foster cross-border cooperation is hampered.

Journalist Nilsen has a similar concern. He believes that both the Frode Berg-case and The Barents Observer-case, outlined in chapter 5.2, illustrates how the autonomy of the Barents-cooperation have been limited due to interstate-tension<sup>22</sup>. Whether it is Russian or Norwegian authorities who through their actions undermines the Barents-cooperation and the practitioners foreign policy practice, the general argument is to maintain and strengthen the autonomy of the cooperation. Education-practitioner Pål adhered:

“There needs to be autonomy in the Barents-cooperation allowing for it to persist despite a deteriorating relationship between Norwegian and Russian governments. That is essential, because that way the Barents-cooperation functions as a channel where dialogue can continue at several levels.” (Interview, 28/02)

As such, similarly to how the informants revived justification of the cooperation in relation to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Pål argues that the Barents-cooperation is a facilitator for dialogue. As we saw in chapter 5.1, according to the informants it is the cooperation’s unique ability to facilitate dialogue *despite* geopolitical tension that has enabled it to retain its activities as well, as expressions of support from the Norwegian government. They argue that if the Barents-cooperation does not retain autonomy, but rather becomes too controlled by either government, or interstate tension, it will struggle to maintain its function as a platform for dialogue. In that way, they see interstate tension as limiting the ability of the cooperation to act independently of a deteriorating interstate relationship.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview, 14/02, Kirkenes

Ultimately, the reactions to both cases follows a similar identity-dynamic where the construction of a “northern” Self with a unique relationship and understanding of the “the Russian” stands in stark contrast to the “southern” Other’s misrepresentation of Russia and the Barents-region. References to a Barents-identity or a “northern” Self, juxtaposed to the “southern” Other, serves as a legitimization of the practitioners’ foreign policy authority. This is because the Self is construed as having a knowledge and understanding of Russia superior to that of the Other. Moreover, to the informants the Norwegian governments’ foreign policy practice in relation to these two cases indicates a deviation from traditional foreign policy where Norwegians and Russians have been allowed to see each other first and foremost as neighbors. Thus, the friction between the center and periphery, or the local and national, discussed in this subchapter makes the politics of the Barents-cooperation visible. From the perspective of the informants the Frode Berg-case and perceptions of Russia in the “Fokus 2020”-report are understood as the “southern” Other (i.e. Norwegian government and intelligence service) mismanaging Norway’s relationship with Russia. Reacting to this tendency, some of the informants produce a regional autonomy-argument, stipulating that the “northern” Self with all her/his competence should be allowed to coexist, and manage relations with the Russian neighbor, unaffected by interstate tension. In the following subchapter, we shall see how politics becomes increasingly visible when the Barents-cooperation emerges as an additional regional political actor in the Arctic region.

#### 5.4 The agency of the Barents-cooperation

The increasing international interest in the Arctic region emerged as a topic in the interviews as the informants continued to legitimize the cooperation in light of the geopolitics that surrounds it. As the polar ice cap is melting, the Arctic is gaining increasing geostrategic interest in recent years, due to its vast natural resources and potential trade routes. This is a part of regionalization of international politics and opportunistic approach to the Arctic as a potential new source of oil and gas extraction. The increased international interest in the Arctic situates the Barents-cooperation within an emerging marketplace attracting the interest of actors with competing interests and values. This includes an array of actors - not reserved to the major powers of US, Russia, and China. Also, the EU has in recent years directed its focus in the Arctic to the Barents region (Biedermann, 2019). Similarly, Norway has interests in the region due to its coastal line to the Barents Sea, their archipelago Svalbard located in the Arctic ocean, resource interests, and significant share of population living above the Arctic circle (Brøther, 2013). And as mentioned in chapter four, the ‘High North’ was given

top national priority by the red/green Norwegian government in 2005 (Jensen, 2012, p.81). Here, we shall see how the Barents-cooperation and promotion of it becomes a tool in the pursuit of regional (and national) development ambitions by the informants closest to policy elites. By linking the Barents-cooperation to increased interest in the Arctic, the informants emphasize what they see as its strengths, and reconstruct its purpose as possibilities for economic growth arise. In that way, the Barents-cooperation emerges as an additional political actor in the Arctic with its own agency.

