



## Online newspaper repositories and Norwegian-Russian media frames of Svalbard

by Robert Wallace Vaagan

### Abstract

Online newspaper repositories of two leading Norwegian and Russian daily newspapers (*Aftenposten* and *Rossiyskaya gazeta* [Российская газета]) offer different media frames of the Arctic group of islands known as Svalbard. The article first outlines the historical and geopolitical background. Then it presents findings from a content analysis of the two dailies. Findings confirm that Norway and Russia since the 1920s until recently have nurtured contending media frames of the archipelago which reflect different historical and geopolitical perceptions. Although Norway and Russia enjoy good bilateral relations, some tension lingers on regarding Svalbard. This might play a role as the Arctic littoral states try to harmonize their interests regarding continental shelves and circumpolar seaways under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

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### 1. Historical and geopolitical background

The Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz is generally accredited with the discovery of Spitsbergen (from Dutch "sharp mountain peaks") in 1596. During the 1600s a boom in Arctic whaling set in and British and Dutch whaling stations were set up on Spitsbergen. The king of Denmark and Norway repeatedly claimed sovereignty over Spitsbergen during the years 1577–1648. In 1613, the English Muscovy Company unsuccessfully attempted annexation on behalf of the British crown. Russia has always argued that Russian *pomor* [1] fur traders from the White Sea area discovered the archipelago and named it "Grumant" (a distortion of Greenland) (Baliyev, 2001). With time, the Netherlands, England, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, France, Russia and finally the U.S. all claimed economic and strategic interests on or around the archipelago.

In the years 1905–1916, the American-owned Arctic Coal Company and the American John M. Longyear invested heavily in coal mining on Spitsbergen. Private individuals and companies from several countries filed land claims (occupations), which at times were conflicting. Since the archipelago during the 19th century had become a *terra nullius* (no-man's land), this posed practical and legal problems. The Norwegian government convened three international conferences in 1910, 1912 and 1914 in the Norwegian capital Christiania (renamed Oslo in 1925) to clarify the legal status of Spitsbergen. These all proved inconclusive. As a result of the First World War and the October 1917 revolution, Germany and Russia were barred from taking further part in the discussions about the future of

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the archipelago.

The strategic importance of Spitsbergen coal increased greatly during the war. Norway remained neutral but lost half of its merchant fleet as part of the allied war effort. This meant Norway could count on support from the big powers in its claim for sovereignty over the archipelago. The Treaty of Spitsbergen signed in 1920 came into effect in August 1925 and gave Norway full sovereignty and jurisdiction over the archipelago. But several conditions were attached, including equal rights for signatory states and their citizens to engage in maritime activity, trade, mining, fishing and hunting, as well as non-militarization of the archipelago. By 1925, Norway had bought the main claims containing the major coal deposits. On 14 August 1925 Norway renamed the archipelago Svalbard (from Old Norse "cold coast") (Arlov, 2003, Ulfstein, 1995).

The Soviet Union ratified the treaty in 1935 and over the years Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard has proven a contentious issue in Norwegian-Soviet/Russian relations, especially during the Cold War years. In 1977, following the lead of several other coastal states, Norway established an exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles (nm.) along the entire coastline of mainland Norway, as well as a 200 nm. non-exclusive fishery protection zone around Svalbard with fishing quotas for various countries, including the U.S.S.R. A main irritant for Russia has been the inspections and detentions by the Norwegian coast guard of Russian fishing trawlers suspected of violating Norwegian fishing regulations, especially inside the zone around Svalbard.

Norwegian environmental policies designed to protect the vulnerable Svalbard ecosystem and justified by the Spitsbergen treaty (referred to as the Svalbard treaty by Norway), have been contested by Russia. While the treaty defines geographically the archipelago and surrounding territorial waters, it offers no guidance on economic zones or continental shelves. Despite this, an agreement was reached in 2010 between Norway and Russia on their common maritime border in the Barents Sea ([Figure 1](#)).

