

Mikhailova, Ekaterina

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Nikel and Kirkenes: Twin City Pair over the Polar Circle

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Ekaterina Mikhailova

PhD Candidate

National Research Institute - Higher School of Economics, Moscow

Faculty of public and municipal administration

Department of regional studies and territorial development

mikhaylovaev@yandex.ru

The paper represents a piece of a doctoral research on three city pairs which name themselves «twin-cities» and are located along the border of the Russian Federation. The term «twin-cities» is used in a narrow sense, with geographical closeness as an important criterion (on the contrary to sister-cities where the distance between cooperating cities doesn't matter). These cities lie on Russian state border with China (Blagoveshchensk-Heihe), Finland (Svetogorsk-Imatra) and Norway (Nikel-Kirkenes). The current contribution is devoted to examining the appliance of the twin-cities concept to the Northernmost and last mentioned city pair.

1. Introduction

196 km of Russian-Norwegian land border is the oldest border of the Russian Federation in Europe – it coincides with the border which was agreed upon in 1826 in the Russian-Swedish convention “About borders between Russia and Norway in Lapland churchyards” (Kola encyclopedia, 2013). Later that border turned into one of the most isolated Soviet frontiers because it separated capitalist and socialist blocks, NATO and Warsaw Treaty states. Today the border separates the Russian Federation and the Shengen zone and has accommodated the first visa-free zone between continental Russia and Shengen agreement countries.

Despite the strict regime of the border the cooperation between Russian and Norwegian border municipalities - Pechenga Rayon and Sør-Varanger commune – got a legal basement in 1973 when the bilateral friendship agreement was signed. Surprisingly that intermunicipal agreement appeared one year before the agreement between Murmansk oblast’ and Finnmark fylke while in general both in times of the Soviet Union and now in Russia international ties usually starts from signing interregional agreement and following creating intermunicipal agreements for its detalization.

Russian-Norwegian intermunicipal cooperation was slowly evolving through years of Soviet epoch. After opening of the border, the cooperation became

broader and more intensive. Some of Nikel interviewees who worked in town hall during that times describe the cooperation of the 90s as the “Golden era” of Russian-Norwegian intermunicipal cooperation (Interview with Liubov Timokhina, ex-mayor of Nikel municipality administration, 2013). In 2008 the twinning agreement between two municipalities was introduced.

Although, literally in the text of the agreement the parties of twinning were defined as municipalities in general (Pechenga Rayon and Sør-Varanger commune) – in reality the execution of the projects and its further reproduction in the majority of cases used municipal centers as the key actors of cooperation (Tvillingbyer - Twin Cities: Kirkenes og Nikel. Official website of Sør-Varanger commune. <http://www.svk.no>, 2013).

The object of the research are two towns lying on the relative proximity of the border – Nikel with population of 12 558 inhabitants (by the beginning of 2012, Murmanskstat) and Kirkenes with its 3 440 residents (by 1 January 2012, Statistisk sentralbyrå). The distance between settlements is 57 km: 40 km from Russian town to the border and 17 km from Norwegian one.

2. Conceptual framework: From Twin-Cities to Twinning the Cities

Nowadays the new understanding of twin-cities is coming into place: increasingly the term “twin-cities” is used as a reference to the futurological project proclaiming of contiguous settlements’ intentions to become twins. We can see in practice that quite often two cities about the same size, situated very close to each other but separated by the national state border try to be paired and call themselves “twin cities” in a provisional way (as an example see a description of Niagara Falls City by Buursink, 2001, p. 10). As a reason for it, Joenniemi suggests the desire of local actors to utilize twinning as “an adequate and preferable response to numerous practical challenges” that cities face in their day-to-day life (for instance improving infrastructure, generating investments, reacting to environmental concerns or focusing on branding) (2014, p. 4).

With this contribution the author suggests to distinguish concepts of city twinning and twinning the cities. The former means the phenomenon of existence of adjacent settlements divided with an international border and the general trend of proclaiming cities to be twins. The latter stands for a process of reaching the ground to be regarded as twin cities. This process is aimed in achieving higher level of similitude and increasing quantity and quality of mutual gains of cooperation between adjoining border-crossing settlements. Thus, twinning the cities represents an activity of social constructing, an analogue of region building but at the smallest of possible scales, at the local level.

