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“It Seemed Like Forever!” Shrinking Spaces of Conviviality at the Border of Norway and Russia

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ABSTRACT



“Conviviality” is a useful term for exploring interactions and relationships taking place between different groups of people. While conviviality may arise through everyday processes, rhythms, and senses of belonging, it may also be made possible or limited by social structures, power relations and politics when taking place across borders. “Conviviality” as a theoretical perspective has mainly previously dealt with places within a border, and to a lesser extent has been linked to borders and boundary areas, and especially then in circumpolar areas. We use the concept of “border conviviality,” focusing on the intersection of changing geo-political contexts and changing personal contexts, to develop a theoretical look at “people-to-people” cooperation- and cohabitation through “conviviality” and how these were created, changed, and challenged in Kirkenes, a small town on the border of Norway and Russia, in the months following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. We find that such a concept may provide a broader understanding of the dynamic nature of space and place associated with cooperation and “unification.” Additionally, we contend that the way in which “conviviality” is meaningfully linked to “borders” is shaped by how people live, work, and collaborate.

KEYWORDS

Conviviality; Russia; Norway; cross-border

Introduction

The Sør-Varanger municipality holds a unique position in post-Cold War Norwegian–Russian relations as the only Norwegian municipality that shares a border with Russia. Established in 1993, the Barents Euro-Arctic Region – commonly known as the Barents region¹ – began as a vision needing substance (Hønneland 1998). Key institutions like the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and the Barents Regional Council (BRC) have been instrumental in attempting to cultivate a shared Barents

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identity. Although it is debated whether a unified Barents identity has fully emerged (Viken and Fors 2014), the region has served as a vital platform for collaborative efforts in the High North, carrying strategic importance. Thus, contrary to a pre-existing, natural identity, the notion of a “Northern” or Barents identity is actively constructed.

The location of the Barents Secretariat and the Barents Institute in Sør-Varanger underscores the locality’s significant role in shaping Norwegian foreign policy toward Russia. These institutions have focused on grassroots “people-to-people” interactions, aiming to build trust and mitigate political tensions between the two nations. They have facilitated various initiatives, from collaborative arts events and football tournaments to media partnerships and even cross-border social visits, funded through the Barents Secretariat’s grant programs (Holm-Hansen et al. 2008, 2020). These local, cross-border engagements in professional and civil society sectors exemplify the complex and active shaping of the region’s identity.

Research on people-to-people and cross-border collaboration in the Barents and Arctic regions has explored various topics, including the role of Kirkenes as a border town (Goldin 2015; Robertsen 2014; Hønneland 2017; Viken, Granås, and Nyseth 2008; Viken and Fors 2014). Hønneland (1998) examines the complexities of forming a Barents identity across the former Iron Curtain. Studies by Viken and Fors (2014) and others emphasize the situational identities and experiences of the region’s inhabitants. Although Viken, Granås, and Nyseth (2008) and Robertsen (2014) found no evidence of a transnational “Barents identity” in Kirkenes, recent research by Lynnebakke (2020), Prokkola (2009), and Rogova (2009) explores the multifaceted and transnational identities among locals in the context of Barents collaboration.

This article takes as its focus how conviviality² relates to changing ideas concerning spaces and places of collaboration and the meaning of the borders (geographical and mental) that exist for people living, working, and collaborating at the border of Norway to Russia. We narrow our focus to Kirkenes, a small town of just over 3500 residents, the administrative center of Sør-Varanger municipality. Kirkenes lies on a peninsula along an arm of the Varangerfjorden and is located just a few kilometers from the Norway-Russian border. We explore how people-to-people collaboration on this side of the border has been “done” in past years and since February 2022.

Bringing together the personal and the political, we analyze points of encounters by tracing how individuals from different collaborative levels (personal/arts, media, regional/national, local government) conceptualize changing places of cooperation (and conviviality) as impacted by the February full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We focus on four cases, exploring how each represents different positionalities and boundaries regarding conviviality, but also varying border-related convivial aspirations.

Since 2020 we have also seen closed geographical borders due to Covid 19 and, in the past year, especially tense political relations and ensuing economic borders/sanctions placed between the countries. After the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the establishment of even stricter formal sanctions, even local and regional projects with the Russian authorities have been put on hold (“on ice”). Still, it is possible to cooperate with independent civil society and with Russians outside Russia in “people-to-people” collaborations. Has everyday Barents collaboration continued? If so, how?

The concept of “border conviviality,” thus, offers a unique perspective for border region studies. It is particularly useful to explore changing relations at the border of

Norway and Russia, in the so-called “Barents region” in the context of the Russian war on Ukraine as it provides a lens through which we can understand the complex dynamics of cross-border interactions and collaborations at different levels – geopolitical, social, and personal.

Our primary research questions are the following:

First, focused on more personal stories: In what ways do people living at the border of Norway and Russia draw on their personal histories when making meaning of and using spaces of conviviality?

Second, with a focus on the larger story of conviviality: How do people living at the border suggest the recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia has shaped and changed the possibility to sustain convivial relations?

In the next section, we describe our analytical approach concerning “border conviviality.” First, we present an overview of the concept of conviviality, then the changing geo-political context that has served as a backdrop for personal and everyday routines and practices that create a sense of conviviality. Finally, we describe how the geo-political and the personal intersect to create spaces of border conviviality.

Analytical Approach: Conviviality “at the Border”

While research on people-to-people and cross-border collaboration in the Barents and Arctic regions mainly focuses on a Barents or border *identity*, we use the concept of *conviviality* to study border dynamics, and the ways in which borders are dynamically placed in relation to spaces of imagined conviviality/togetherness. We scrutinize processes related to conviviality by focusing on the places where change and non-change happen, on everyday practices and on challenges and opportunities within local governance and community structures. This includes ways in which local participatory spaces – including digital spaces – may enable different levels of participation and different ways of participating (Boersma and Schinkel 2018).

