International Cooperation as a Means for Russia’s Arctic Urban Sustainability Strategy

Alexander Sergunin
St. Petersburg State University
Russia
sergunin60@mail.ru

This paper aims to examine how Russian Arctic urban municipalities use cooperation with international partners to ensure sustainable development. This is an entirely new – post-Soviet – phenomenon because, first, most of the Arctic zone of the USSR was closed for cooperation with foreigners and, second, it was the central authorities who took care of the Soviet Far Northern territories in terms of their development and supply. The harsh realities of the 1990s (when many Russian northern territories were almost abandoned by the federal government) forced local actors to seek new survival strategies. Cooperation with international partners is seen by municipalities as both a valuable resource for and efficient method of ensuring their sustainable development.

Specialists distinguish two main forms of the municipalities’ international strategies – direct (developing external relations of their own) and indirect (influencing regional and federal governments’ foreign policies as well as international organizations).

Direct methods include:

- **Treaty-making.** Despite the heated debate among federal, regional, and municipal authorities over who has treaty-making powers, municipalities were quite active in this area. Since the early 1990s, many Russian Arctic municipalities have concluded direct agreements with their international counterparts. In the past, such treaties had been prepared with the Russian Foreign Ministry’s assistance. Such municipal ‘treaty-making’ activities are one of the cities’ most effective instruments to strengthen their international prestige.

- **Attracting foreign investment.** Some Russian Arctic municipalities succeeded in winning foreign investment for the development of local economies. For example, Canadian companies invest or plan to invest in the mining industries (gold and silver) in Chukotka and Yakutia and oil fields and the renewable energy sector in the Nenets Autonomous District (http://pda.www.minregion.ru/Arctic/552/650/1693.html).

- **International environmental projects.** To solve their numerous environmental problems at a time when they are short of money and federal subsidies, the Russian Arctic municipalities develop cooperation with international partners. For example, there are plans to create a U.S.-Russian natural park for the protection of biodiversity in the Bering Strait region with the provisional name of Beringia. This project is crucial for the local economy, which is heavily dependent on the fishery. It is planned that such a park could be based on the experiences of the existing ethno-natural park with the same name on the Russian side of the Bering Strait (established in 1993) (see the Beringia park's web-site: http://beringiapark.ru/).

- **Education and culture.** Most of the Russian Arctic urban municipalities have well-established educational/cultural cooperative ties with foreign countries. For example, among the Russian Arctic higher education institutions, the Northern-Arctic Federal University (Arkhangelsk), Murmansk Pedagogical University and Yakutia State University have the most intensive international cooperative programs.
(teacher and student mobilities, joint bachelor and masters programs, collaborative research projects, etc.) funded by foreign partners.


- **Creating a region’s positive image.** To attract foreign investors, some municipalities have launched aggressive PR campaigns. For example, they arrange exhibitions, hold so-called ‘cooperation days’ or festivals in sister cities, take part in international fairs and advertise themselves in the foreign mass media. Municipal leaders undertake foreign trips with PR purposes. Some towns publish English-language periodicals oriented to foreign audiences.

- **Co-operation with international organizations.** In the hope to obtaining international assistance, many municipalities try to develop relations with regional and sub-organizations, such as the Barents/Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), Arctic Council, Council of Europe, European Congress of Municipal and Regional Governments, European Regions Assembly, etc. For example, the BEAC has a Murmansk office that coordinates cooperative projects at the regional and municipal levels. It should be noted that co-operation with international organizations is important for the Russian Arctic municipalities not only in terms of survival or getting additional resources for their development programs but also in terms of opening up for the world-wide processes of globalization and regionalization.

*Indirect methods* boil down to:

- **Taking part in federal diplomacy.** Since the federal law envisages Russian regional and local governments’ participation in international activities that concern them, some municipalities succeeded in including their representatives into official delegations and negotiation teams. For example, Murmansk representatives assisted the Russian Foreign Ministry in preparing the Russian-Norwegian agreements on delimiting maritime territories in the Barents Sea and on the visa facilitation regime for the border regions (2010).

- **Exploiting the Russian Parliament.** Similar to the regional governments, the municipalities use the legislature to lobby their foreign policy interests at the federal level. The Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Parliament made up of the representatives of Russian regions, is the most popular vehicle for regional and municipal lobbying. In alliance with the regional governments the Arctic municipalities aim at promoting political ‘heavyweights’ for the senator positions who serve, in fact, as their lobbyists.

- **Capitalizing upon federal infrastructure.** To promote their foreign policy interests the municipalities use the institutional structure created by Moscow in the periphery. For example, the Foreign Ministry has established a special unit on inter-regional affairs. The Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Commerce, Customs Committee, and Federal Border Service have offices in those regions/municipalities engaged in intensive international co-operation. Theoretically, these agencies should coordinate and control municipalities’ international contacts. However, they often serve as the municipalities’ instrument of pressure upon Moscow rather than the center’s leverage over the cities. The problem is that these agencies are dependent on local authorities in terms of housing, salaries and professional career advancement. They are usually staffed by locals with close personal connections to the
regional/municipal elites. Some experts claim that this situation even casts doubts on the loyalty of these federal structures to Moscow.

- **Exploiting international organizations.** To put pressure on Moscow the municipalities managed to use not only the above Russian federal institutions but also international organizations. For instance, to get a more privileged status (special economic zone, facilitated visa regime with neighboring countries), the Russian Arctic municipalities quite skillfully exploited venues such as the BEAC or the EU’s Northern Dimension program. The northern areas of Russia are represented at the Regional Council of the BEAC and develop direct ties with the neighboring regions of Finland, Norway and Sweden.

It should be noted that in the real life the regions combine both direct and indirect methods because they are complimentary rather than mutually exclusive.

