

Kirkenes-Nikel:

Catching a Second Wind of Twinning?

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This article examines the unfolding of relations between two northern towns, Kirkenes and Nikel, as a rather recent case of city twinning. Their endeavor, launched in 2008, did not emerge in the standard bottom-up type of fashion with the cities in question defying to some extent the divisive impact of statist borders. It came instead into being as part and parcel of broader schemes of cross-border cooperation between Norway and Russia encouraged by central authorities. It might thus be assumed that twinning project is doomed to succeed. The towns might well turn into a bridge altering decades of closure and isolation, although it is also conceivable that being tied to a broader setting largely outside the control of the towns themselves hampers cooperation. The two towns do not necessarily engage in the production of familiarity and closeness in the way they are assumed and encouraged to do but pursue policies of their own premised on unfamiliarity and bordering rather than de-bordering. Our aim is thus to chart the experiences gained during the initial years of the project implementation as well as the difficulties encountered in this process. Exploring the somewhat particular case of Kirkenes-Nikel arguably adds to the insight concerning city-twinning in Northern Europe, but it also invites for a probing of the various aspects of a rather complicated relationship where interests in cooperation and the established of an in-between space premised on rather far-reaching togetherness co-exists and struggles with feelings of animosity and distrust.

Introduction: Changing Meanings of Twinning

City-twinning has gradually turned into a wide-spread phenomenon in various parts of Europe, including the former socialist countries. The previous pattern of ‘friendship’ and ‘sister’ cities that existed during the years of the Cold War in order to signal symbolic togetherness has changed in character, as there is currently much more emphasis on concrete and functional cooperation. Out of a very large number of European cities being in various ways linked to each other, some fifty cities exist as city-pairs cooperating across a shared border (Schultz, 2002: 3). In general, twinning

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is seen by local actors as an adequate and preferable response to the numerous challenges that they face in their day-to-day life. It is pursued by many European, including some Russian, municipalities not only as an efficient instrument for solving local problems; twinning is also employed in efforts to ensure their sustainable development. The municipalities depart from the assumption that various border-related resources can be utilized more effectively with cooperation extending beyond state borders, although the efficiency and scale of twinning varies considerably across Europe (Ploszaj, 2012; Schultz, 2005).

It should be noted that the very concept of “twin cities” figures as a rather vexed question in the research literature. Different schools suggest different interpretations and use various synonyms (often of a misleading character). To summarize the ongoing academic discussion, the following definitions of the concept can be identified.

In the domestic context, twin cities are a special case of two cities or urban centers founded in close geographic proximity and then growing into each other over time. Originally, this concept referred specifically to the cities Minneapolis and Saint Paul located in Minnesota (Twin cities, 2011), but with time it was used to describe the same phenomenon in other countries. It should be noted, however, that with some exceptions (e.g. Porsgrunn and Skien, Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg in Norway), northern Europe lacks this kind of twin cities. Instead, there are a number of the so-called “satellite” cities in the region that have emerged in order to “groom” larger urban centers and/or fulfill specific functions (to host university campuses, techno-parks, industries, transport infrastructure, military bases, etc.): Sandnes–Stavanger (Norway), Espoo–Helsinki (Finland), Severomorsk–Murmansk and Severodvinsk–Arkhangelsk (Russia) are cases in point. The craving for larger and more competitive entities is bound to increase pressures towards mergers.

In the *international sense*, there are two – broad and narrow – definitions of the concept “twin cities/towns.” Under the *broader understanding*, the term “twin cities” has been employed to connote cooperative agreements between cities, towns, and even counties that are not neighbors but located at a considerable distance and even in separate countries to promote economic, commercial, and cultural ties (Stephen, 2008). Most town twinning unfolds between cities facing similar social, economic, and political situations or sharing historical links. In Europe, a variety of terms are used, although “twin cities” appears to be the most common one. However, other terms such as sister, fraternal, connected, double, transborder, bi-national, neighbored, coupled, partner, and friendship are utilized in naming the city-pairs (Buursink, 2001; Schultz, 2002). In the case of Russia (similar to the Soviet time), along with twin-towns concept, the terms of brother/fraternal (*pobratimyy*) or related (*porodnennyye*) cities are used.

In the *narrow sense*, twin cities are border towns adjacent to each other. According to Buursink (1994), there are two sub-categories of neighbored border towns: double towns that aim at cooperation and supplementing each other, and town couples that often compete with each other. Schultz (2002) asserts that only double towns can be seen as real twins and sets a number of criteria for selecting twin towns. They should not only consist of border towns but also have the following characteristics:

- They should harbor a joint history as cities that have existed as administrative units in the past, prior to national borders separating them.

- Although previously separated by borders, this delimiting should have been traded for open borders.
- A preferable case consists of cities where a river both separates and connects the cities facing each other across the river (and, for this reason, they are called bridge towns).
- There should be connecting factors and features conducive to cooperation such as ethnic minorities as well as command of the neighbor's language.
- There should be a certain level of institutionalization of cooperation between the twins in terms of unified administrative structures and common urban planning. The most advanced twin towns purport themselves as "Euro-cities" in emphasizing their European rather than national identity.

While agreeing with most of the above criteria, we nonetheless base our study on a somewhat different and more extensive definition of twin towns with adjacency and the breaking of spatial fixations in the form of national borders as our main point of departure. Whereas twinning is in most cases seen as residing in the application of a particular form of "urban logic," it also inevitably provides the cities engaged in such activities with transnational and international features. It does so as they contribute, in varying degrees, to the formation of commonality reaching beyond national configurations (Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2011; 2012).