Such collaboration can be said to provide a framework for what scholars have termed “conviviality.” The term stems from the Latin words *con* (“with”) and *viv* (“to live”) – “living with.” “Conviviality” is a concept used to explore the interactions taking place between different and disparate groups of people. In recent years, “conviviality” has been put forward as a promising analytical tool in studies of community making, integration and cultural borders (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Wessendorf 2014). Communities and convivial places may traditionally be seen as static – with distinct borders, rootedness, and identities. The notion of conviviality reflects an older concern with how communities, cultures, societies, and nations “stick together” (Wise and Noble 2016) through “positive” forms of solidarity (Durkheim, 1933/1964). Today’s idea of “conviviality” describes the everyday ability to “live with difference” (Valentine 2008) in settings where people of different religious, political, national, ethnic, and racial identities meet (Nowicka & Vertovec 2014). Thus, conviviality “unfolds parallel to and in spite of” otherwise divisive or otherizing discourses (Lapina 2016, 33, citing Gilroy 2005).

In such a discussion, the Barents region – including the border towns between Norway and Russia – is often viewed as having “fixed places with clear boundaries and stable associated identities” (Cresswell 2009, 8). In contrast, we see conviviality as a process

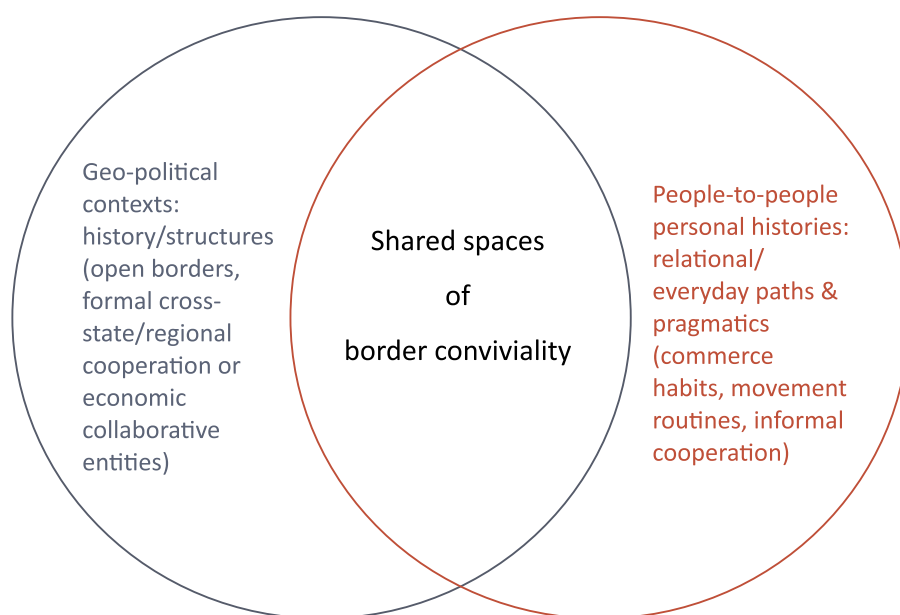


Figure 1. Border Conviviality.

rather than outcome. We explore *how* spaces are shared, rather than on movement from different to similar, where one culture or people is “integrated” with another. Thus, our use of the concept operates from a non-normative and non-essentialist stance, where space is seen as contested, but also fluid in nature. We propose that conviviality should be seen not as a static condition, but as a “reality that is a construct of experience” (Yuan, 1977 cited in Cresswell 2009). In this view, people do not just belong to a geographic area; they belong to specific situations shaped by interactions (Amin 2002), at the levels of the political, the social and the personal (see Figure 1). Though Russia and Norway are physically separated by a well-defined border, social and cultural boundaries are more flexible. These mutable boundaries are enriched by experiences, symbols, and relationships. While such boundaries can foster a sense of “otherness,” they also offer opportunities for breaking down these divisions and fostering social harmony or conviviality.

Geo-Political Contexts

Convivial spaces are made meaningful within the specific historical, political, social, and biographical temporal contexts shaping them (Gubrium and Leirvik 2022). A processual view of conviviality also focuses on how it varies based on people’s “social locations” (Yuval-Davis 2006, 204). Feelings of togetherness are not spontaneously generated; they arise through social practices (Wise and Noble 2016), particularly during times of change or conflict (Turner et al., 1969), and by actively navigating and negotiating differences (Frankenberg 1970). Our analytical emphasis on conviviality and how this is *made* across the border between Norway and Russia offers a way into understanding how people on different sides of the border are situationally assembled and create a sense of collectivity in concrete places.

There is a tendency for scholarship on conviviality to focus on larger cities as those providing necessary resources for conviviality to be *done*. Our case in focus, the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, while small, is, in a sense, a “marginal hub” at the border between Norway and Russia (Marsden and Reeves 2019). While at first glance this small town appears geographically marginal, people’s imaginings of its borders and shared spaces *do* it into a site of intense and volatile sociability. Its placement across the border from Russia is what arguably makes Kirkenes special and what makes it an interesting site for moving beyond the mostly urban (and some small town) focus on conviviality. “Border conviviality” allows us to examine the ways in which people living in border regions interact with each other, despite changing political contexts and geographical boundaries.