Aspiration for the future adds this term a character of declaration of goals: entering in the twinning relations provides evidence of intentions to live closer and enhance the current level of belongingness. In other words, the “twin cities” notion became used not to describe existent state of affairs but to claim a dream on realization of which settlements are working or are about to work on. Thus, the term has turned into a name of the final destination that is hoped to be reached after a long voyage of the project work. The rapidness of change in the usage of this concept in the European continent could be partially explained by availability of the EU funds for those who named themselves twins.

Thus, instead of interpreting twin-cities as “laboratories of integration” and analyzing them from international relations perspective, in my PhD project twin-cities first of all are treated as a special object of governance and are interpreted as a tool of territorial development.

3. Methods

The paper is based on academic literature and statistical analysis and research field work in the selected towns, which included collecting 70 questionnaires (47 from Kirkenesians - 32 in Norwegian, 15 in Russian and 23 from Nikelians) and holding 40 interviews (19 in Pechenga District, 13 in Kirkenes and 8 in the city of Murmansk). Interviewees could be divided into three groups - state representatives (regional and municipal servants, mayors and international

advisors of both cities), business actors and soft project cooperation participants (educational, sport, cultural and ecological organizations).

Both towns were analyzed with the same methodological pattern starting from description of economic profiles of cities, moving to organizational design of town halls and finishing with investigating strategies of municipal development. The results are presented in two blocks – similarities and differences between Nikel and Kirkenes.

4. The similarities and historical bonds of Nikel and Kirkenes

The development of both towns is strongly connected with mining activities. In 1910 the mining company “A/S Sydvaranger” started iron ore production near Kirkenes and stimulated urbanization of that area. The “Petsamon Nikkeli Ltd.” was founded by Finns in 1934 who owned the Petsamo territory for about 20 years till September 19, 1944, when the Moscow Armistice between Finland and Soviet Union was signed. Both plants’ facilities were destroyed (bombed, burnt or blasted) in the end of the Second World War by German troops and both were reconstructed.

The fact of liberation of Norwegian Arctic by the Red Army was used as a foundation of cooperation during Soviet times. The biggest permanent exhibition in the Kirkenes museum (“Grenselandmuseet” which means “the Borderland Museum”) is devoted to the WWII and depicts a portrait of a Soviet soldier as a liberator. The survey has demonstrated that the fact of long history of cooperation between Pechenga Rayon and Sør-Varanger commune and its pilot status are widely known by municipalities’ residents on both sides of the border.

Both Nikel and Kirkenes share extreme peripheral location: it is more than 2000 km from them to national capitals and more than 170 km to regional centers (if measure the distance with the length of the highway). Kirkenes has an airport with direct 2-hour flight to Oslo while the only one road from Nikel after 4 hours of driving will lead you to Murmansk. From Murmansk it is half an hour by car to the airport where you can take a 2 h and a half flight to Moscow. On the other

hand, taking into account closeness to the Northern Sea route, one can argue about peripheral status of Nikel and Kirkenes in the Nordic context.

5. The differences of the towns or “God forbid Nikel and Kirkenes to become twins!”¹

The asymmetric relations between Nikel and Kirkenes came into being in 1993 when the Kirkenes declaration was signed. That document which gave birth to the Barents Euro-Arctic region (BEAR) made Kirkenes an unofficial BEAR capital. From that moment until now Kirkenes has changed a lot – gradually it turned into an international political center in the High North where the meetings of top politicians take place annually and on the daily bases operates an international organization (International Barents Secretariat). Due to this fact Kirkenes deserved a title of “town of miners and ministers” (Nyseth and Viken, 2009).

In Nikel situation also has changed: after the Soviet Union broke apart, the High North stopped receiving financial support from the central government in the former scale: year by year Nikel was losing its population and today has four times less people than it used to be in early 90s. In a word, from a relatively prosperous place Nikel turned into a small village on the edge of the Earth (interview with Tatyana Bazanova, cross-border cooperation adviser of the Pechenga Rayon administration, 2013).

While interviewing Kirkenes residents about their experience of being to Russia, the majority of respondents started describing their experience from Murmansk although the only road to Murmansk passes by the town of Nikel. Before May 2012 when special visa free regime for residents of 30 km area entered into force it is fair to say that Norwegians hadn't stopped either in Nikel or in Pechenga District.