Notably, twinning stands for shared citiness and figures as a manifestation of new forms of urban policies. It testifies, as an aspect of regionalization, with considerable clarity that the order-producing impact of national borders is waning. The changing character of inner-oriented borders turning into outwards-oriented frontiers and allowing for the emergence of shared borderland is visible also in northern Europe as exemplified by twinning. City-twinning has turned into one of the departures used by cities in aspiring for a distinct, visible, and favorable profile, and it is, in this sense, part and parcel of their policies of place-marketing and branding in the context of the increasingly intense and transnational regionalization.

Twinning has also accrued broader institutional forms with the establishment of the City Twins Association (CTA) in December 2006. Altogether 14 cities have joined the CTA, including four pairs located in northern Europe: Valka-Valga (Latvia-Estonia), Imatra-Svetogorsk (Finland-Russia), Narva-Ivangorod (Estonia-Russia) and Tornio-Haparanda (Finland-Sweden) (City Twins Association, 2010).

These pairs, coming into being during the 1980s or 1990s through initiatives taken by the cities themselves, differ as to success and effectiveness. Tornio-Haparanda obviously stands out as a success story and Valka-Valga as well as Imatra-Svetogorsk belong more or less to the same category. Narva-Ivangorod has, in turn, experienced some initial difficulties in implementing various schemes of twinning, although the record of this Estonian-Russian pair has to some extent improved over time (Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2012).

It is also to be noted that the trend, as to twinning in northern Europe, has not been a straightforward one of increasing success and deepening integration. Instead, the outbreak of the world economic crisis (2008) as well as the subsequent crisis of the Eurozone and the new round of the Schengen zone's expansion (2007) has to some extent impacted the unfolding of twinning in

northern Europe. Progress has over the recent years been limited with the case of Tornio-Haparanda standing out as an exception.

It appears, against this background, that the initiative pertaining to Kirkenes-Nikel, taken in 2008, breaks the pattern. It emerges as a kind of late-comer and represents an attempt to revive the very idea and spirit of twinning in northern Europe. Moreover, the initiative did not just emerge in a dialogue between the cities themselves as also the Norwegian and Russian foreign ministries were actively involved in pushing for such an outcome. They did so, it appears, as part of an effort to initiate broader regional and cross-border cooperation between the two countries through this, then providing the twinning between Kirkenes and Nickel with features of a top-down – rather than the ordinary bottom-up – type of endeavor (Figenschou, 2011; Haugseth, 2013). The active and encouraging role of the ministries has also been reflected in the 2010 decision to establish a visa-free zone for residents living in the vicinity of the border between the Sør-Varanger commune and the Russian towns of Nickel, Zapolyarny, Petchenga and Korzunovo. The Kirkenes-Nikel constellation has been further complicated by the fact that the agreement on twinning has not been concluded between the cities themselves but came into being through a joint declaration issued by the municipalities of Sør-Varanger on the Norwegian side and that of Pechenga on the Russian one. Kirkenes and Nickel form the largest entities within their respective municipalities, but their nested position within the two somewhat broader entities may nonetheless complicate their aim and pursuance of twinning.

There are thus good reasons to interrogate the unfolding of twinning in the case of Kirkenes-Nikel. Being an integral part of broader plans for cooperation and cross-border regionalization between Norway and Russia potentially provides the two northern cities with the position of front-runners. The option is there to transgress and reach beyond the border and the various binary divisions into ‘we’ and ‘them’ that for a considerable period of time have prevented the development of any interaction, and to make it malleable and part of a border-related space premised on cooperation and friendly relations. They may transcend the national appropriations that have characterized the policies pursued in the past. It is, however, also possible that they encounter various obstacles related to the burden of the past, the somewhat complicated structures in which they have been embedded and/or various actors resisting a down-grading of the divisive impact of their national border. For the latter type of reasons it might have been difficult for twinning to take off in various spheres of economic, social and cultural relations and for closer relations to develop between Kirkenes and Nickel, providing substance to the notion of city-twinning.

In addition to charting success or failure in various efforts of cooperation, our aim is one of addressing the way the encounter has unfolded in terms of the narratives employed as well as the discourses used in grounding the twin-city relationship between Kirkenes and Nickel. This is done in order to offer additional insight into the quite complex cross-border relationship. The options available on the basis of the national histories consist both of familiarity and unfamiliarity. Obviously, the encounter consists of meeting the other as clearly different from oneself – in spite of the term ‘twins’ suggesting the existence of a far-reaching similitude – and yet the difference can be interpreted as benign or threatening in nature. It may be depicted as a familiar kind of strangeness conducive to curiosity, fascination and nostalgia, these then contributing to interaction or amounting instead to resentment and perhaps even animosity. Both options are in general there as noted by Spierings and van der Velde (2008) and Scott (2013). The prevalence of

familiarity amounting to moves of inclusion rather than unfamiliarity inviting for exclusion would contribute to progress in the sphere of twinning, whereas the latter would complicate if not undermine various efforts of changing the meaning of the border through increasing closeness and intense cooperation.