Kirkenes is located within the Norwegian municipality of Sør-Varanger. The Norwegian–Russian border is almost 198 kilometers long and divides Sør-Varanger from the Russian Pechengsky *raion* (district), an area traditionally inhabited by Saami hunting and reindeer herding populations. Contact between Russians and Norwegians in the north goes far back in time. The so-called *Pomor* trade became particularly active from the mid-eighteenth century when Norwegian traders sold fish and fish products while Russians sold grain, timber, and other raw materials. In 1944 Sør-Varanger was liberated from German occupation by the Red Army. The legacy of the liberation of Sør-Varanger is a part of the broader historical backdrop that informs relations between Norway and Russia in the north (Kolstø 1996). However, during the Cold War, when the border represented one of only two borders between the Soviet Union and NATO, there was little contact between Norway and Russia, and few people crossed the border in the north, though it was never completely sealed. The little contact there was mostly consisted of official visits and participation in sports and cultural events. Territories on the Russian side of the border were closed to Norwegian tourists.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the liberalization of the border, the cross-border traffic increased tremendously with a peak in 2014 of about 400,000 crossings. This period, thus, saw a normalization of Norwegian–Russian relations in the north (Viken and Fors 2014). While the first years of more open borders were characterized by a certain scepticism and distance toward Russian visitors, with crime and prostitution dominating the discourse, gradually Russians for the most part have become a welcome contribution to the Sør-Varanger municipality. Russians contribute to the local work force, usually as skilled labor; local businesses have catered to the Russian market; Russian ships have been repaired in the local town of Kirkenes; and local shops were oriented toward selling consumer goods to Russian visitors. The Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) aimed to create a unified regional identity based on the concept of “Northernness,” but this notion was overly simplistic due to cultural, legal, and administrative differences between the border regions (Hønneland 2017; Holm-Hansen and Aasland 2023; Mikhailova 2016). From having an identity as a peripheral mining municipality, Sør-Varanger came to brand itself as a border municipality with an international strategic significance (Aagedal, Egeland, and Villa 2009), and the Kirkenes town branded itself as the capital of the Barents region. The town is home to three key institutions of Barents cooperation: the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, which has been present from the inception; the Barents [Research] Institute, founded in 2006; and the International Barents Secretariat, established in 2008.

Geopolitical tensions have impacted the area, particularly since Putin's third term in 2012, marked by increasing authoritarianism and strained Russian-Western relations (Kortukov 2020; Laruelle 2020; Lewis 2020; Wilhelmsen and Gjerde 2018). Despite geopolitical challenges, including the 2014 Ukraine crisis and subsequent sanctions, the Barents collaboration between Norway and Russia had nonetheless largely remained stable. Blakar (2016) described this as "an island of normalcy during an otherwise cooler time period," and Borge and Horne (2020) confirmed that most cross-border cooperation remained unaffected. Norway had prioritized collaboration on common interests and invested in long-term intercultural cooperation since 1991, making the region somewhat immune to international conflicts (Borge and Horne 2020).

In a recent review of the Barents collaboration, Holm-Hansen and Aasland (2023) have reported improvement – both people-to-people and regional – from 2007 (and 2014) to 2020, despite a shift toward increasing authoritarian control in Russia in this period. The strategy of focusing on "low politics" – societal challenges and sub-national (regional, local, people-to-people) spaces – has maintained the possibility of collaboration despite geopolitical tension at the national/international level (Holm-Hansen and Aasland 2023). Holm-Hansen and Aasland's (2023) expectations of decreased cooperation since 2014 did not hold – in fact, reports of higher mutual trust, and collaboration in most sectors in 2020 can be seen (Holm-Hansen and Aasland 2023).

Despite earlier deteriorating political relations between Norway and Russia from 2012 (Holm-Hansen and Aasland 2023), cross-border interactions remained stable until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which led to an immediate halt in official contact. Annual border crossings dropped from 250,000 during 2017–2019 to 55,000 in 2022, many of whom were young men fleeing Russian military mobilization. The post-2022 atmosphere was described as "lost love" (Trellevik 2023) and "a shiver running through the whole of Sør-Varanger" (Sætra 2023). Lena Norum Berg, the mayor of Sør-Varanger, stated, "For us in Sør-Varanger, there will always be a 'before' and an 'after' February 24th, 2022" (Edvardsen 2023).

People-to-People: Social Practices and Well-Trodden Everyday Paths

We use "spaces of conviviality" as an analytical concept that enables us to describe an abstract idea of collectivity and communality between borderland inhabitants. We emphasize the actual relation-making between people and between groups of people across the border, thus we are looking at how the geopolitical border between Norway and Russia is socially constructed (Silvey 2005, 139) and experienced (Gielis 2009, 599), and the ways these constructions and experiences have been transformed with the event of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Borders do "border" (Flores 2019, 114), yet borders are also transgressed.

On a personal level, people approach borders according to how their "behaviors, actions and mindsets make them relevant" (van Houtum 2000). Convivial places may be delineated by "well-trodden paths," which exist "because people have used (them)" and because they are "maintained" with care (see Figure 1). Use and maintenance over time becomes a "history of use" (Ahmed 2019, 40–41). Over time, the path enters a "history of becoming natural" (Ahmed 2019, 41). Such paths may be made possible, or delimited, by social structures and power relations. Thus, the temporalities of use that

shape the possibility of building and maintaining places of conviviality also face “restriction(s) of possibility that (are) material” (Ahmed 2019, 26). Social norms and institutions can shape “the effects of use” (Ahmed 2019, 43). With changing social norms and with institutional limitations placed on use (i.e. border restrictions, boycotts, stigma), it may take more effort to use unused paths and a sense of conviviality may be challenged. Research on borders and border-making also explores what people *do* when they draw lines of exclusion (outside vs inside) and when they build connections through conviviality (Wise and Noble 2016, 426). We draw from the “people approach” (van Houtum 2000), using “conviviality” as an analytic strategy that enables us to focus on how different people *do* border conviviality through a focus on potential spaces for conviviality, but also on challenges to, and possibilities for, maintaining or even building such spaces.