During years 2006-2008 there was an external reason for it: in 2006 Nikel got special status of a “closed border territory” (Prikaz FSB № 240 ot 02.06.2006;

¹ Questionnaire of the Kirkenes resident of Russian origin, 20.03.2013.

Prikaz FSB ot 01.10.2008 number 474) which significantly decreased the number of cross-border cooperation projects both in number and scale.

6. The appearance, appliance and acceptance of twin-cities concept in Nikel and Kirkenes

The idea of establishing twinning agreement in 2008 was formulated by Jonas Gahr Støre, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway and sent in a letter directly to the mayor of Sør-Varanger commune Linda Beate Randal.

Today, five years later the twining agreement was signed, the fact that idea of twinning was cascaded from the upper level of authority is not forgotten yet. That serves as an argument for people who describe Nikel and Kirkenes as “artificial” twin-cities (interview with Unni Sildnes, external international adviser of the Sør-Varanger commune).

The most recent and remarkable achievement of cooperation between Nikel and Kirkenes which usually is described as a main result of twining process is establishment of 30 km visa-free zone in May 2012 which provided residents of that area an opportunity to have a special border pass (“grenseboerbevis”) which allows them to cross the border without visas and stay within the 30 km zone for up to 15 days.

As the survey has shown, there is a clear division of locals into supporters and skeptics towards twinning process both in Nikel and in Kirkenes which coexists with relatively small awareness of residents about undergoing cooperation projects.

7. Cooperation between municipal administrations

Local administrations claim to have weekly contacts with their colleagues across the border. Electronic correspondence was named as the most frequently used channel of communication with occasional use of phone calls in case of urgency. Russian, Norwegian and English are used as languages of communication with domination of two former and permanent utilization of interpreters.

Official delegations of border municipalities meet four times a year - every May and October. Recently a new platform for meeting was set up the Days of cross-border cooperation in Nikel. This event prepared by the Ministry of Economic Development of Murmansk Oblast takes place every November.

Addressing the issue of motivation to cooperate, the Norwegian informants mentioned neighbourship and friendship to be the main engines of dialog; while Russian interviewees articulated a hope that developing of CBC will result in certain economic gains for the municipality.

The procedure of collaborating with neighbors has gone through substantial changes from self-organization basis when any actor with a CBC idea initiated the search for a partner independently to a highly centralized system of interactions. From the middle of the first decade of XXI century about 70 % of intermunicipal dialog has been coordinated by City Halls. Today to start cooperation, the actor needs to communicate its wish to do so to the local administration, which will try to find a partner matching requirements of the applicant.

The range of competence on the Russian side is restricted with the federal law No. 131 that doesn't name expenses for international ties among expenses that municipal budget can cover. Such a situation significantly limits available finances for carrying out CBC projects. In reality there are only three ways to contribute to the project work financially for the Russian side: 1) transferring some costs to the so-called representative expenses of the municipality (Russian "*predstavitel'skie raskhody*"); 2) to do project related work within working hours or after it without extra payment (so-called "labor contribution", or in Russian "*trudovoy vklad*"); and 3) gratuitous provision of municipal property for temporary utilization for project needs. Usually realization of any CBC project at the local level requires using of all fore mentioned sources. However, as the observation of carried out project has shown, financial participation in the CBC projects is significantly unequal. Typically, an imposing share of cooperation projects was financed by Norwegian funds – predominantly by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat. At the

municipal level in Pechenga District organizations have a habit of being supplicant for financial support.

Although the structure, functions and range of power of two administrations differ a lot, there are some common traits as well. One of them is existence of the position of international adviser, who is the main expert in CBC work. Nowadays this post remains only on the Russian side while due to budget cuts the Norwegian side curtailed it in January 2013 and now has to ask external specialists for advice.

The other type of CBC coordination that is used by municipalities is sectoral coordination when a municipal servant manages CBC interactions in the particular field (for instance, kindergartens cooperation).

EU-finances are available when projects are planned in trilateral form with participation of Finnish border municipality Inari. So far there is a project for women-leaders and some youth exchange. The rest of cooperation activities is financed mostly by the Barents Secretariat. One of reasons for this is the absence of fund-raising department in any of municipalities. Skills of application writing have been used only on the Norwegian side of the border what mainly is due to the procedure of meriting the Barents Secretariat funds that does not allow Russian organizations to apply for a grant directly.

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