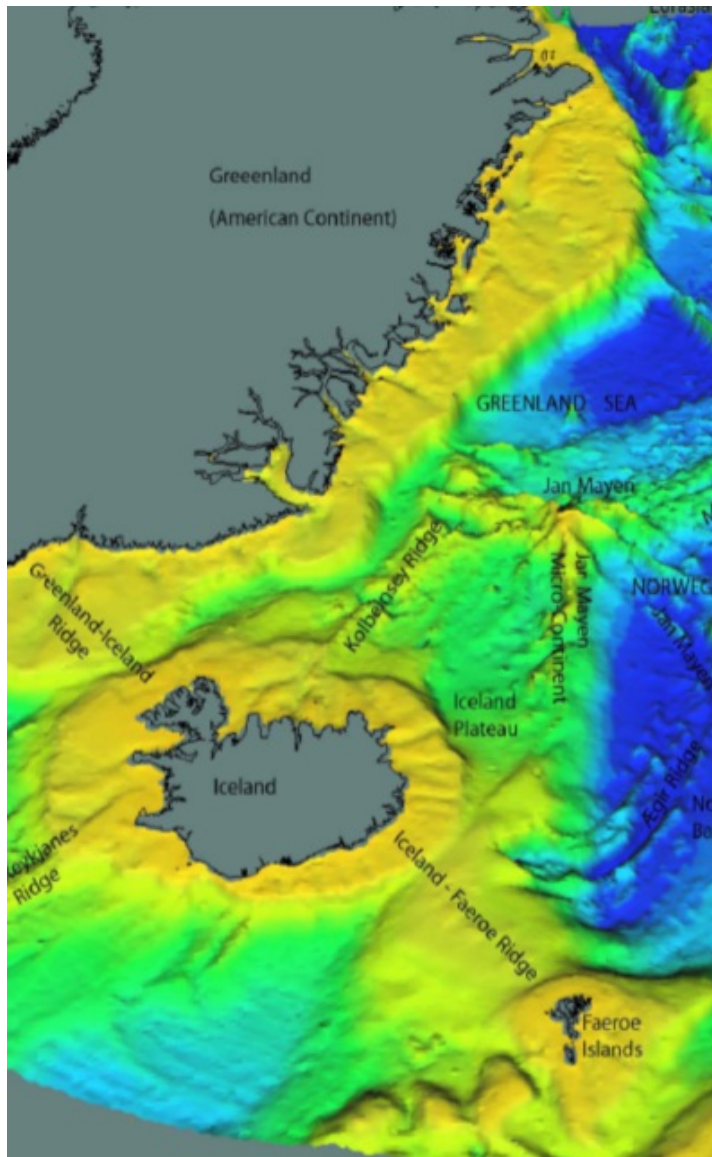


**Figure 1:** The maritime border agreed between Norway and Russia in 2010, with right. Svalbard is in the top left quadrant (Norwegian Ministr

Although the agreement reflects the overall good relations between the two countries, Russia has in the past argued that the equal rights provision of the Spitsbergen treaty applies not only to the archipelago's landmass (as Norway maintains), but also to the seabed around (which Norway rejects). In 2006, Norway documented scientifically to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that Svalbard is part of Norway's continental shelf, and this was endorsed in 2009 by UNCLOS. To date, UNCLOS has registered continental claims to the ocean seafloors around the globe from 61 coastal states. As for the Arctic, the five littoral states (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Russia and the United States) agreed in 2008 to base their Arctic claims on the UNCLOS framework, including multilateral bodies such as the International Seabed Authority, International Maritime Organization, Arctic Council etc.

With the exception of The United States which has signed but not yet ratified UNCLOS, these countries are currently harmonizing their Arctic continental shelf claims based on geological findings submitted to UNCLOS. In the event of overlapping claims, as between Canada and the United States in the Beaufort Sea, border lines have to be agreed on. Other issues of growing importance include circumpolar seaways as a result of rapidly receding Arctic ice masses. The shortest sea route

between Europe and Asia follows Russia's Arctic coastline.