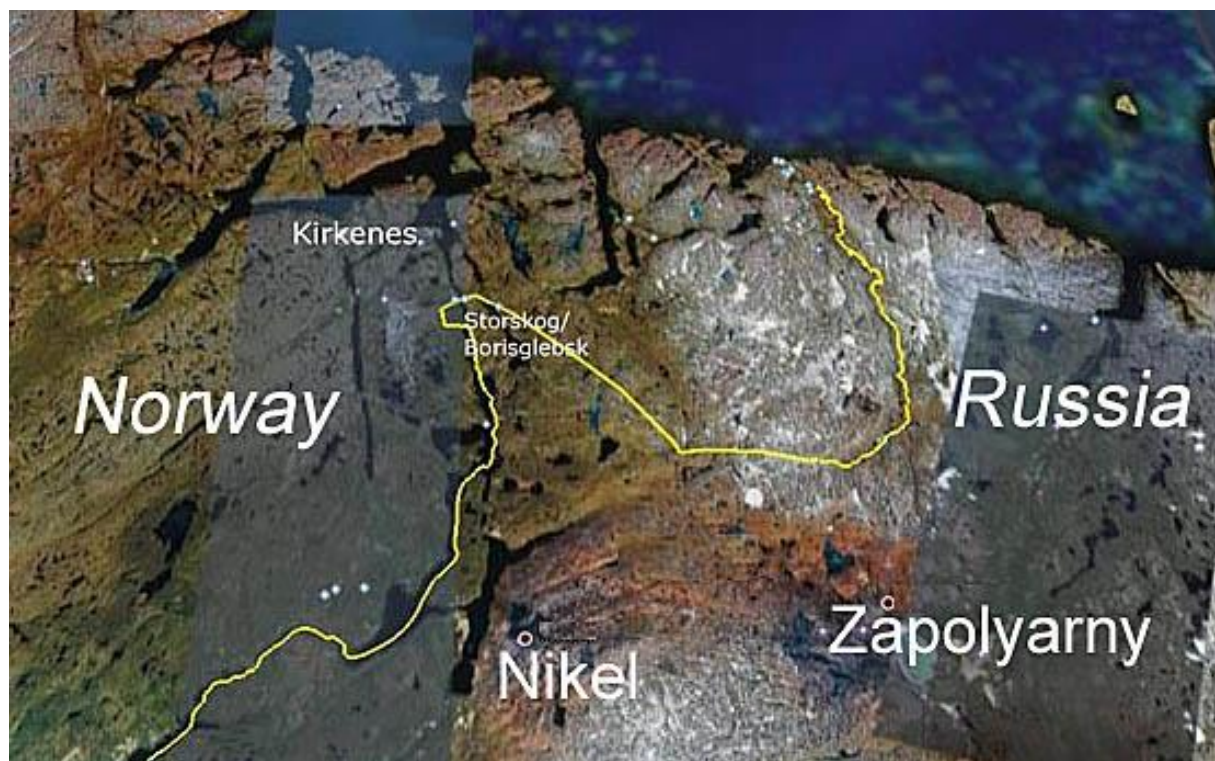


Figure 1- Map of the Kirkenes-Nikel Area

The Duality of the Past

The history of the region offers elements for the construction of familiarity as well as unfamiliarity. Modern bordering, part of extending state-formation to the north, took place at a relatively late juncture and was presided by a ‘common land’ period and interaction that paid scant if any attention to state-related borders and efforts of bordering. In particular, a Sami population moved flexibly across borders and also Finnish-speakers were strongly present in the region straddling various borders. Borders emerged more clearly during the Swedish-Norwegian Union (1826-1905). It was finally drawn in 1826, although the demarcation and delimitation proceeded quite slowly with borders preserving their natural frontiers up to the beginning of the twentieth century (Niemi, 2005). The period of openness was then followed by one of closure premised on notions of unfamiliarity above all because of the Russian Revolution in 1917. With Finland gaining independence in 1917, the Norwegian-Russian border became a Finnish-Norwegian border-line up to 1944. This implied that Nickel (Nikkeli) and the surrounding area of Pechenga (Petsamo) were part of Finland up to the end of WWII with the border turning again into a Norwegian-Soviet/Russian one.

The various historical turns implied that the Sør-Varanger region remained for a long period quite multicultural, in essence containing Norwegian, Finnish-speaking Kvens, Sami as well as Russian elements. The interaction was locally premised for a large part on familiarity whereas the policies pursued by the Norwegian state rested on “Norwegianization” (Rogova, 2008: 11; Viken et.al., 2008: 27).

The Second World War implied that security – or rather insecurity – gained the upper hand. There was much resistance against the German occupation particularly in northern Norway, and to some extent with the partisans cooperating with the Soviet forces (Niemi, 2005). Towards the end of the war the Red Army liberated north-eastern areas of Norway, including Kirkenes, from German occupation. Although the fighting amounted to an almost full dismantling of the dwellings in the region and caused profound destruction, the image of the Soviet forces has remained rather positive as indicated among other things by the statue devoted to a Soviet soldier still standing on a hill-top in Kirkenes.

However, the war implied in general that security remained a core constitutive argument and impacted also forcefully the Norwegian-Soviet relations. It also implied that the emphasis on Norwegianization continued with the state of Norway pursuing policies based on unfamiliarity and exclusion rather than familiarity and inclusion. A garrison-mentality prevailed both on the Norwegian as well as the Soviet side amounting to the presence of various military installations and entities as part of the ideological and systemic East-West conflict. The dominance of the quite securitized national discourse implied that the border remained almost entirely closed. The border was for a long time comprehended as “a symbolic end of the world for people living on the two sides of it” as noted by Anastasia Rogova (2009: 33).

This changed, though, with the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the 1990s. More space opened up for the application of notions premised on familiarity and the border turned increasingly flexible allowing for various transactions to unfold. The discourses waged not only change locally as also various state-related authorities changed footing in encouraging interaction. Notions pertaining to the more multicultural and interactionist periods in the history of northern Norway grew in significance as also evidenced by the frequent use in the current discourse on Norwegian-Russian cross-border cooperation of the term *Pomor*, i.e. a reference to ancient coastal trade between Russians and the rest of the local population (Niemi, 1992). Even the Norwegian and Russian military have exploited the connotations of commonality embedded in the term by naming their joint exercise in 2013 as *Pomor*.

