



NATO Parliamentary Assembly

SUB-COMMITTEE ON
TRANSATLANTIC DEFENCE AND SECURITY
COOPERATION (DSCTC)

MISSION REPORT

KIRKENES, NORWAY

10 – 12 MAY 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Immediately following the closure of the Joint Special Seminar in Svalbard on 10 May, a delegation from the Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Defence and Security Cooperation (DSCTC) traveled to Kirkenes, Norway. Kirkenes sits just 16 km from the nearest border crossing with Russia. Often touted as one of the few remaining areas wherein a consistent level of cooperation and interaction between Russia and a NATO member states still exists, the DSCTC delegation traveled to the Norway-Russia border to garner insight into the existing levels of political, economic, and social exchange between Norway and Russia.
2. Border control featured prominently on the daylong agenda for the group as they made their way from Kirkenes to two border stations controlled by the Norwegian military. Beyond the day-to-day duties of border management, the region is engaged in significant economic, social, and political cooperation: The area immediately surrounding the border has even been turned into a kind-of Schengen-free zone for local residents. The challenge the delegation learned, however, is how to maintain a good level of cooperation as the tenor of political life in Russia, which has already drastically effected Moscow's broader international relations, begins to creep into the Russia-Norway relations in the High North.
3. Sverre Myrli, Vice-President of the NATO PA and former DSCTC Chairman, led the delegation throughout the programme. A total of 11 parliamentarians from 9 different NATO member and partner states composed the delegation. Their programme consisted of meetings with municipal leaders in Kirkenes as well as visits to the Jarford and Svanvik Military Border Stations and a visit to the Svanhovd Bioforsk (The Norwegian Institute for Agricultural and Environmental Research).

II. MEETINGS AT THE SØR-VARANGER MUNICIPALITY OFFICE

4. The delegation first met with **Rune Rafaelsen**, Mayor of the Sør-Varanger municipality. Sør-Varanger is a municipality in the easternmost part of Finnmark County in Norway. The region, Mr. Rafaelsen said, is the geopolitical center of Norway— only half-jokingly. The border between Russia and Norway, he continued, is the most recent border for Norway, while the oldest standing border for Russia.
5. Jumping immediately to address the question of Russia's impact and role in the Sør-Varanger region, he told the delegation that Russia has "always interfered in the politics of the region." Saying the most recent issue of the refugees streaming across the border from Russia in 2015 is not the first time the region has witnessed such a bold politically-driven phenomenon; it was rather in line with the long-term ebb and flow of Norway-Russia relations. The region has always been managed through efforts to maintain a good level of cooperation.
6. In the Cold War, he said, the 196km Norway-Russia border was the only point of direct contact between the Soviet Union and the West: as such, the region served as a microcosm for efforts to boot larger scale cooperation efforts. In the first year after the collapse of the Soviet Union, then Norwegian Defence Minister, Thorvald Stoltenberg, reached out to his Russian counterpart in an effort to make the region a nuclear-free zone. This was the beginning of a new post-Cold War era cooperation upon which today's Norway-Russia relationship is built. As the delegation learned, this runs the gamut from border control, to SAR cooperation at sea, energy exchange, to even a limited Schengen-free zone existing for legal residents within certain parameters of the border.
7. The post-2014 Russia-Ukraine crisis and the subsequent sanctions imposed on Russia by the West were costly to the region. In the pre-sanction era, he noted, the region benefitted from

about a \$1.3 billion level of exchange. Economic exchange remains in the region, but it has clearly been hampered by the continued sanction regimes.

8. Returning to the subject of the 2015 refugee flow across the Russian border into Norway, when about 5,500 refugees entered the region over the span of only a few months, Mr. Rafaelsen told the delegation that about half of the refugees returned after the flow stopped suddenly in November 2015. He said both the Norwegian and Russian governments realized that a continued flow of refugees between the two countries was in neither government's interest. Russia and Norway's Arctic interests are better served through cooperation, he said, which was at risk during the refugee flow crisis.

9. Both Norway and Russia need to cooperate to maintain the sustainable development and use of the region's resources. He told the delegation the oil reserves in the Barents Sea, for example, are enormous. He said that Rosneft, Gazprom, and Exxon have all agreed to cooperate in regional oil exploration and extraction. In addition to oil, the region is an important fishing area as stocks move further north with the rising temperatures of the world's oceans.

10. Oil, important fish stocks, and the opening of the Northeast Passage for shipping routes, he continued will have an important impact on not only Russia and Norway, but also all key Arctic stakeholders, including the United States, as well as the non-Arctic growing economic giant, China. Chinese fishing in the region has increased, he told the delegation, and, with its newly ordered icebreaker nearing completion, he said, China will be a player in the regional trade picture as well.

11. The delegation asked Mr. Rafaelsen about the degree of Russian political interference in the region, as well as the general suspicion of the dual-intentions of Russia's activities in the past several years. While Mr. Rafaelsen noted the return of Vladimir Putin to power in Moscow has seen a decided downturn in relations, he continued by saying the region wanted to try to maintain a degree of cooperation and exchange at as many levels as possible.

12. The delegation then had a briefing from **Anja Kristine Salo**, Head of Communications at the Norwegian Barents Secretariat. Ms. Salo also began her presentation by saying the Sør-Varanger municipality is the geopolitical center of Norway. She mentioned the Norway Barents Project as the hub for efforts to make the Arctic region a zone of peace and cooperation. She said the concept for Barents region cooperation goes back to efforts by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987; eventually the Norwegian Barents Secretariat was founded out of these efforts in the wake of the Cold War. She said the decades-long experience of regional cooperation made the Norwegian Barents Secretariat a go-to source for understanding how to better cooperate with Russia – she mentioned a recent program exchange with a Ukrainian delegation by way of example.