**Figure 2:** Topographic map of the northeast Atlantic, Barents Sea and Arctic region. Source: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Arctic Regions of Norway in 2006* (UNCLOS, 2012; Executive Summary).

Russia was the first country to file a claim with UNCLOS in 2001, which was understandable since it has the longest Arctic coastline and potentially the largest continental shelf with the richest oil and gas deposits in the Arctic basin. Russia claims its continental shelf follows the Lomonosov Ridge all the way to the North Pole. UNCLOS has so far not endorsed the Russian claim. This did not stop Russia in August 2007 from planting a Russian flag on the seabed 4,200 meters under the North Pole, a gesture many countries resented (BBC, 2007). The UNCLOS process and partition of a substantial part the Arctic seabed may still take years. Canada is scheduled to present its claim in 2013, Denmark (Greenland) in 2014.

## 2. Content analysis of online newspapers

Although many find quantitative and qualitative content analysis to be useful and complementary approaches (Krippendorff and Bock, 2009), others (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, *et al.*, 2005) disagree. Instead, they argue that quantitative content analysis is scientifically superior to qualitative approaches such as discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, semiotic analysis, narrative analysis, interpretative analysis, conversation analysis, etc. which they do not consider as content analysis. Certainly ICT developments over the last decades have greatly facilitated the task of quantitative content analysis. Two examples could be the use of the LIWC

(linguistic inquiry and word count) program by Pennebaker and Chung (2009) to analyze text by the Al-Qaeda leaders bin Laden and al-Zawahiri and identify variables measuring psychological traits. Another example involves the methodology of Ling, *et al.* (2011) to analyze a dataset of 400 million sms texts to find which age groups have most sms partners. But this hardly means that qualitative approaches are unwarranted or less scientific. Essentially, this is a broader discussion of the merits of quantitative versus qualitative methodology.

In this paper we will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, drawing on frequency measurement and framing theory. Together with agenda setting, framing has become one of the most used analytical approaches in communication studies and can have both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The three main types of framing can all be traced in our data: the *constructionist* type (newsrooms and media outlets such as *Aftenposten* and *Rossiyskaya gazeta* provide interpretative packages of the position of sources), the *critical* type (frames result from both news gathering routines, such as the use of correspondents or the use of news agencies, and from hegemonic elite values, *e.g.*, those of profiled editors, journalists); and finally the *cognitivist* type (media texts become embedded in the minds of audiences) (Bryant and Miron 2004; Vaagan, *et al.*, 2010). Media frames that become enduring interact with what Assmann (1999) has termed "cultural memory" and can in time even evolve into stereotypes.

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### 3. Norwegian media

The Norwegian leading daily print and online newspaper *Aftenposten* is conservative-leaning and belongs to Norway's largest privately owned media group Schibsted. It was founded in 1860 and has digitized all print editions back to 1860, making it relatively easy to access its coverage of various issues and events. In 1920, Norwegian media were intertwined with party politics. The Norwegian parliamentary system with political parties that emerged from the 1880s led to a party press system that was to last roughly 100 years (Nordby, 2010). Liberals, agriculturalists, conservatives and the labour movement all launched various local and national newspapers. By 1890, the liberal press had caught up with the conservative press in terms of the number of supportive newspapers. Around 1910, the liberal press included around 70 newspapers compared with 60 conservative newspapers. But the liberal press was not so well organized as the conservative press. The labour movement developed later, and around 1920 each of the three main political orientations had around 55 newspapers (Ottosen, 2010).

The leading conservative newspaper at the time was *Aftenposten* whose circulation increased from 46,500 in 1915 to 65,000 in 1920, then to 72,000 in 1925 and to 79,528 in 1930 (Wasberg, 1960). Online availability to its digital editions greatly facilitate content analysis. *Aftenposten's* coverage of Spitsbergen and Svalbard before and after 1925 is particularly interesting and is what we briefly want to dwell on since it shows that the newspaper multiplied its reporting on Svalbard from 1925 and downgraded Spitsbergen.