Towards a More Cooperative Pattern

At large, the constitutive themes grounding political space have changed profoundly in the North since the end of the Cold War, and this goes particularly for Norwegian-Russian relations. The two countries perceive each other as ‘partners’ with a considerable amount of cooperation in various fields. The agreement reached on a delimitation of the Barents Sea in 2010 has contributed considerably to a decline in securitization and opened up more friendly and cooperative relations, although within limits. The various environmental challenges as well as the different economic options – pertaining above all to the extraction of oil and gas but also new shipping lines such as those of the Northern Sea Route (Northeast Passage) – are of such a magnitude that the incentives for cooperation have turned quite considerable. The constitutive

discourse relates therefore increasingly to various projects, particularly in fields related to the production of oil, gas and shipping, and in general the significance of the northern areas to the national economies as well as the dangers to be averted in the environmental field. For Norway, the northern areas have turned into a strategic priority area in the sphere of the country's foreign policy as articulated for example in the Government's Strategy of 2006 (The Norwegian Government's High North Strategy, 2006) and updated in the 2009 document (New Building Blocks in the North, 2009). A similar development has been discernible in Russia as evidenced by the emphasis placed on the Arctic region's significance by the Government's Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation issued in 2008 (Medvedev, 2008) and in a follow-up version published in 2013 (Putin, 2013). This implies in reality that the national diplomacies and municipal 'paradiplomacies' conducted by various local actors such as Kirkenes and Nikel reinforce and compliment rather than contradict each other.

It also follows from these that the northern areas have grown in centrality and are no longer, as used to be the case, regarded as utterly peripheral in nature. It is to be noted, however, that the various plans and predictions have not always materialized, at least not in the way initially thought and expected. The different endeavors and plans pertaining to extensive cooperation may sometimes fail or have to be postponed as shown clearly by the backlash experienced in the case of the Shtokman gas and oil field with Norwegian Statoil giving up its shares in the field and the Russian companies putting their plans for development on ice.

Twinning as a Development Strategy

Kirkenes in particular has been able to capitalize on the growing significance of the northern areas. Rather than just being at the edge of Norway and of some importance due to national security, it has increasingly turned into a hub for a variety of industrial activities, commercial services and tourism, with considerable features of internationalization and a political center for different activities related to the Barents Sea cooperation. It hosts, among other things, the International and Norwegian Barents Secretariats and the Barents Institute. It is hence unsurprising that Nyseth and Viken (2009) describe its current profile as pointing to "miners and ministers" implying changes in terms of industrialization as well as internationalization. The change is formidable as Kirkenes experienced severe difficulties in the 1980s and with the mine being laid down in the mid-1990s. Instead of the rather bleak future that seemed then to be the destiny of the town, with the changing and more open character of the border as well as the other options offered by the altered and more internationalized environment the town has become dynamic and flourishing.

Nikel has been less touched by the changes in the external environment. The local economic base has basically remained the same and it has not changed in the way that Kirkenes has, although it is also to be noted that the underlying discourse on the part of Nikel shows at least some signs of de-securitization. This is in particular evidenced by that Nikel no longer has the status – as it had before 2008 – of a closed border territory (Russian Ministry of Justice, 2008). The town still hosts some minor military entities and has thus the character of a garrison town, and in hosting the *Norilsk Nickel* plant it is also a heavily industrialized town. One aspect of such an industrialization is that due to the smelter part of the production of nickel, Nikel also has the reputation of a rather polluted mining town. The town seems in general to have declined in importance due to a

variety of factors such as reduced support from the central government, cuts in the number of military personnel as well as declining production at the *Norilsk Nickel* plant. The diminishing standing is well reflected in the fact that the number of inhabitants (around 12,500 in 2012) has dropped by a third in comparison to the days of the Cold War.

Clearly, Kirkenes and Nikel deviate from each other as to their profile and dynamics of development. They are proximate as to geography, both have an industrial profile and host military entities but in most other regards differ from each other. Yet they have been prepared to utilize the changes in their external environment and the increased prospects of partnership by engaging in town-twinning. Notably, the emphasis on cooperation boils down to an extension of previous policies as the search for togetherness between Kirkenes and Nikel goes back to 1973 and the era of the Cold War. Kirkenes and the Pechenga district (part of the Murmansk region) – including Nikel – at that time signed an agreement pertaining to friendship with emphasis on cultural and sport exchange in order to alleviate the divisive impact of the border and develop familiarity in order to leave behind various negativities residing in the past as well as the then prevailing situation (Viken, et.al, 2008: 30). In fact, at that time the collaborative ties between the two towns consisted for the most part of irregular cultural contacts (Brednikova and Voronkov, 1999). The togetherness was rather limited, although since the initial period it has been taken much further in the post-Soviet era, with both the Norwegian and Russian sides expressing interest in reinvigorating their town-to-town relations on a principally new and more pragmatic basis.

The mutual interest and intensified contacts between the towns resulted in the signing of an agreement between the Sør-Varanger community and the Pechenga district (28 March 2008), including an agreement on a special Kirkenes-Nikel twin city project (*Soglashenie o razvitii druzhestvennyx svjazey*, 2008). Notably, this agreement was preceded by a letter from the Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre in March 2008 to the chair-person of Sør-Varanger, referring to talks conducted between the Norwegian minister and Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. Støre also articulated progress in talks to establish in the long term a joint economic and industrial zone of cooperation (Pomor) reaching across the Norwegian-Russian border. He recommended that the representatives of Sør-Varanger and Pechenga come together in order for Kirkenes and Nikel to turn into a twin city for such an arrangement to be part of the zone-arrangement (Haugseth, 2013). As a consequence, and following success in the talks between the two municipalities, the twinning between Kirkenes and Nikel was approved by the Norwegian and Russian foreign ministers at their meeting in Kirkenes on 9 June 2008 (Pogoretskaya, 2008). The same day a joint statement on the prospects of twinning was issued by the Sør-Varanger and Pechenga leaders (*Sovmestnoe zayavlenie o sotrudnichestve*, 2008).