To some of the informants, the increasing international interest in the Arctic justifies promoting and informing about the Barents-cooperation in Brussels. For example, Marius, the informant from the NNEO, explained that a core reason for why it is important to do so is to show that Arctic states are cooperating:

“One of the main reasons making it important to promote the Barents-cooperation in Brussels is in relation to geopolitics and arctic policy. A lot of people perceive of the Arctic as one of the last pristine areas in the world, thinking that it’s an area where vast resources will become available when the ice melts, that no one owns any of these resources and that there will be a resource-race, a gold rush, in order to get to the resources first. It is seen as an area without law and order. What we want to show is that the arctic states take responsibility and cooperate well, that people in the region cooperate, and that it is an area with sovereign states with harbors” (Interview, 22/04).

The motivation for promoting the Barents-cooperation in Brussels, according to this informant, is driven by a set of assumptions about what “a lot of people think”. Here, the Barents-cooperation serves as a tool in order to debunk myths about the Arctic region or what Marius believes are misrepresentations of the Arctic - for example that it is “an area without law and order” - and to establish Arctic states presence in the region. Maruis also told about how they focus on success-stories of people to people contact and collaboration to emphasize the amicable relations across the border<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, due to the worsened Western-Russian relationship amid the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the international focus and interest in the Arctic serves as a relevant context from which to promote cooperation in the region. The MFA source told a similar story of how increased international interest in the Arctic has made emphasizing cooperation in the region increasingly important:

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, 22/04

“The interest in the Arctic is increasing. Many countries are writing Arctic strategies, many have a lot to say about the Arctic, and many fear conflict – race for the Arctic, war in the Arctic – there’s been many conferences on that. In that context, peace and cooperation is important. So, when talking to international colleagues about the Arctic, our foreign minister and our prime minister always mention the Barents-cooperation, what it is like to be neighbor with Russia, and how the Barents-cooperation is an instrument to handle a complicated neighbor.” (Interview, 03/03).

In the context of increased interest and narratives about insecurity in the Arctic, the Barents-cooperation is constructed as a successful example of multilateral (practical) cooperation, enhancing peace and security. As such, a similar discursive justification of the cooperation that was identified in relation to increased geopolitical tension amid 2014 and authoritative turns in Russia, is evident here. However, as we shall see, in relation to new economic opportunities in the Arctic, the Barents-cooperation and its success-stories are tools in order to advance (Northern) Norwegian development ambitions in the Arctic.

The informants operating within the official structures of the cooperation, and those with official political mandates, construct an Arctic exploitation-argument when linking the Barents-cooperation to the Arctic. This argument pertains to the possibilities of resource exploitation in the region – as mentioned, the central reason for its increased international interest. The exploitation of oil and gas in the Arctic is a sensitive and highly political topic, where environmental concerns are competing with the lure of economic growth and development. As we saw in chapter four, there is simultaneously a security aspect, as references to security have been made part of the official government discourse Norwegian legitimizing its ambitions in the region (Jensen, 2012).

In the context of international interest in the Arctic and a melting ice cap, mayor Rafaelsen sees great potential for Kirkenes to profit from it. According to Rafaelsen, the Barents-cooperation is “*the best security mechanism [foreign minister] Eriksen Sørreide and [minister of defense] Frank Bakke Jensen has*” (Interview, 21/02). Therefore, in his opinion, the best thing that could happen is “*big, complex industrial cooperation between Russia and Norway. Maybe combined with large western companies, for example Equinor, Total, Exxon, etc. Norway is a small country, we are dependent on having international arrangements*” (Interview, 21/02). Moreover, Rafaelsen states that:

“We [Kirkenes] have national strategic significance and therefore cooperation with Russia is detrimental as the northern sea route develops, cooperating also with South Korea, Japan and China, to establish a major harbor here [in Kirkenes] combined with a railway to Rovaniemi. The Barents-cooperation is the facilitator making this possible.” (Interview, 21/02)