Table 1: Frequency count of "Spitsbergen" and "Svalbard" in <i>Aftenposten</i> , 1920–1930 (Source: <i>Aftenposten.no</i> , 2012).											
	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
Spitsbergen	202	175	167	256	189	306	120	49	178	96	100
Svalbard	7	1	3	6	8	176	350	150	509	208	205

The term "Spitsbergen" first appeared in *Aftenposten* on 15 October 1860, in a report that a vessel with a cargo of whaleross and other specimens had arrived in Tromsøe. In comparison, "Svalbard" first appeared in *Aftenposten* (morning edition) on 23 May 1913. In a front page article entitled "Isachsens Spitsbergen-expedition 1906–1907", the term is traced back to the Icelandic sagas:



Figure 3: First appearance of "Svalbard" in *Aftenposten*, 23 May 1913

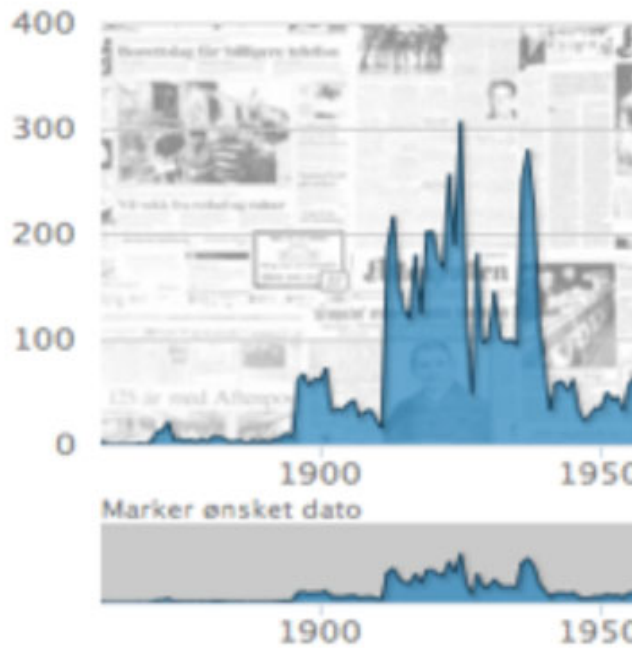
On 14 August 1925, the front page of *Aftenposten* (Figure 4) carried an interview with Prime Minister Johan Ludvig Mowinckel of the Liberal Party (Venstre), a shipowner, in which he likened the acquisition of Svalbard and extension of Norwegian territory to the Norwegian conquests of the past, including Iceland where Norwegians had settled c. 870 and from where the name Svalbard originated:



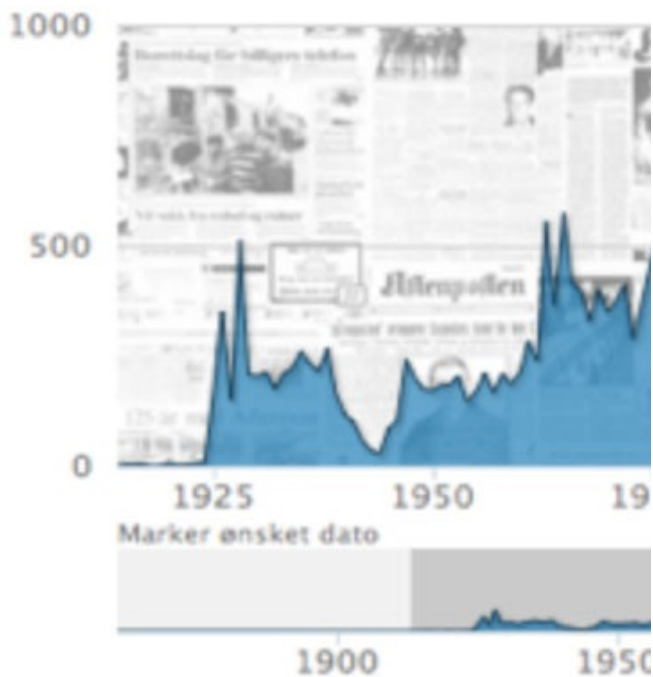
Figure 4: Front page of *Aftenposten*, 14 August 1925 (*Aftenposten*)

Mowinckel, Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary 1924–26, 1928–31 and 1933–35, thereby set the tone for what to this day has remained a consistent and dominant Norwegian media frame of Svalbard: it is Norwegian both historically, geographically and legally.