More specifically, the 2008 agreement on twinning covered cooperative areas, such as: support for small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs); establishment of a joint Business Cooperation Center in Nikel; environmental protection; health care (including direct cooperative schemes between municipal hospitals); education (direct links between elementary and secondary schools); training programs for municipal officials; tourism; cultural festivals and exhibitions; library and museum cooperation; mass media cooperation; women and youth cooperation; and sports (*Soglashenie o razvitii druzhestvennyx svjazey*, 2008; Smirnova, 2008).

In spring 2011, the agreement was updated by the two municipalities and an action plan for 2011-2012 was adopted. It was decided to focus on priorities such as support for SMEs; creation of a common labor market; good governance practice at the municipal level; educational projects; culture (including the festival *Barents Spectacle*, regular art exhibitions, library and museum cooperation, and joint festivities to commemorate the Murmansk and Finnmark regions' liberation from German occupation in 1944) and sports (ice hockey and football tournaments, and swimming competitions). Special attention was paid to early preparations for the introduction of the visa-free regime for the border regions' residents (establishing a special corridor for border resident card holders at the Borisoglebsk-Storskog border-crossing, liberalization of the customs regime in the border zone, etc.) (Plan sotrudnichestva, 2011; Lebed, 2011).

The new leadership of the Sør-Varanger community elected in the municipal elections in 2011 confirmed its adherence to both the above agreement and action plan (Belova, 2011). In addition, the partners decided to opt for a new action plan by the fall of 2013.

The way twinning emerged in the case of Kirkenes-Nikel points to the fact that the two towns were in general expected to contribute to a demise of the divisive effects of the Norwegian-Russian border and to generate experiences applicable more generally to the cooperation between Norway and Russia. They have been invited to implement spatial strategies that contribute to the emergence of a bridgehead towards Russia, a common trans-border area, and an integrated borderland in order for the experiences then also to be utilized in other spheres of Norwegian-Russian cooperation in the North. The two towns are expected to reach beyond their national role and connect the local with the international through their particularly close relations in terms of twinning.

In general, the strategy of twinning as a form of inter-town and inter-municipal cooperation seems to boil down to three issue-areas: capacity-building (aiming at developing various capabilities of the parties); problem-solving (cooperation in functional areas with the aim to ensure sustainable development); and cultural interaction in order for negative perceptions of the neighbor to be down-graded and familiarity to be up-graded.

Capacity-Building Strategies

These strategies include a wide array of methods:

One crucial area consists of *attracting investments*. Both domestic and foreign investments are searched for and this applies both to the existing sectors (such as mining industries or transport infrastructure) as well as potential projects (e.g. new railways connections and industrial parks). For example, the Sør-Varanger community managed to attract the Tschudi Group, a large Norwegian investment company, to the region in order for the Bjørnevatn iron ore open-pit mine to be reopened in 2009. The mine is important for Sør-Varanger in terms of employment and it actually adds to the shortage of labor that has been there already for some time, thus also contributing to the idea that some part of the working force could be recruited from the Russian side of the border. The mine does not only contribute to the local economy with iron ore being extracted there, as it is also hauled with the Kirkenes-Bjørnevatn Line over to Kirkenes in order to be processed and shipped out. The mine already has a long history as it was initially opened in

1906 – leading then also to the grounding of Kirkenes – but then closed in 1996 because of its own inefficiency and the decline in the price of iron ore (Viken, et.al., 2008: 28-29). The reopening is, in turn, related to more favorable prices allowing also the Tschudi Group to invite some external investors to contribute to the re-opening. They have invested altogether some 2,400 million Norwegian krone (NOK) for the mine to be modernized and reopened.

Among other large investment projects, the Sør-Varanger community is looking for investors to renovate the Kirkenes international airport, European routes 06 and 105 as well as the local road system. It is to be noted that all these projects have been advertized as gateways or links to the Murmansk region or Russia in general.

As for the Russian side, an event called the Russian-Norwegian Cross-Border Cooperation Days was organized in November 2011 in Nikel was exemplary in terms of investment policies. A number of international business associations such as SIBA International Management, Foreign Investor Business Association (FIBA), Norwegian Business Association (NBA) and Naringsshage (Kirkenes business association) took part. The Pechenga district has organized a poster session titled ‘Russia’s north-western gates’ to demonstrate investment opportunities for foreign businessmen (Bulygin, 2011).

Branding/PR strategies: In order to attract foreign investors and for twinning to gain both regional and national support, the municipalities have launched rather active PR campaigns. For example, they have arranged exhibitions, held the ‘days of cooperation’ and arranged festivals in towns with which they are related, taken part in international fairs and advertised themselves in the partner cities’ mass media (see photograph below). In addition, the municipal leaders undertake regular trips abroad for public relations purposes. Kirkenes, Nikel and Pechenga run bilingual periodicals and web-sites oriented towards audiences in the regional neighbourhood. The main message of this campaign is to present twins as creative and innovative platforms rather than remote and depressive areas.

Figure 2 - A Sør-Varanger community ad in the Pechenga district’s newspaper:
Welcome to Kirkenes – your nearest shopping center!