As part of the Barents collaboration, people-to-people contacts between Norway and Russia started to flourish. It took the form of cultural exchanges between communities in Russia and Norway. The *Samovaya* theater, with a prominent cross-border flavor, was established in 1992, and a cultural festival – Barents Spektakel – has become an annual event in Kirkenes since 2004 (Fors 2014; Viken 2014). Tourism and cross-border trade developed rapidly, and educational and academic exchanges, as well as sports training and competition also enhanced cross-border interactions. With the Norwegian Barents Secretariat located in Kirkenes, numerous joint Norwegian–Russian projects received financial support (Holm-Hansen and Aasland 2023). Likewise indigenous Sámi communities in the Barents region developed closer ties (Berg-Nordlie 2013; 2017).

On a more practical and logistical level, a local border traffic regime agreed between the two countries in 2010 allowed for people within 30 kilometers on both sides of the border to travel without a visa for local border crossing (Viken and Espiritu 2014). It is no coincidence that Kirkenes came to be called “Little Murmansk.” In addition to Russian love migrants, Russian fishermen and sailors have been visible in the Kirkenes town landscape, and so have large numbers of tourists and shoppers on short-term visits. The town has street-signs in Latin and Cyrillic letters and Russian language can be heard everywhere, including in local businesses, at the local library and in local restaurants (Lynnebakke 2020).

The strong focus on collaboration with Russia through the Barents collaboration and the strong presence of Russian people and culture in Kirkenes have, however, caused some tension in the town. With so much focus on the Russia connection, less attention has, at least until recently, been devoted to Norwegian-Finnish cross-border collaboration, and to the Kven, Sámi and Finnish minorities that are also historically well represented in the municipality. Furthermore, some have seen the Barents region emphasis as an elite project with only limited relevance to ordinary citizens (Aagedal, Egeland, and Villa 2009). However, with so many ordinary people involved (and especially so in Kirkenes and municipalities close to the border) – from school classes visiting Russian schools to joint sports competitions, cultural festivals, and private visa-free visits across the border with the use of the border resident permit (Trellevik 2023) – the Barents collaboration has not developed into an elite project in an everyday sense. Heikkilä (2014) contends that:

Very few individuals can identify with “the Barents” and that’s the way it will probably be. If there is something like a Barents identity, it is concentrated in the triangle Kirkenes–Mur-mansk– Rovaniemi, where the distances are manageable and there would most likely be some kind of contacts anyway. The Barents Region is an artificial structure [...] But there is more to it [...] Real things are going on; real people are meeting.

On an everyday, practical level, “conviviality” might also be said to relate closely to the feeling of being part of a community or place that is attached to specific meanings – a sense of “feeling at home” together (Antonsich 2010). A convivial sense of “living together” is shaped by the routines and habits practiced together – in harmony or not – in shared places and spaces. This is sustained through a continuity of movement that creates and maintain a sense of “aboutness” together (Seamon 1980). For instance, this may take place through habitual “time–space routines” such as sitting at the counter of the same local coffeeshop first thing every morning on the way to work or through playing weekly football games – both as “home” and “away” team, with a local team from across the border. When strung together, time and space coalesce and “place” gains meaning through constant repetition of individual and social practices. Thus, conviviality is a process delineated by paths of activity (together) occurring over space and time, and over a given period (Pred 1984). In this way borders become processual, rather than static – the border is formed via a regular or everyday practice and relation, rather than a fixed object (van Houtum 2000). Along these lines, the co-created spaces of conviviality may thus be imagined as dynamic and porous shapes, whose borders may change according to various “layers of ‘with-ness’” (Boisvert, 2010; cited in Wise and Noble 2016, 425).

Border Conviviality: At the Intersection of the Geo-Political and the Personal

Combining focus on historical contingences, as these intersect with everyday practices, we explore how bordering practices and spaces are made meaningful in the practice of *doing* conviviality, with reference to how such spaces have changed since the outbreak of Covid 19 and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 (see Figure 1). Border practices can be outside the domain of a state – citizens can also be “everyday border workers” (Johnson and Jones 2016). Thus, border conviviality and convivial relations may be comprised of interpersonal- and social relations just as much as by the relations existing between pre-defined geo-political entities (Wise and Noble 2016).

The focus in the paper is, indeed, on how conviviality is actively produced, negotiated, and navigated in the face of everyday difference, including geo-political conflict (see Figure 1). The concept of border conviviality allows us to consider the historical context of invasion and emerging war, and simultaneously explore how individuals living at the border draw on their personal histories and identities to make sense of their experiences, as they imagine the ways that spaces of conviviality may nonetheless be used and imagined in the future. As opposed to the situated concreteness of “place,” we treat “space” as an abstract concept formed from experience, not something that exists beforehand (Casey 1996, 14). The concept of “space” helps us understand the creation of specific places, the dimensionality of place-making, and how border convivi-ality is *done* – in places. As such, the fixity of the geopolitical border does not (necess-arily) negate the fluidity of a border. More broadly speaking, border conviviality occurs at and over borders between different formal spaces, including shared feelings

of belonging, forms of identity, spaces of co-operation and politically defined developmental strategies. Spaces of conviviality may be shaped, limited, or made possible by the specific discourses that separate “us” from “them” (Yuval-Davis 2006). Borders are simultaneously dynamic and historically contingent – they are made and their significance changes over time according to situated discourses, identities, and activities (Little 2015). The meaning of borders, and of the space(s) they delimit, are narrated as changing over time, including in the future.

Data and Methods

We gathered data through seven interviews with participants involved in Barents cooperation in the years before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as one focus group interview with Barents Secretariat staff. All interviews took place in the spring and summer of 2022. All but the interviews with the Barents Secretariat were individual interviews following a semi-structured interview guide and lasting between one to two hours. The interview with Barents Secretariat staff took place in a focus group format, where five staff members were present. The focus group interview followed a similar, semi-structured, format and used an interview guide with the same themes as those in the individual interviews.