## HISTORISK TREND



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**Figure 5:** Histograms of "Spitsbergen" (top) and "Svalbard" (bottom) in *Aftenposten.no*, 2012).

In Figure 5, the histograms show the frequencies noted in [Table 1](#). Particularly interesting are the increase of "Svalbard" in 1925 (176) and 1926 (350) and the decrease of "Spitsbergen" from 1925 (306) to 1926 (120). Of course, further content analysis is necessary to determine the type of media framing underlying this shift. It may well be that post-1925 references to "Spitsbergen" are to the biggest island in the archipelago that retained this name from 1925, and that the same article highlights "Svalbard", the name of the entire archipelago. In this brief paper, the intention is simply to note this frequency shift from 1925 which shows that Norway's main daily from then promoted the new name. The Old Norse name which predated both Spitsbergen and Grumant [2] invoked cultural memories of Norwegianness. From 1396 Norway had been a colony first

under Denmark and from 1814 under Sweden, and only gained independence in 1905. In 1925 the capital Christiania (named after a Danish king) returned to its original, Norwegian name Oslo. So by giving the archipelago its original Old Norse name in 1925 became a vital part of the media frame of Svalbard as Norwegian that dominates Norwegian media to this day.



#### 4. Russian media

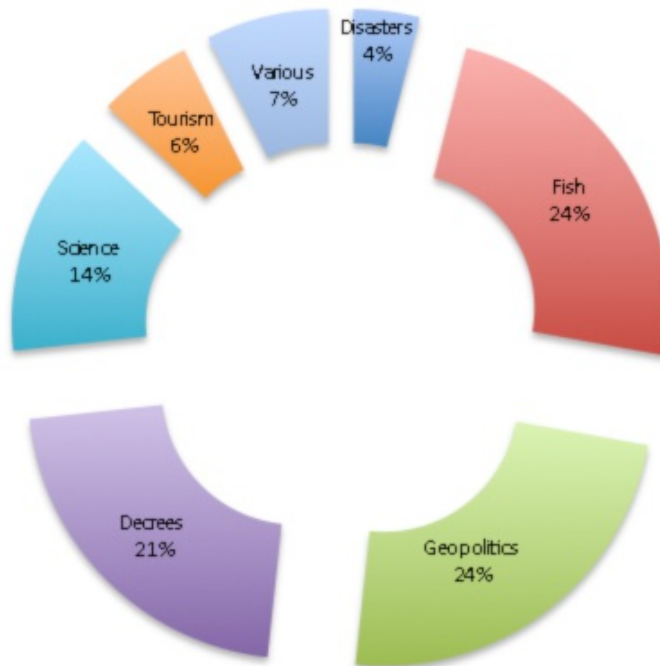
Media usage in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has changed. Television is by far the most popular media for most Russians. The main TV channels — Channel One, Russian television, TV-Center and NTV as well as Ren-TV — are all firmly under Kremlin control (Vaagan, 2009). But as elsewhere, the Internet has become a major source of information, and by late 2011 almost 66 million Russians (44 percent of the population) had access to the Internet, which remains the least state-controlled media outlet today.