Co-operation with international organizations: In the hope of getting international assistance and recognition, many northern European municipalities try to develop relations with regional and sub-regional organizations, such as the Barents/Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), Arctic Council, Council of Europe, European Congress of Municipal and Regional Governments, European Regions Assembly, etc. For example, the BEAC has both its headquarters and Norwegian national offices in Kirkenes and its office in Murmansk. These offices help to coordinate cooperative projects at the regional/municipal level, including the Kirkenes-Nikel twinning project. The Sør-Varanger community, being a part of the Finnmark county, cooperates with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities which, in turn, is a member of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2013: 11). As mentioned above, both municipalities have contacts with the CTA and even think about joining it in due time. It should be noted that co-operation with international organizations is important for the twinning municipalities not only in terms of survival or getting additional resources for their developmental programs but also in terms of opening them up for the world-wide processes of globalization and regionalization.

The use of the 'treaty-making power': As far as the Russian side is concerned, over the past two decades, this strategy was at the center of the heated debate on the treaty-making powers of the federal center, regions (members of the Russian Federation) and municipalities. Despite Moscow's resistance since the early 1990s, many Russian border municipalities have concluded direct agreements with same-type international partners. As a compromise between the central and local actors, it was decided that such agreements should not have a status of full-fledged international treaties (which is considered as a federal prerogative) and should be prepared with the Russian Foreign Ministry's assistance. Nevertheless, these would-be 'treaty-making' activities of the municipalities were one of the most effective instruments both to build their capacities and strengthen their international prestige.

Twinning Strategies: Problem-Solving/Functional Cooperation

The Kirkenes-Nikel twinning project aims to help these towns solve the numerous problems they face and promote their further sustainable development. Their cooperation covers the following areas:

Industrial cooperation. It is, more particularly, connected to the Norwegian Pomor Plan, i.e. a plan initiated by Norwegian experts in 2006 and aiming at the establishment of a Pomor Special Industrial Zone (PSIZ) in the Sør-Varanger community/Pechenga district on the border region but potentially also transcending the Norwegian-Russian border (Cherednichenko, 2008).

One of the prime aims of establishing a PSIZ consisted of facilitating the development and use of the Shtokman gas field in the Barents Sea among other things by providing a major bulk of the required regional transport infrastructure and construction of a plant for production of liquid gas. Russia and Norway have also decided to connect some of their gas pipelines in the Barents Sea area, and in bringing the pipeline on land, an appendage might also reach Nickel (so the nickel depositories could be processed on spot rather than traded on the world market as raw material as has been the case so far). The plans to build metallurgy and oil refinery plants on the coast of

the Pechenga Bay were mentioned as well (*Pechenga*, 2008). These activities open up some interesting prospects also for the part of twinning.

Developing transport infrastructure: There was also a project to build a 40-km railroad from Nikel to Kirkenes. Such a connection would be needed in order to switch a part of a broader flow of goods (coming from the Far East and Russia's High North to Europe and North America *via* Murmansk) to Kirkenes. A special company, the World Port Kirkenes Group AS, was established in Norway in 2001. According to the company's plans, the link should be created not only to the Russian but also to the Finnish railway system and the connection between Kirkenes, Murmansk and Arkhangelsk ports should be established (World Port Kirkenes Group, 2002: 11). However, the Murmansk regional authorities have been reserved about this project because they did not want to transform Kirkenes to a world-class port capable of being a competitor to the Murmansk harbors. Instead they proposed a plan of radical reconstruction of the Murmansk port to receive the growing flow of goods. Owing to competitive interests, the railway project has made little progress, and instead Oslo has been pushing for the exploration of the viability of a railroad from Rovaniemi (Finland) to Tromsø or Finnmark county (including Kirkenes) in order to develop an alternative version of the transport corridor (Regnum, 2009). According to the Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre (2010), the plan is being assessed "on a serious basis".

The regional authorities are modernizing the E-105 highway from Murmansk to Kirkenes (*via* the Borisoglebsk-Storskog border-crossing) and building several shortcuts that bypass Pechenga and Nikel making thus the distance shorter. The Norwegian side modernizes its part of the E-105 as well. Both projects should be completed by 2014 (Barents Observer, 2011).

Creating a common labor market: One aspect of twinning consists of relations in the sphere of work. There is a considerable shortage of skilled labor force in Sør-Varanger and Finnmark more generally, and this has become more acute with the re-opening of iron mines in the vicinity of Kirkenes. Efforts have been taken to improve the flow of labor in the Barents region between Norway and Russia, for example, by providing training for jobs in the offshore sector and by changing experience in the promotion of an inclusive labor market (Støre, 2010: 10). There were plans to partially staff the Kirkenes mines with workers from Nikel who could commute daily or work on the shift basis. These plans, however, were postponed because the introduction of new visa/work permit regulations was delayed.

Promoting visa facilitation regime: The intensified contacts between Finnmark and the Murmansk regions have entailed the need for liberalization of the visa regime for the border residents. In that context, agreement was reached on a local border traffic zone and the introduction of a border resident ID card on November 2, 2010. Those who live within the 30 km border area on the Norwegian and Russian sides are eligible to get a three-year ID card and able to cross the border without a visa and stay on the other side up to 15 days each time (Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Korolevstva Norvegija i Pravitel'stvom Rosssiyskoy Federatsii, 2010). The whole Sør-Varanger community (with exception of the Sami village of Neiden) as well as the Russian towns of Nikel, Zapolyarny, Pechenga and Korzunovo were covered by these arrangements.

The agreement was ratified by both the Norwegian and Russian sides in early 2011. However, it entered into force only on May 29, 2012, one and half year later after it had been signed. The numerous technical difficulties, ranging from providing border residents with reliable ID cards to renovation of the Borisoglebsk-Storskog border-crossing, have repeatedly delayed its

implementation. It is estimated that there is a need for 9,000 cards on the Norwegian and 35,000 IDs on the Russian side (Lebed, 2012). At the Kiruna BEAC summit on June 4, 2013, the Russian and Norwegian prime ministers have signed a protocol to extend the 2010 agreement to Neiden thus covering the whole Sør-Varanger community by a visa-free regime [Pogoretskaya, 2013a].