Our analysis followed a case study design (Stake 1995). Following this approach, our analytical goal was not to reach data saturation to present generalized results, but instead to demonstrate the diversity of meaning-making related to imagined spaces of conviviality and their borders (Yin 2009). To provide a more detailed analysis on the connections participants have made between relevant socio-political contexts, their everyday lives and routines, and their thoughts on existing and future collaboration across the border, we have narrowed our presentation to three participants and one focus group. These are illustrative cases of formal/official collaboration (Norwegian Barents Secretariat and a local administrative leader), and less formal collaboration, including in culture and society (a local arts leader), and journalism (a visiting journalist from Russia) (see Table 1). Each represents different thoughts and wishes about what conviviality³ (political, cultural, and social) between people on different sides of the border can and should be. Each represents distinct profiles – differing in life history, type, and formality of collaboration across borders, sector of activity and imagined life project. The four cases are illustrative of the dialectical and active nature of the way in which conviviality is imagined, built, maintained and/or threatened.

Results: Doing Spaces of Conviviality

We explore how individuals at different levels of cooperation between the Norwegian and Russian sides thought about conviviality at the border after the invasion of Ukraine in

Table 1. Research Participant Cases.

Research participant	Sector	Nationality
Barents Secretariat staff	National-regional governmental organization	Norwegian, one Russian (Staff members)
“Berndt”	Regional govt leader	Norwegian
“Dmitrii”	Arts leader	Russian
“Anyia”	Visiting journalist	Russian

February 2022. Four primary themes emerged from an analysis that was especially focused on the interplay described by participants between larger historical events and collaborations across the border of Norway and Russia and more personal histories, including the imagining of future spaces of conviviality. We present these as four dimensions: (1) Varying configurations of conviviality of the border; (2) Everyday life and pragmatics; (3) sustainability of conviviality; and (4) new opportunities.

Configurations of the Border: The Barents Region

The space associated with the “Barents” was both contested and fluid. The possibility of thinking about “Barents” as a space of conviviality – or border conviviality – varied between the participants, especially regarding the forms of interactions and activities that were understood as possible or rewarding. Several of the participants we spoke with referred to “the North” as a concrete place that had shaped their own lives and experiences. Several noted that the idea of a “Barents” region was a newer construction, a conceptual framework and specific nation-state effort that was linked to the state’s desire for cooperation after the fall of the Soviet Union. Others described this idea as a continuation of what was before had been termed *Nordkalotten* (the “North Calotte”).⁴ Berndt, who worked as a leader within the regional government, focused on collaboration at the regional level. Yet as a longtime local resident in the region, he also suggested that this activity ran deeper than the “Barents” concept. For him, the presence of a North that was shared across national, local, ethnic, and sociocultural borders had provided a possibility for broadened opportunities and ways of thinking. He described these deeper and intertwined roots:

The Barents concept ... a “Barents citizen” sounds a bit strange, at least to me. ... We use the Barents term to get money, it provides the money to do [collaborative] projects. ... We use it because we look to our neighbor and we’re curious about their culture. Plus, all the positive things about Russia, you can start with the most banal like traveling over to refuel with cheap diesel. And to shop. To travel to Murmansk on a weekend trip, go to great restaurants, eat cheap, go clubbing, everything, it’s a big town that is only here two and a half hours away from Kirkenes. ... But already from the 50s [collaboration] it was (the case), starting with sports cooperation over and across the border. From the 1990s and not least the 2000s, it has increased considerably. ... But I don’t think very many people think of themselves as ... living “in the Barents region” ... In a way, what existed before the Barents region was the North Calotte. ... You called it a “Calotte,” the whole northern area, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, were part of it – or I don’t know if Russia was involved then – or if it was the Soviet Union that was involved, but it was the “North Calotte cooperation.” So, the Barents region is really just a ... further development of a collaboration that existed in the past. But (it’s) more formalized and politically grounded. The cooperation has really been from the 1950s and 1960s ... , so it’s old. (It became the “Barents” in) 1993.

While the “Barents” represented a new push after the Cold War, Berndt suggested that collaboration was not entirely dependent on a politically “warm” environment, referring to a collaboration of sports, culture and commerce that had historical roots even before the Cold War had ended.

The employees we spoke with from the Barents’ Secretariat, more formally tied to the national Barents project, focused more on the post-Cold War framework of collaboration. As one noted:

We have now been around for almost 30 years. We'd ordered new posters and stuff to celebrate 30 years of cooperation next year. We'll see how relevant those posters will be ... We were created also after the signing of the so-called "Kirkenes Declaration," which was in a way a document signed by the foreign ministers of the four Barents countries [Russia, Finland, Norway, and Sweden], by the EU, and by some other actors as well. The goal was to start a normalization of neighborly relations here on the border, after 70 years of Cold War.

As the formal "Barents collaboration" had been conceived in large part to normalize the post-war border relationship between states, with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine these participants emphasized a pressing need to re-imagine the collaboration space as a space of defense with a changed composition. It was possible that the Barents collaboration would instead become "Circumpolar" or "Arctic." As a Barents' Secretariat employee noted:

it's more like that ... and then Greenland, Iceland, right. Arctic Circle. So really from us here, that we are, in a way, the final frontiers against, against Russia so long as they don't want international cooperation. (We should) rather get used to it. Circumpolar, etc.