13. Today, about 36,000 people take part in exchange programmes annually. She said, the Secretariat's motto is *proximity = more trust, less suspicion*. The Sør-Varanger municipality, she continued, is part of an open exchange zone in the border region between the two countries. The zone is about 30km in area, which exempts official residents from Schengen visa requirements for 30-day periods, totaling no more than 180 per year. Many delegates expressed a degree of dismay that such a programme was allowed to exist.

14. Ms. Salo did also note the Russian government's efforts to suppress the freedom of civil society is having resonant effects in the region and, therefore, the efforts of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat. The most affected organizations, she said, were those working to protect indigenous rights, as well as those working for civil liberties.

15. The delegation next heard from **Thomas Nilsen**, Editor of *The Independent Barents Observer*. Mr. Nilsen told the delegation he had founded the news source to fill the relative void of information about the region, particularly in the context of Russia's regional activities. He said the news outlet focuses on the Barents and High North, covering issues from regional politics, security, and economics to matters of civil society and the environment. He noted that a news outlet

focusing on all the activities in the region is one of the surest means to counter the growing hybrid efforts by the Russian government to destabilize the West when and where it can.

16. Continuing in the vein of hybrid, he said that efforts at political, economic, and security manipulation by the Putin regime today are quite different than they were a decade ago. He said that the *Barents Observer* had written about the Crimean annexation in its immediate aftermath; a month later, at a journalism conference, he noted being insulted publically by a Russian diplomat calling the *Barents Observer* a tawdry propaganda outlet and a mechanism for foreign agents seeking to condemn the regime in Moscow.

17. In 2015, he continued, it was the *Barents Observer* that reported the visit of Russian Defence Minister Dimitri Rogozin to Svalbard. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry picked up the report, he continued, and made an official condemnation of the visit as a violation of the sanction regimes currently in place against Russia. Subsequently, the FSB held a series of meetings with Norwegian officials in an effort to get the *Barents Observer* shut down. After ensuing legal challenges, which resulted in a brief closing of the news outlet, the operation was back up and running under the new moniker – the *Independent Barents Observer*.

18. The struggle to maintain the news source, he concluded, continues. Mr. Nilsen said since November 2016 he has figured on a list of journalists not allowed in Russia. He told the delegation he had been informed he was considered *persona non grata* by the Russian government until 2021. Mr. Nilsen then accompanied the delegation for their visits to two border military stations in the region, giving historical and modern-day insights into the region along the way.

III. VISIT TO JARFJORD AND SVANVIK BORDER STATIONS

19. The delegation then drove out to two Norwegian military border posts along the Russian border. Approximately three-fourths of the Norway-Russia border is through rivers and lakes, along which there are 396 border markers. The border was established in 1826, verified in 1947, and is currently being verified again.

20. Norway has three authorities working together on border management – the Border Guard, the Finnmark Police, and the Border Commission. The joint mission is to ensure bi-lateral border agreements and to prevent incidents, as well as to solve any eventual conflicts at the land border, negotiate disputes, establish facts, and to engage in border affairs with their Russian counterparts. As such, the authorities engage in bi-lateral meetings on water use, fishing, cross-border reindeer herding, ambulance protocol, as well as document control.

21. Authorities noted that diplomatic dialogue is available between the two 24 hours a day. They noted this remained the case even during politically challenging periods; such as, the Cold War, the 2015 migration crisis, and the adverse effects of climate change and environmental challenges.

22. Police officials noted the principal border threats were organized crime manipulation of the region, illegal immigration, and human trafficking. They also noted the increased regional economic activity and transit possibilities added to their mission. Norwegian army officials said their duties are to maintain Norway's sovereignty in the region via surveillance and law enforcement – their tasks then being threat prediction and force readiness maintenance.

IV. VISIT TO SVANHOVD BIOFORSK, THE NORWEGIAN INSTITUTE FOR AGRICULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH

23. The delegation rounded out their visit to the region with a presentation from **Snorre Hagen**, Managing Director, Svanford Bioforsk. Mr. Hagen noted the Svanhovd Bioforsk as the driving force to a sustainable, green economy in the region; as the institute focuses on regional environmental research and cooperation throughout the Barents region.

24. Discussing some of the regional environmental efforts, he cited the Norwegian-Russian Expert Group to monitor air pollution, which was established to deal with trans-border issues such as the pollution from the Norilsk Nickel plant, Russia just over the border from the Svanhovd Bioforsk. The single plant, Mr. Hagen noted, emits four times the amount of sulphur dioxide than all other sources of the air pollutant in Norway combined. Mr. Hagen said the issue was not just a Norwegian one, but one for the EU as the air pollution traveled extensively in the region.

25. Mr. Hagen also noted the Norwegian Radiation Protection Authority, which was working with the Svanhovd Bioforsk to help develop the Norwegian nuclear action plan to help mitigate nuclear contamination in case of accidents, as well as to prevent the region's abundant nuclear materials from falling into the wrong hands. To illustrate the complexity and urgency of the region's nuclear waste materials problem, Mr. Hagen told the delegation the USSR's armed forces had dumped approximately 17,000 nuclear waste containers in the Barents Sea in the Cold War. In addition, the sea serves as a graveyard for decommissioned USSR nuclear submarines, only about 120 of which have been dismantled and contained.