The increased contacts imply that the number of border crossings have grown considerably. The border crossing in Borisoglebsk-Storskog at the Norwegian-Russian border close to Kirkenes was reopened in 1991 but initially the number of border-crossing remained low with only a few thousand crossings a year. In 2010 and 2012 the figures were more than 100,000 and 250,000 crossings respectively (Pogoretskaya, 2013a; Støre, 2010: 9). It is expected that this figure will be doubled in 2013.

This also means an increased load on the Russian and Norwegian consulates. For example, in 2011-2012, the Russian consulate in Kirkenes issued 7,000 visas each year. Moreover, it issued 2,200 border resident ID cards from mid-2012 to mid-2013 (Pettersen, 2013). To facilitate visa application, processing and issuing, the Russian Visa Center was opened on March 28, 2013 in Kirkenes. The novelty is that it is operated by a Western private company, not by the Russian consulate. The visa applications can be made *via* mail or on-line and there is no need to go to the visa center in person for an interview or to receive the visa (Pettersen, 2013). The Norwegian side introduced similar on-line services in its consulate in Murmansk and opened a visa center there. In the summer of 2012, a temporary Norwegian consular office was opened in Zapolyarny to issue ID cards for the local border residents. It functioned during several days and received more than 100 Russian applicants (Nickel News, 2013). The Norwegian side also plans to open an honorary consulate in Nikel to handle applications from the local residents.

As the Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre underlined on one occasion, Norway was one of the first Schengen countries to undertake such an experiment on the liberalization of the visa regime (Lebed, 2012). On the other occasion, he told his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov that he expects the introduction of a visa-free regime with Russia in the foreseeable future (Pogoretskaya, 2013a).

Education: Cooperation between twins in the sphere of education started from collaborative projects between elementary and secondary schools as well as from various language courses: training and retraining of school teachers of English [with the help of the University of Nordland (Bodø, Norway) and Murmansk State Institute for Humanities] and the Norwegian language courses for the Nikel residents. These projects proved to be efficient and are continued to date (Lebed, 2011).

In December 2012 an ambitious project to establish an international Master's program in Border Studies (Bordology) has been launched by the University of Nordland and Murmansk State Institute for Humanities. The main idea of the project is to train specialists in border management for the Norwegian and Russian border regions. The group of 20 students were recruited from candidates with bachelor degrees and composed of ten Russian (5 slots are reserved for students from Nikel and Pechenga) and ten Norwegian representatives who are being trained in Nikel, Murmansk and Kirkenes for 3.5 years. The program is a combination of class-room lectures and seminars with web-based distant-learning technologies. The courses are

taught in English by teachers from Norwegian and Russian universities and practitioners from various governmental and municipal bodies. The program's curriculum is built on the Bologna Process principles and should result in getting a MA degree from the University of Nordland (Bulygin, 2012; Grimmer, 2013; Pogoretskaya, 2013b). For the time-being it is difficult to say whether the project will be a success story or not, but the demand for specialists in border management is very high in both twinning communities.

Cultural Strategies: Increasing Familiarity

The Sør-Varanger community and the Pechenga district have well-established and multifaceted cultural cooperative ties with each other.

The core of twinning cultural activities is the *Barents Spektakel*, a festival which is held in Kirkenes on an annual basis from 2004. As the organizers describe it, “[t]he festival is a cultural-political cocktail with contemporary art, performances, literature, theatre, film, seminars and concerts as ingredients, spiced with the current issues related to the Barents Region and the High North in general” (Barentsspektakel website). The main aim of the festival is to promote cultural contacts between different countries and peoples of the Barents region with the goal to develop a common Barents/Arctic culture. Along with cultural, the festival has a clear political connotation: to encourage the states and people of the region to solve existing disputes over territories, borders, natural resources, environmental problems, etc., in a peaceful and non-violent way.

For example, the *Barents Spektakel 2013* had a title “Ticking Barents’ that was explained by the organizers in the following way: “[w]hat is ticking, one might ask. The Arctic is hotter than ever and definitely ticking!” The organizers called for a *revolution on ice* to solve the most compelling Arctic problems: “[t]he festival plays out alternative social structures and local formats of communal self-organization: A revolution in our mind, a revolution as a community-building process” (ibid).

In addition to the *Barents Spektakel*, the two twinning communities have established numerous direct contacts between local writers, poets, artists, actors, dancers, libraries and museums that formed a dense network of cultural cooperative ties in the region.

The twinning communities have to include to their cooperative plans indigenous people as well. For example, there is a small Skolt Sami village of Neiden which is – being a part of the Sør-Varanger community – located on the Norwegian-Finnish border. The Skolts form a minority group among the Sami and are distinct from other groups in a number of ways. There are approximately 1000 Skolt Sami in Northern Europe: 600 live in Finland, 250 in Russia and 15 in Norway. The Russian culture has had a strong influence on the Skolts, who adopted Christianity in its Eastern Orthodox form in the 16th century. The Skolt Sami language is highly endangered and not spoken actively in Neiden today. Almost all speakers live in Finland. The protected area around Neiden includes a number of different monuments, including a tiny (13 square meters) Russian Orthodox St. Georg’s Chapel built by Tryphon of Pechenga in 1565.