Yet, as suggested by Berndt, the "Barents region" was also commonly understood as an entity made up of a constellation of less formal, "people-to-people" relationships and co-activities. Several participants spoke of this type of collaboration, which was understood as more personal and dynamic, and less dependent on formal frameworks for cooperation. As one employee of the Barents Secretariat noted, aside from formal national ties, the Secretariat had as its mandate to financially support the development of meeting arenas, "simply to bring people together ... we cover (the costs) of bringing people (together) to meet." The "people-to-people" concept enabled multiple levels of cooperation, communication, and border cohabitation. Dmitrii, an artist who spoke about his work to support democracy in Russia, described the difference between this more personal sort of collaboration and more formal state collaboration. As he noted:

"People-to-people," that is the lowest level of communication possible. You know: the closest relations you get. ... Governmental cooperation is super official, it is bureaucratic, it is slow, it is, in Russia we will say it is "watery" you know: a lot of words without great effect. But people-to-people cooperation is always practical, it is, it is here and now, it is superfast.

Dmitrii, whose everyday work involved the more hands-on aspects of "bringing people together," emphasized the practical and processual nature of such cooperation.

Border Conviviality: Everyday Life and Pragmatics

The small border town of Kirkenes was opened and "made larger" by the collaboration across the border. This "something more" was enabled by daily interactions across the border at the personal level, and through the "regularness" of diversified person-to-person connections. This sense of "more" was felt culturally, through regularized routines of events taking place across borders; and visually, through multi-language signage and multicultural community presence. Several participants noted that convivial activities that had enabled this sense of broader (economic, social, and cultural) space were the result of frequent and regular routines of co-activity, normalized over time. Dmitrii described how Kirkenes, a former mining town at the "edge of the world," had transformed into a broader place beyond borders. He described the change to

Kirkenes, from the perspective of someone who had originally lived on the other side of the border:

Before the borders with Russia opened, it was the end of Norway, which is really important to understand. Everybody thought it was a dead end, so like far north, dead end, almost ... the most eastern part of Europe. So, like “why go there?” And then when the borders opened, suddenly, it became the centre of the “Barents region.” And it became a very important political and cultural point and so on, and it became a crossroads between different nations. ... I think the role of Kirkenes really changed when the borders opened.

Berndt echoed these sentiments, recalling the changed atmosphere in Kirkenes after he had returned to live there in the early 2000s, after many years away. Since his time away, the USSR had fallen. Not only was there a new state on the other side of the border, but in fact, in an everyday sense, the border was no longer strongly felt. As he noted:

When I came back it was **Russia** on the other side, and then they had Russian street signs in the cityscape, there were a lot of Russians, you heard them speaking Russian on the street. ... what was a project before to go to Russia, it didn't become a project anymore. It kind of became part of people's lives, part of people's everyday lives.

The ease of contact was enabled by years of co-activity resulting in a normalized expectation of communities across the border interacting and living together on a day-to-day level. As Anya noted, for herself and for Russians living on the other side of the border, “Kirkenes is almost at home.” She described her fears that the everyday rhythm of border conviviality facilitated by regular, almost daily cooperation and visits across the border would disappear. This rhythm and routine were not formal, they were personal and emotional. As Anya related:

It is already impossible to imagine life without it [movement across borders], we are used to it. ... we just came to Kirkenes every week to drink coffee, talk with friends and take a walk. If you are sad, then you can take a car and be in Kirkenes in three hours, but here it's good right away. It was very cool. ... when you live on the border, you realize very quickly that you can do part of the [media] work for your Norwegian friend, and the Norwegian friend can do part of the work on his side of the border, and you can release a joint text or project that will be interesting everywhere. And it also seemed like forever.

Sustaining Conviviality Amidst Geo-Political Limitations

The participants often described what “had been” a convivial relationship across the border as a natural rhythm in everyday life. Yet, when all was said and done, the practical, conceptual, and mental ease of such relations were nonetheless circumscribed by formal regulations at the state and regional levels. That such regulations structured what was possible and defined the scope of opportunity visibly emerged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Changed state and regional regulations to formal collaboration after February 24, 2022, limited public cooperation. The challenge was more directly felt by those participants who formally led or were involved in activities that were arranged between state, regional or local authorities on the Norwegian and Russian sides, because the transfer of resources and formal collaboration was no longer possible with formal sanctions. Thus, Berndt and the employees of the Barents' Secretariat emphasized that collaboration had been paused, for the time being. As one employee of the Barents

Secretariat noted: “The universities, the high schools, right, everything is public. Health cooperation, hospitals are public, and then at the same time, civil society is almost shattered. So, we have (only) a small door ajar for some actors.”

The level of challenge related to cooperation depended both on formal restrictions of activity across physical borders and on the moral restrictions associated with invasion and acts of war. For Berndt, taking the stance of a regional leader, and the Barents’ Secretariat employees, the establishment of new borders also related to necessary public denunciations of violated norms. As Berndt noted “It’s not just like physical borders, it’s mental borders that have been formed, or increased ...” The future of local region-to-region collaboration was, for instance, challenged due to open support by political leaders on the Russian sister town side for Putin and his actions. These had been “put on ice” and “frozen.” As one employee at the Barents Secretariat noted:

There have been approximately 13 different municipalities that have had “sister cities” on the Russian side. And not least, the counties have friendship agreements ... But when you see, for example, the mayor of the neighboring [Russian] municipality ... driving around in a car with that big Z and statements from the governor ... (then) it’s not just like if the war stopped today, we would just be able to go back (to where we were), and say, “Hey! Nice to see you! Thanks for last time!” ... I think there’s going to be a very prolonged standstill.

Mental borders were not only attached to the political framework of regional collaboration, but also to limitations to, and blockages of, everyday rhythms that had otherwise prevailed before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. What had been seen as normal activity across borders by people living in Kirkenes was now a potentially stigmatizing violation of moral everyday behavior. A new attitude of condemnation that had begun to set in would potentially gain strength over time. As one Barents Secretariat employee noted:

It’s like, it’s almost like, if you do it [you go across the border to fill the gas tank] it’s like, kind of treacherous. ... everything is destroyed, and clearly the longer things take, the bigger the distance will be as well. People are people, right? That’ll be it ... and it’s clear when it gets like that, negative in society ... you get a completely different kind of thing, not exactly an “enemy” image, but it’s going to be (challenging) there.