The main daily newspapers are: *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (Российская газета), *Izvestiya* (Известия), *Kommersant* (Коммерсантъ), *Moskovsky komsomolets* (Московский комсомолец), *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (Независимая газета), *Trud* (Труд) and the weekly *Argumenty i fakty* (Аргументы и факты). The bi-weekly *Novaya gazeta* (Новая газета) is known for its investigative journalism and is where the journalist Anna Politkovskaya worked until her assassination in 2006. English-language newspapers include the *Moscow Times* (a daily) and the *Moscow News*, a weekly. Most of these newspapers and weeklies are owned or controlled by private interests close to the Kremlin. *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (RG), founded in 1990, is by contrast 100 percent government-owned. RG is printed daily in 41 cities and a weekly edition appears in another 46 cities all over Russia. It has a print circulation of 180,000 and an online edition with a repository. It carries the insignia of the Russian state and is the official recorder of the Russian government, publishing official decrees, statements and documents of state bodies. Acts of state only become into effect after due publication in RG. At the same time, RG is intended for the general reader and carries a broad range of articles written by journalists and it maintains 38 offices in Russia and abroad. Articles written by RG journalists reflect the views and policy of the Russian government (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 2012; BBC, 2007).

A search in the electronic archive of *Rossiyskaya gazeta* confirms Spitsbergen (Шпицберген) as the prevailing Russian name for the archipelago, with 212 hits compared with two for Svalbard (Свалбард) and six for Grumant (Грумант). Some hits prove to be the same article, e.g., all eight articles referring to Svalbard and Grumant were included among the 212 mentioning Spitsbergen. These 212 articles covered the years 2003–2012, with 2005, 2007 and 2011 as peak years. From this we can draw the conclusion that Russia under Putin/Medvedev overwhelmingly uses the term Spitsbergen (and not Svalbard) to refer to the archipelago of Svalbard. This reluctance to use the Old Norse name is part of a consistent policy of questioning Norwegian sovereignty over the archipelago. In 1925, when the Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920 came into effect, the Soviet Union was not among the 45 states invited to ratify the treaty. Three of the nine original signatory states had at that point not recognized the Soviet Union. Only after the United States recognized the Soviet Union in 1934 did the latter ratify the treaty, in 1935.

The final number of relevant, unique articles was 176. Of these 38 (21.6 percent) were official decrees by either the Russian Federal Government or various ministries. One hundred and thirty-eight articles (78.6 percent) were bylined by RG staff, including correspondents. The 176 articles are mostly shorter texts of one page or less. In some cases they are longer and in a few instances even stretch to 10 pages or more. Content-wise, many deal with several issues but if we simplify and categorize the 176 articles according to each article's main frame we get the distribution shown in Figure 6. The four main frames accounting for 83 percent are fish (24 percent), geopolitics (24 percent), decrees (21 percent) and science (14 percent).





**Figure 6:** Media frames in *RG* articles 2003–2012 about, or referring to, Spitsber Grumant or Svalbard ( $N=176$ ).

Fish (24 percent) was dominated by Russian reports of the Norwegian coast guard detaining and fining Russian fishing trawlers around Svalbard. Such actions were mostly described as unjustified. In many cases Russian trawlers were described being brought forcibly to Norwegian ports like Tromsø for court proceedings. In one dramatic case, the captain of the vessel *Elektron* escaped with two Norwegian coast guards on board. The vessel reached Russian waters, and the captain (in all fairness) was tried and jailed.

Geopolitics (24 percent) embraces reports on military and naval issues, oil and gas, continental shelves, third party involvement including NATO. Policy speeches by President Medvedev, Prime Minister Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov and interviews with Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre are also grouped here. In Figure 7 an example is given of two maps both using the term Spitsbergen (Шпицберген). The maps are from an article in which we are told about Russian submarines mapping the Russian continental shelf and Lomonosov Ridge at depths of 4,000 meters. Geopolitics also included an interview with a former KGB operative on the archipelago published on 28 April 2006.