Thinking back to the establishment of the Barents-cooperation (chapter four) and how one of the motivations was creating a region for economic exchange and evening out socio-economic differences, the mayor sees profit-making as the key driver for long-term stability in the region. To Rafaelsen the initial economic development aspect of the Barents-cooperation has changed in the context of a melting North Pole, as new possibilities for economic and industrial development has emerged. While the cooperation is promoted to EU-diplomats as a small-scale people-to-people cooperation, a key regional actor such as Rafaelsen promotes Norwegian-Russian partnership through “big”, or large-scale, industrial cooperation and sees the Barents-cooperation as a facilitator for this type of development. As the mayor also said, “*The Barents-cooperation is the starting point for everything we do here!*” (Interview, 21/02). This understanding of the cooperation, constructed by the mayor, is used to articulate his own political development ambitions for the region and Kirkenes. Environmental concerns, also one of the outspoken issue areas upon the establishment of the Barents-cooperation, is never mentioned by the mayor.

From Rafaelsen’s point of view, the melting polar ice cap, a direct result of climate change, facilitates a situation where growth-oriented models of development can finally reach a regional apogee. This expresses an opportunistic adaptation, in which the opportunities for economic growth arising from climate change are promoted at the expense of measures addressing its causes (Kristoffersen, 2015). Interestingly, Rafaelsen’s ambitions are in line with Russia’s plan for Arctic development, as a new Arctic strategy was signed in March 2020<sup>24</sup>. The strategy, which includes Russia’s main objectives in the region, states ambitions of major resource exploitation and development of the Northern Sea Route (Staalesen, 2020). Håvard aligns with the Arctic exploitation-argument, and argues that through the Barents-cooperation Norway and Russia can align forces in their pursuit for resource exploitation in the Arctic:

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<sup>24</sup> The original Russian version of this document is available on the website of the Russian presidential administration: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947>



“Of course [Norway and Russia] have disagreements, however through the Barents-cooperation it has become easier to cooperate on subjects where we know there are common interests. There is no doubt that both Norway and Russia are actively working to create attractive societies in Northern Norway and Northwest Russia. So, there are several common issues. For example, some EU countries do not think that oil extraction should be sought in the North, but Norway and Russia have a common interest in defending it internationally. So, it [the Barents-cooperation] is an important tool for that end, in my opinion” (Interview, 07/02)

In this quote Håvard emphasizes how the Barents-cooperation facilitates and advances common regional development ambitions between Russia and Norway. Similar to how the informants argue that the cooperation provides government officials with a contact platform in times of inter-governmental tension (post-2014), the Barents-cooperation is construed as providing Russian and Norwegian politicians with a platform where their common interests in oil extraction can be defended. In that way, the Barents-cooperation as represented here by Rafaelsen and Håvard, gains its own agency by promoting a specific type of economic and industrial cooperation between Norway and Russia. This idea comes with the backdrop of another idea, as articulated by mayor Rafaelsen; that more and enhanced industrial cooperation across the border strengthens stability and security in the region. As geopolitical tension is on the rise, large-scale industrial cooperation facilitated by the Barents-cooperation is constructed as a mean for Norway and Russia to secure amicable relations in the foreseeable future. The argument articulated here by Rafaelsen and Håvard, can be seen as a liberal institution-building approach to peace where none of the participants can risk the loss. Or put more precisely, securing an amicable relationship between Norway and Russia due to large-scale industrial collaboration in the Arctic region.

Moreover, the Arctic exploitation-argument should also be put in context with some of the social and economic realities in the Barents-region. As Håvard said in the quote above, both Norway and Russia have outspoken ambitions of creating attractive societies in their Northern and Northwestern regions. Northern-Norway is experiencing a population decline and providing more job opportunities is a natural ambition for a regional leader such as Rafaelsen. Whereas in Nikel, a Russian industrial town located close to the Norwegian border, Russian authorities have decided that the town’s cornerstone industry, a nickel smelter, is closing down at the end of 2020 (Staalesen, 2019). This threatens the future of the town whose population is highly dependent on the jobs provided by the smelter. In several interviews for

this thesis informants spoke of the future of Nikel and its population with worry. Within this regional context, Rafaelsen promotes an ambition from which his plan for large-scale industrial development is a “savior” of a region in need for more jobs and of economic growth. Notwithstanding jobs and economic growth, in Rafaelsen’s perspective large-scale industrial development will simultaneously enhance intergovernmental relations between Norway and Russia. Thus, Rafaelsen’s plan, facilitated by the Barents-cooperation, is represented as something that will secure both economic prosperity and friendly Norwegian-Russian relations in years to come.