Several participants also suggested that while any stigma attached to Russians living in Norway had been less pronounced in Kirkenes due to long-lasting collaboration and history, a compromised sense of border conviviality was now also likely felt by the local Russian community living in Kirkenes, due to stigma resulting from the Russian warfare in Ukraine. Berndt described a newly charged feel in Kirkenes that both threatened the region’s multicultural identity and had changed everyday attitudes toward Russians living in town. He recalled his own thoughts, noting:

There are a lot fewer Russians in the streets now, and when I see Russians speaking Russian, I think a lot, “what are they doing here?” I know they’re here because they work on a fishing boat maybe, they have family here. Some of them may have Norwegian/Russian passports. But cross-border trade has come to a complete halt.

New Opportunities for Border Conviviality?

Collaboration across borders and border conviviality had in the past decades opened a new world for all the participants – professionally and in social terms but also for

some of the participants involving a sense of democracy and possibility of democratic voices. Yet the participants had varying understandings about the impact of the present situation on the possibility to maintain border conviviality, and thus on what the future held. Their ideas about the future represented a sort of limbo, a sense of “betwixt and between,” especially in the first months after the invasion of Ukraine.

Border conviviality was challenged at the political/formal and personal levels. Yet Dmitrii and Berndt, who had long engaged in professional and personal border conviviality-making on a hands-on level, also pointed out that the past months and year had, in fact, emphasized the need for continuing conviviality. The invasion demonstrated the need to continue a collaboration between members, as Dmitrii put it, of “civil” society – society that “followed rules” and was capable of “building something together” with others. In this sense, convivial, “civil” society was not a nationality or country, it was a continual process of working- and “living together.” It was, according to Dmitrii, taking the action of “speaking out together” and helping other members of civil society to speak out and protest those who would “tear society apart.” Drawing on his professional identity as an artist, Dmitrii noted that one way of continuing this process and these actions was through arts and culture, suggesting that the current crisis had demonstrated the need for this sector to play a major role. As he noted:

You can't imagine out of what kind of trash a poem can grow. ... art grows from ugliness, unfortunately. But it takes its roots from beauty as well ... when there is destruction and chaos, art suddenly understands that “oh here is what I can use,” you know ... Because yeah, art is emotions and yeah, it gets to peoples' hearts. And when there is so much pain, art is just the best instrument to use. Logic doesn't work.

For Dmitrii, the crisis had heightened the importance of people-to-people, action-to-action civil collaboration in arts and culture. He described the new spaces of collaboration that had been created amongst Russians who had fled Russia and temporarily immigrated to other countries, including Finland, Canada, the U.S., and Lithuania. From these temporary civil spaces, Russians were able to establish civil society collaboration more fully than they had since 2007, when dissent and open discussion had decreased in Russia. Dmitrii suggested that such people – artists and other members of the cultural arts – had begun to forge new networks to speak up against destructive forces. According to him, it was this “radically new” society that was “worth building,” rather than spending time protecting “old formal structures.”

Dmitrii mentioned several concrete strategies used in the arts to protest and to build civil society. These were carefully planned, invitation only, and partly secret. Such strategies were enabled by the regular and broad spread use of communication technology that emerged during the years of Covid 19. The Covid period had been a sort of “preparation” for the current phase, as it had popularized the use of digital solutions. Such solutions continued to be useful after February 24th made visible the reality of the physical border. While it was possible to deal with border closure, dealing with the mental borders that had emerged required the strong message that the arts could send to strengthen civil protest. As Dmitrii recalled:

Covid brought a lot of digital opportunities, and we developed a lot of communication channels thanks to that. I think many beautiful things happened during this time. For example ... a really nice project called the “light phone” in 2021. The idea of this project was (to have) a

building in Kirkenes and a building in Murmansk ... lit with different colours. You could control the lights of the buildings, but the controls were put in ... different towns, so you could have, you had five pedals in Kirkenes, and you could push any pedal and you would change the light of the building in Murmansk. And in Murmansk you could (push the) pedal and change the lights [in Kirkenes]. ... it was a very, very beautiful project in terms of this intervention into another country ... and that was thanks to Covid. Wouldn't have done this otherwise. ... so, I think of course Covid destroyed a lot of things, but I think it certainly created opportunities, quite a few.

Berndt also pointed to uncertainty and hesitation about future possibilities for continued cooperation and friendships. Local formal collaboration had necessarily been put “on ice,” but border conviviality between Norway and Russia also had strong past roots and thus might continue. While spaces of collaboration had been limited by sanctions, this was more of a temporary chill in activity than an “end.” Still, Berndt described the complexity that public sector leaders such as himself met when trying to maintain some contact, noting:

You are ... a little cautious about what you put out. ... You don't want ... the Russians to stay, be persecuted or have to answer because they cooperate with Norwegians. And then there is, if I contact a person I know in Russia in private, then in Russia, or at least (by) the Russian authorities, I will be perceived as a public figure. ... So, I'm very careful about, I've had almost no contact with Russians.

Employees at the Barents secretariat also described visions of conviviality and cooperation for the future but given their formal mandate at the state level and the current political scenario, several noted the necessary exclusion of Russia in future constellations. Given that their professional competence was focused on Russia, this would be difficult shift from their former life- and professional projects. As one noted,

The foreign secretary ... mentioned that like, now that Sweden and Finland will most likely become NATO members, there will be more room for civil cooperation between these countries. Tighter civil cooperation. But then we have to ... right, we are specialists in **Russia**, and that's why we've come here to work, actually. I don't have especially good competence on Sweden.