The *Skolt Sami culture across borders*, a cooperative project between Finland, Norway and Russia, was launched in 2010. Its aim is to contribute to a strengthening and revitalization of Skolt Sami culture, language and identity (Skoltsami website). The project offices are located in Sevettijärvi

(Finland), Neiden (Norway) and Murmansk (Russia). The visitors from Murmansk and the Pechenga district visit Neiden on the regular basis (Oboishikova, 2011).

There was a considerable increase in familiarity between twinning communities as a result of the above cultural interactions. For instance, Kirkenes, consisting of some 7,000 inhabitants but growing, has in fact been a major meeting-point for Russian-Norwegian contacts since the 1990s on a variety of levels and in different forms. It is multicultural in the sense that in addition to a Norwegian majority, there is a Sami population in the region, a considerable number of Finnish-speakers around as well as an increasing number of Russians and Russian-speakers in the town and its vicinity. The latter group amounts to some ten per cent of the town's population (Rogova 2008: 29).

It appears also that a considerable number of Russians living in the Murmansk region nowadays view the Norwegian-Russian border in terms of a shared borderland. The border has turned far less divisive not just politically and in administrative terms, but also culturally and identity-wise. Anastasia Rogova (2009: 31) claims that a borderland has emerged "which is neither Russia, nor Norway to the full extent". Russians visiting Kirkenes do not have the feeling of being abroad, as also indicated by Kirkenes being named 'Kirsanovka' or 'Kirik' with connotations of a small local and nearby entity/village in the language used in the Murmansk region. Visits have become frequent for reasons of shopping or, for that matter, using the Kirkenes airport for flights abroad.

In one of its aspects, the Norwegian-Russian cross-border cooperation can draw upon the somewhat idealized legacy of the so-called Pomor trade, i.e. a trade with Pomors exchanging flour for fish (Niemi, 2005). These coastal trade contacts, which lasted for nearly three centuries before dwindling out after the Russian revolution in 1917, were quite important for the development of the northern areas. The legacy is frequently referred to and activated with the current-day cooperation and border-crossing seen as a return to traditional constellations.

Still another memory impacting in particular local attitudes consists of the fact that a considerable number of German troops were stationed in the region, pursuing quite repressive policies, and it was freed by the Soviet Army in 1944. For sure, the Cold War period, with perceptions of enmity as the prevalent approach, impacted the views on Russians. The negative views have, however, gradually changed and normalized. As mentioned above, it became a common tradition to jointly celebrate the date of the liberation of the Murmansk region and East Finnmark from the Nazi occupants in October 1944.

In addition to a growing number of Russian and Russian-speaking inhabitants in Kirkenes, there is a considerable number of Russians arriving from the Murmansk region for shopping as well as sailors visiting the town. The latter group is there because Russian fishing vessels frequently visit the port of Kirkenes (with some 30–50 ships at port any time) (Rogova, 2008: 15). A shopping mall has been recently built in the town with visiting Russians seen as an essential part of the customers. Overall, various forms of cooperation across the border have turned rather significant for the economy of the town as well as Sør-Varanger at large.

Conclusions

The Kirkenes-Nikel twinning initiative that has been launched in 2008 demonstrates a quite positive dynamics regardless the unfavorable economic and political conditions surrounding this project. It covers a broad spectrum of issues ranging from ambitious industrial and transport infrastructure projects to cultural, educational, youth and women's cooperative schemes. There is still considerable emphasis on humanitarian aspects of twinning, although cultural/humanitarian bonds have been increasingly related to more pragmatic and interest-driven forms of cooperation. The case of Kirkenes-Nikel is hence clearly to be understood as a laboratory introduced in order to explore and test the prospects for cooperation in a broader context.

The broader background also implies that over time the twinning between Kirkenes-Nikel might be integrated into a broader pattern of trans-border cooperation between Norway and Russia with several other cities and regional actors as a part of the configuration.

The town pair has developed a rather sophisticated and innovative arsenal of policy strategies that aim at twins' capacity-building, problem-solving (implying issues to be dealt with on the local political agenda) and cultural interaction (to increase familiarity).

To overcome a divisive effect of state borders, the twins initiated the introduction of a visa-free regime for the local residents that – upon its approval at the central governments' level – facilitated the cross-border exchanges to a greater extent. This experiment can be seen as a near-success story and its experiences can be replicated in other border areas between Russia and the European countries belonging to the Schengen zone. However, it should be noted that this experiment did not turn the Norwegian-Russian border from a divisive line to a borderland which serves as a zone for cooperation and unites rather than divides people. Despite the existence of a dense network of economic and humanitarian contacts between them, Kirkenes and Nickel still do not form a unified entity and are far from being a EuroCity model as demonstrated by the Tornio-Haparanda case.

As experts (Figenschou, 2011; Haugseth, 2013; Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2012; Nyseth and Viken, 2009) point out, there are some serious obstacles both to the implementation of the existing twinning projects and transformation of the inter-municipal cooperation to a more advanced and far-reaching form of collaboration. The bureaucratic barriers, visa-related problems, the lack of funding and political will on the Russian side (which is explained by the reluctance of the regional and federal authorities to support in full the twinning experiment), the delay with the establishment of the Pomor special economic zone (which was seen as an additional spur for the twinning project) should be mentioned among the factors that prevented the Kirkenes-Nikel twinning project from becoming another success story and generated quite modest results.

But looking at the bright side of the story, it appears, in general, that in spite of the above obstacles the twinning project has reasonably good prospects of growth for the foreseeable future as part of increased cooperation between Norway and Russia. As mentioned, the Kirkenes-Nikel pair plans to join the CTA if the project succeeds. In any case, their decision to become city twins seems to indicate that the concept of twinning has retained its attractiveness in northern Europe, and has also become of interest for some of the states of the region to advance and support.

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