The practice of reproducing the importance and relevance of the cooperation in relation to political tensions and developments is apparent in all four subchapters of this analysis. Representing the Barents-cooperation as a facilitator and platform for dialogue is a way in which the informants legitimized the cooperation throughout the interviews. Referring back to chapter 5.1, the Barents-cooperation is constructed as increasingly important in times of geopolitical tension. The arctic exploitation-argument uncovered here which reproduces the relevance of the cooperation is a continuation of this. However, in this subchapter the representation of the Barents-cooperation as a facilitator for Norwegian-Russian collaboration becomes problematic as it is used to promote political ambitions of large-scale oil and gas exploitation. Here lies a dilemma as environmental concerns are neglected in the discourse uncovered here linking the Barents-cooperation to increasing international interest in the Arctic, despite the fact cooperation on environment and sustainable development has been a central part of the cooperation since the 1990s. Rather, the Barents-cooperation is, primarily by mayor Rafaelsen, discursively represented as an entry-point to talk about the opportunity for economic growth. A type of economic growth that comes at the cost of environmental concerns.

While little has come of Norwegian-Russian oil and gas cooperation this far, the Arctic exploitation-argument constructed here represents a future vision for both the Barents-region and the role of the Barents-cooperation. A link between the Barents-cooperation and large-scale oil and gas-cooperation is talked into existence by the informants closest to policy-elites. In that way, the Arctic exploitation-argument signals how the Barents-cooperation, through Rafaelsen and some of the other practitioners I have interviewed, is emerging as an actor with its own agency in the Arctic. The cooperation becomes a driver and promotor of a specific type of regional development where Russia is construed as an ideal partner. Economic opportunities that opens up are seen as grounds for enhanced cooperation with a Russia which

is also interested in oil and gas exploitation in the Arctic. In that way, the boundaries of what the Barents-cooperation as foreign policy is about and is going to be about in the future are being pushed by key regional actors.

## 6 Conclusion

In this thesis I have placed the experiences of practitioners in the Barents-cooperation at the center of my analysis. I have approached these experiences through a poststructuralist discourse analysis where I emphasized the constitutive relationship between foreign policy discourses and identity construction. I asked: *'How is the Barents-cooperation discursively represented by its Norwegian practitioners, and what identities are thereby constructed?'* The discourse analytical perspective has enabled me to uncover discursive dynamics that make out the Barents-cooperation. More precisely, I showed how the practitioners represent the cooperation, legitimize it and their own position, assess their own role and their relations to other actors, and how they articulate potential threats or challenges.

In the analysis we have seen how there is a tendency to frame the Barents-cooperation in a way that deems it essential whether it pertains to the Norwegian-Russian bilateral relationship amid the annexation of Crimea, authoritative turns in Russia, frictions between the Norwegian center and periphery, or increased international interest in the Arctic. Amongst the practitioners, cooperative practices are expected to continue regardless of interstate tension and disagreements at a higher political level. This is the dominant discourse on the Barents-Cooperation uncovered here: as geopolitical tension is on the rise the cooperation is construed as increasingly important, and the informants provide arguments and justifications to maintain the status-quo. This dominant discourse reveals that on all activities that fall under the umbrella of the BC, the practitioners legitimize and justify the cooperation. This is ongoing, it is built into their everyday foreign policy practice, that they justify and develop legitimization for their activities. In this way, they give meaning to their own practice, and as we have seen, construct identities.