Nonetheless, for Russians such as Anya, whose professional and personal life required the ability to cross borders, the idea of a maintaining and creating new convivial spaces apart from the one across the Norwegian–Russian border was a strategy worth considering. In Anya's case, this involved envisioning a broader, looser space of conviviality than that over a single border. As she noted:

When there is cooling between countries, then everything is different here in the North, we have our own life here, we live in the Arctic, I have face-to-face interaction here, we have people's diplomacy. And we will still be friends.

Conclusions

The concept of “border conviviality” provides ways to explore the complexities of border regions. It allows us to understand the dynamics of cross-border interactions and collaborations, the negotiation and redefinition of borders, the role of personal histories and identities, and the practices and challenges within local governance and community

structures. This makes it a valuable tool for border region studies and for understanding the unique dynamics of regions like the Barents region.

What, then, characterizes “border conviviality” in the “Barents” region? In what ways do people living at the border of Norway and Russia draw on their personal histories when making meaning of and using spaces of conviviality? Border conviviality was made possible through the formal opening of borders, enabling frequent collaboration and interactions between people across national and regional borders. In Kirkenes, the opening of borders had led to a broader sense of economic, social, and cultural space in otherwise small and geographically isolated border cities. “Border conviviality” has thus been a space in which different people, across borders, have “lived together” in the “Barents,” “North Calotte,” the “Circumpolar,” or “Arctic” regions. While current geopolitical shifts could potentially redraw these boundaries, exacerbating divisions between “us” and “them,” ultimately, we argue that what is crucial is how feelings of community and togetherness are socially and situationally constructed across these borders.

Those participants working at the level of the national or regional government were more formally tied to a national Barents project that had been a state-level initiative with local and regional activities. Those involved in the formal organization of these collaborative efforts emphasized that, after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was a need to re-imagine the shape of the convivial space as one with a changed composition (without Russia), for instance, shifting state and regional emphasis to a “Circumpolar” or “Arctic” collaboration that might also include defense (against Russia). Nonetheless, some participants also referred to “the North” as a concrete place based on their own lives and experiences, while others described the idea of a “Barents” region as a continuation of an earlier convivial relation, where collaboration at the regional level had historical roots even before end of the Cold War.

The meaning of border conviviality, however, was shaped by “performatively lived, long drawn, and ongoing” processes (van Houtum 2010). Border opening facilitated the normalization of multicultural communities engaging in daily routines of co-activity. Following this, common routines of activity, mingling and shared opportunities had created a sense of something “more, together” (Antonsich 2010; Seamon 1980). More significantly for the participants, however, the sense of “belonging together” to a place and an identity was linked to shared activities and a shared sense of purpose (Yuan, 1977 cited in Cresswell 2009). Participants noted that official border openings were not sufficient to catalyze a shared identity. Rather, this had been realized by frequent and regular routines of co-activity. Thus, the sense of border conviviality was felt more on personal, embodied, and emotional levels, than as merely a geo-political “Barents” identity.

How do people living at the border suggest the recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia has shaped and changed the possibility to sustain convivial relations? Geo-political concerns and limitations, as well as everyday practices shaped how the ability to sustain border conviviality was imagined in the months after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Changed global politics re-shaped possibilities for collaboration, both at the institutional level, and in everyday meetings and friendships. Formal sanctions at the state and regional levels had limited public cooperation, and mental borders had formed that were attached to violated social norms and expectations. Those participants who were closer to the formal project of border conviviality expressed fears that the loss of a shared routine and lifestyle would be a significant loss for the community, reducing

the identity, activity, and broadened potential of the town, to something smaller. Activities taking place across borders which were previously been seen as “normal” had become potential moral violations, leading to a new attitude of condemnation. These changes threatened the town’s more cosmopolitan convivial identity.

Yet several participants – especially those involved in the concrete day-to-day projects of cultural conviviality – pointed out that the past few months had rather emphasized the need for maintaining, and even re-building, a convivial “civil society” that spanned borders. Such participants were involved in less formal, “people-to-people” relationships and civil society building activities, and these were understood as more personal and dynamic. For these participants, the invasion demonstrated the need for arts and culture to play a major role in continuing the process of speaking out together and helping other members of civil society to speak out against destructive forces. Not only were these activities envisioned as less dependent on governmental frameworks for cooperation, but they were also imagined as a move from an “older” (more formal, territory-associated, and static) to a “newer” (more personal, fluid, and ideological) foundation for establishing new forms of conviviality at the border. The historical point at which the Russian full-scale invasion took place was also significant. The Covid period just before had brought about new digital opportunities that allowed people to continue collaboration even after war began, despite a less easily crossed physical border. The cultural work to shore up conviviality in civil society was made possible by new digital spaces (Boersma and Schinkel 2018). While some participants noted that the presence of mental borders posed the greatest threat and hesitated about future possibilities for continued cooperation and friendships, others felt that border conviviality between Norway and Russia had strong past roots and thus could continue, albeit in different forms.

Notes

1. The Barents Region is a geographical area located in the northernmost part of Europe, encompassing parts of North-West Russia (Murmansk, Karielia, Arkhangelsk, Komi, and Nenets), Norway (Finnmark, Troms and Nordland), Sweden (Norrbotten and Västerbotten), and Finland (Lapland, Northern Ostrobothnia, Kainuu and North Karelia).
2. While “conviviality” in its everyday use often implies simply being friendly or sociable, in an analytical context, it encompasses a broader range of interactions, activities and relationships, particularly in the dynamics of border areas. This includes not only the creation and maintenance of a sense of belonging and cooperation but also how these are influenced by changing social structures, power relations, and political contexts.
3. We did not use the term “conviviality” in the interviews, rather, we asked interview participants about their experiences concerning collaboration, communication, and interaction.
4. A “*kalott*” is a small, round hat. *Nordkalotten* refers to the geographic formation at the northern end of Scandinavia and the Northwestern part of Russia.

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