**Figure 7:** The Russian view (Nadezhda Sorokina, "Встреча на дне", (Meeting с

Decrees (21 percent) included a variety of laws on taxation, education, etc. that applied to Russian territory including Spitsbergen, and also to

official statements and announcements. Very interesting is a de-classified policy statement published on 30 March 2009 concerning Russian long-term Arctic policy until 2020 and beyond. It makes it quite clear that Russia sees itself as the primary Arctic state with a legitimate claim to roughly half the Arctic continental shelf and resources. Science (14 percent) embraced a number of articles on climate, geology, oil and gas, as well as Russian research stations in the Arctic basin, including mapping efforts to document Russia's continental shelf claims through UNCLOS.

But what about RG articles between 1990 and 2003 that may have addressed Spitsbergen (Grumant, Svalbard)? In all probability there were many such articles but they did not appear in our several searches, so our analysis is incomplete. But we have been able to retrieve an article from June 2001. On the eve of Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's first official visit to Russia 17–19 June 2001, a strongly worded article criticizing Norwegian environmental policy on Svalbard appeared in *RG* on 14 June 2011 (Baliyev, 2001). Instead of Svalbard, it referred to Spitsbergen 13 times and to Grumant four times. Readers were warned that Grumant, which allegedly had been discovered by Russian *pomors* in the 12th century (no documentation provided) and had been a no-man's territory until the end of World War I, now could be closed to Russians as a result of Norway's unilateral policy. The Russian governor of Murmansk, Yuriy Yevdokimov, was quoted to the effect that recent Norwegian environmental legislation was an attempt to displace Russia from Spitsbergen. Although the visit was described as a success in the Norwegian press, contending media frames and cultural memories were very apparent.

A more recent article included in our sample of 176 articles including Grumant is by Svetlana Tsygankova and Viktor Vasenin dated 30 May 2011. "Two old vessels have set out from Petrozavodsk following the route of Simon Dezhnev" covers the 350-year anniversary of the discovery of the Bering Strait by the Russian Semyon Dezhnev. Reference is made to Grumant and Spitsbergen while Svalbard and Norwegian sovereignty are omitted:



Figure 8: *Rossiyskaya gazeta* 30 May 2011.

This article has similarities with the quoted article by Baliyev (2001) in that it conveys a media frame and cultural memories of Spitsbergen as Grumant, an essentially Russian archipelago.

## 5. Conclusion

Norwegian sovereignty over Spitsbergen and its renaming to Svalbard in 1925 was a major foreign policy victory for Norway. Prime Minister Mowinkel compared it to conquests of the distant past. Norway's leading daily *Aftenposten* provided a supportive media frame by emphasizing the archipelago's Old Norse name and downplaying the former Dutch name. But 75 years later this has had little impact in Russia where the official media outlet of the government, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, persists in calling the archipelago by its Dutch name Spitsbergen, and on occasion even using the name Grumant. Russian media frames related to the archipelago are dominated by fish, geopolitics, official decrees and science. Norwegian–Russian contending media frames indicate also contending cultural memories of the archipelago. Although Norway and Russia today enjoy overall good neighbourly relations, some tension remains over Svalbard. Hopefully this will not disturb the process in UNCLOS of

## About the author

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## Notes

**1.** *Pomor* (from Russian “no mope” which means “by the sea”) refers to the coastal population of today’s Northern Russia. For transliterations from Russian, a simplified system is used.

**2.** The first recorded reference to Svalbard is from 1194 in Icelandic chronicles. In *Sturlubók af Landnámabók (The Sturlubók of The Book of Settlements)*, compiled by the saga-writer Sturla Þórdarsson (d.1284), it is stated that it took four days to sail from Langanes in the north of Iceland to Svalbard (“en fra Langanesi a northanverðu Islandi er fjögurra dægra haf norðr til Svalbarða i háfsbotn”). The quotation is from AM 107 fol, *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar*, (Reykjavik, 1974), p. 4. Grumant is a non-Russian name (a distortion of Greenland) that first appeared in Russian chronicles in 1714 (Lunden, 1980). Moreover, Russian archaeological excavations on Svalbard, to demonstrate that Russian *pomor* settlements pre-date Barents’ discovery in 1596, remain scientifically controversial.

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