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, resulted in a change which led to a contentious geopolitical climate, a 'new normal' with increased tensions. This was apparent in the interviews as the annexation of Crimea and subsequent cooling of international relations are discussed more as a negative atmosphere surrounding the cooperation than as tangible events inflicting upon it. The analysis revealed a tendency to represent the Barents-cooperation as

more important *because* of the geopolitical tensions after 2014. The informants provided a series of justifications for the cooperation representing it as a facilitator of dialogue, or “peace communication”, and the practitioners own activity as a “soft-security mechanism”. In that way, the Barents-cooperation was represented as a counterweight to geopolitical tensions by the informants.

I also showed in the analysis how the informants produced a Norwegian perspective on developments in Russian politics whereby the Self was constructed as a supporter of what they perceive as a weak and vulnerable Russian civil society. Adopting the role of the supporter of someone who is seen as weak and vulnerable can be seen as an additional justification and legitimization of the practitioners foreign policy practice and the Barents-cooperation in general. Through their support to the threatened Russian civil society, the informants constructed an idea of Self as representatives of liberal and democratic values. This perspective also entailed a discursive representation of the Russian state as the illiberal and undemocratic Other. Here, a link between the Barents-cooperation and the world order in the cold peace era, as understood by Sakwa (2017), was illustrated. It demonstrated an underlying logic embedded in the Self/Other-dynamic where it is the Russian Other who is expected to change and transform normatively towards “our” liberal and democratic values.

Furthermore, reflections and reactions to the Frode Berg-case and Fokus 2020-report revealed frictions between the local and the national in Norway as relevant to the Barents-cooperation. The informants see their knowledge and understanding of Russia as superior to that of Norwegians located south of the Barents-region. They discursively reaffirm their own competence as everyday foreign policy practitioners and thereby express opposition to what they see as a tendency where the Norwegian government is allowing interstate tension to inflict upon the Barents-cooperation. This, they contend, undermines their cooperative practice. The local/national friction makes visible the politics in the Barents-cooperation and how approaches to Russia are constantly negotiated and balanced between different interests and considerations. The informants express understanding for Norway’s pragmatic approach towards Russia, however they emphasize a need for their cooperative foreign policy practice to remain separated from interstate tension.

The politics of the Barents-cooperation becomes increasingly visible as it emerges as a regional development actor in the Arctic. In a time when international interests in the Arctic is increasing, the cooperation is used as a tool to promote regional and local development ambitions by the informants closest to policy elites. Descriptions of the cooperation as a

facilitator for dialogue and for Norway and Russia to protect common interests in Arctic oil and gas exploitation, is the basis on which the cooperation is construed as an additional actor in the Arctic representing its own ambitions – and thereby agency. This illustrated a dilemma between the Barents-Cooperation as a development actor, as it justifies a particular kind of development approach; one in which environmental concerns are sacrificed. This again underscored the political character of the Barents-Cooperation, as key actors promote the Barents-cooperation as tool for large-scale industrial development collaboration with Russia.

Finally, by directing focus towards the experiences of practitioners of the Barents-cooperation, in this thesis I aimed to contribute to the existing literature on Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia. While acting out the cooperative practices of the Barents-cooperation are done within fields that are described as “politically uncomplicated” by one informant, the analysis has shown how *talking* about the Barents-cooperation is highly political. When linking the cooperation to geopolitical tensions, it becomes a tool from which political opinions, values, and ambitions are articulated. It uncovers a process where the cooperative practice, e.g. the different cross-border cooperation projects, are given meaning and a specific purpose as foreign policy practice. Most of the informants are not policy-elites or decision-makers, they are nevertheless everyday foreign policy practitioners. Therefore, this thesis can hopefully contribute to our understanding of how foreign policy practice is not just something that is done by politicians or policy-elites. Thus, this thesis reflects a view of foreign policy not as only defined by interaction between official state representatives and articulated in government white papers. Rather, international relations are influenced by collaboration beyond the state-level, where there is articulation of political values, opinions and meanings, and foreign policy practices are enabled and constrained.

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## 8 Appendix

### 8.1 Interview list

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Institution/occupation</b>	<b>Location/communication medium</b>
Rune Rafaelsen	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2020	Mayor of Sør-Varanger	Kirkenes
Thomas Nilsen	14 <sup>th</sup> February 2020	Journalist at The Independent Barents Observer	Kirkenes
Håvard*	07 <sup>th</sup> February 2020, 15 <sup>th</sup> June 2020	Several years of experience from the official Barents-cooperation institutions	Skype & E-mail
Clara*	19 <sup>th</sup> February 2020, 15 <sup>th</sup> June 2020	Several years of experience from the official Barents-cooperation institutions, Project and culture expert	Kirkenes & E-mail
Nina*	19 <sup>th</sup> February 2020	Theater and culture expert	Kirkenes
Pål*	28 <sup>th</sup> February 2020	Decades of experience from cross-border education cooperation	Skype
Marius*	22 <sup>nd</sup> April 2020	Several years of experience from the Northern Norwegian European Office	Skype
Knut*	8 <sup>th</sup> June 2020	Decades of experience from cross-border sports cooperation	Telephone
Anonymous 1	20 <sup>th</sup> February 2020	Business and Industry expert	Kirkenes
Anonymous 2	3 <sup>rd</sup> March 2020	Norwegian Foreign Ministry, with experience from the Barents-cooperation and the region	Oslo
Anonymous 3	20 <sup>th</sup> February 2020	Several years of experience from cross-border business cooperation	Kirkenes
Anonymous 4	14 <sup>th</sup> of February	The Barents Institute	Kirkenes

\* = *pseudonym*

## 8.2 Interview Guide

Main Topic	Questions
Part 1: Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell me about your background... How did you end up working with/in...?</li><li>• What do you do on a day to day basis in your job as...?</li><li>• What is your personal motivation for working with cross-border cooperation?</li></ul>
Part 2: Organization, project and the Barents-cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell me about your institution/project: its' history?</li><li>• What are your objectives? Why? And how do you go about achieving them?</li><li>• What are some of the challenges you are facing in practicing cross-border cooperation?</li><li>• From your experience, how has the Barents-cooperation/your project/your institution developed since you started working there?</li></ul>
Part 3: Political tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do you assess the impact increased international (political) tension has had on the Barents-cooperation?</li><li>• How has *it* affected your day-to-day activities?</li></ul>
Wrapping up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do you envision the future of the Barents-cooperation (and/or your project)?</li><li>• Is there someone you think I should talk to that would benefit my research?</li><li>• Would you like to add anything?</li></ul>

### 8.3 Information letter

*This information letter is a translated version (original in Norwegian) of the one I used during my field trip to Kirkenes in February 2020. Therefore, it reflects my interest and approach to my topic at the time.*

#### **Do you want to participate in the research project “The Barents-cooperation amidst geopolitical tensions”?**

I hereby ask if you would like to participate in a research project where the objective is to gather information from people who work with the Barents-cooperation on a daily basis. I am interested in the experiences and assessments you make around the cooperation and the geopolitics that surrounds it. In this letter I provide information about the aims for the project.

#### **Purpose**

The project is a master’s thesis in International Relations at the NMBU.

Thematically this project is geared towards Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia in a time of increased tension between the West and the East. I ask how increased tension challenges the Norwegian governments balancing act between membership and commitments to NATO on the one hand, and a peaceful and amicable relationship and cooperation with Russia on the other hand.

The purpose is to explore how increased geopolitical tension is experienced by experts and practitioners involved in the different projects and institutions of the Barents-cooperation. To that end, this research project will do a systematic analysis of how people who work with the cooperation on a daily basis experience, reflect, and assess the cooperation in general, its significance to the Norwegian-Russian relationship, and how geopolitical tensions affect their work.

In addition to this, I am interested in how different approaches to Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia is discussed publicly and amongst people in the Barents-cooperation. Who are the actors that discuss this and what are the different perspectives?

In this research project I want to answer: What is the significance of the Barents-cooperation to Norwegian foreign policy? And how is the cooperation affected by geopolitical tensions?

#### **Why are you asked to participate?**

Possible research participants are based on their current or previously active role in the Barents-cooperation.

#### **Who is responsible for this project?**

Norwegian University of Life Sciences is responsible for this project.



**Norges miljø- og biovitenskapelige universitet**  
Noregs miljø- og biovitenskapelige universitet  
Norwegian University of Life Sciences

Postboks 5003  
NO-1432 Ås  
Norway