**City-Twinning: The case of Nikel-Kirkenes**

City-twinning proved to be a most promising form of international cooperation at the inter-municipal level in Northern Europe. The Nikel-Kirkenes pair exemplifies a success story in the Arctic zone.

The first twinning agreement between Kirkenes and Nikel was signed in the Cold War era (1973). At that time the collaborative ties between two towns consisted mostly of irregular cultural contacts and reflected a local interest in reaching across the then rather divisive and by and large closed border (Brednikova and Voronkov, 1999).

The relationship went much further in the post-Soviet era with both the Norwegian and Russian sides expressing interest in reinvigorating their city-to-city relations on a principally new and more pragmatic basis. The mutual interest and intensified contacts between the towns have more recently resulted in an agreement on cooperation between the Sør-Varanger community and the Pechenga district (part of the Murmansk Region), including a special Kirkenes-Nikel twin city project. An agreement to that effect was signed by the leaders of the Sør-Varanger and Pechenga district on 28 March 2008. The agreement and twin city project were approved by the Norwegian and Russian foreign ministers at their meeting in Kirkenes (9 June 2008) (Pogoretskaya 2008).

The cooperative arrangements under the project cover areas, such as:

- Support for small and medium-size business
- Establishment of a joint Business Cooperation Centre in Nikel
- Environmental protection
- Health care (including direct cooperative schemes between municipal hospitals)
- Education (direct links between elementary and secondary schools)
- Training programs for municipal officials
- Tourism
- Cultural festivals and exhibitions
- Library and museum cooperation
- Mass media cooperation
- Women and youth cooperation

The agreement does not stand out as something isolated and is part and parcel of a broader Norwegian-Russian strategy of cooperation in the North. For Norway, the
North has been a strategic priority area in the sphere of the country’s foreign policy as articulated for example in the Government’s High North Strategy issued in 2006 and updated in 2009. The treaty signed in September 2010 between Norway and Russia on the delimitation of maritime areas in the North has further added to the interest for, as well as prospects of, cooperation.

As to twinning, there is still considerable emphasis on cultural contacts, although cultural bonds have been increasingly related to more pragmatic and interest-driven forms of cooperation. The case of Kirkenes-Nikel is hence clearly to be understood as a laboratory introduced in order to explore and test the prospects for cooperation in a broader context. It is, more particularly, connected to the Norwegian Pomor Plan, i.e. a plan initiated by Norwegian experts in 2006 and aiming at the establishment of a Pomor Special Industrial Zone in the Sør-Varanger/Petchanga districts on the border region but potentially also transcending the Norwegian-Russian border (Cherednichenko, 2008). Particularly, the plans to build a metallurgy plant on the coast of the Pechenga Bay were mentioned. One of the prime aims of establishing such a zone consists of facilitating the development and use of the Shtokman gas field in the Barents Sea, among other things by providing the bulk of the required regional transport infrastructure and the construction of a plant for producing liquefied natural gas. Russia and Norway have also decided to connect some of their gas pipelines in the Barents Sea area, and in bringing the pipeline on land, an appendage might also reach Nikel (so the nickel deposits could be processed on the spot rather than traded on the world market as raw material as has been the case so far).

This opens up some interesting prospects for twinning. The broader background also implies that over time the twinning between Kirkenes and Nikel might be integrated into a broader pattern of transborder cooperation between Norway and Russia, with several other cities and regional actors as a part of the configuration.

Crucially, the Russian authorities have been prepared to consider such a broader plan of extensive transborder cooperation, although there also seem to be competitive aspects at stake. For example, the Murmansk regional authorities have been reserved about a project launched in order to build a 40-km railroad from Nikel to Kirkenes. Such a connection would be needed in order to switch a part of a broader flow of goods (coming from the Far East and Russia’s High North to Europe and North America via Murmansk) to Kirkenes. Owing to competition between the cities, the railway project has made little progress and instead Oslo has been pushing for exploring the viability of a railroad from Rovaniemhi (Finland) to Tromsø or Finnmark county in order to develop an alternative version of the transport corridor (www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1174685.html). According to the Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre (2010), the plan is being assessed “on a serious basis”.

One aspect of Nikel-Kirkenes twinning consists of relations in the sphere of labor. There is a considerable shortage of skilled labor in Sør-Varanger and Finnmark more generally, and this has become more acute with the re-opening of iron mines in the vicinity of Kirkenes. Efforts have been taken to improve the flow of labor in the Barents region between Norway and Russia. For example, by providing training for jobs in the offshore sector and by exchanging experience in the promotion of an inclusive labor market (Store, 2010: 10).

In that context, an agreement was reached to establish a local border traffic zone and introduce a border resident ID card (2 November 2010). Those who live within 30 km of the border on the Norwegian side and 30–50 km on the Russian side will be able to cross the border without a visa and stay on the other side up to 15 days each time (http://www.barentsobserver.com/first-opening-in-the-Schengen-regimewith-
Kirkenes as well Nikel will be covered by the arrangements, as will Zapolyarny, also a nearby city. Temporary work permits can be issued to unskilled Russian workers from the Barents region up to three years for work in any sector in the three northernmost Norwegian counties. The agreement was ratified by both the Norwegian and Russian sides in early 2011.

The increased contacts imply that the number of border crossings have grown considerably. The border crossing at Storskog at the Norwegian-Russian border close to Kirkenes was reopened in 1991 but initially the number of border-crossing remained low with only a few thousand crossings a year. In 2010, the figure was more than 100,000 crossing a year (Støre, 2010: 9) and it is expected to be much greater in the forthcoming years.

It appears, in general, that in spite of some bureaucratic obstacles (mostly coming from the regional and federal governments) the twinning project has reasonably good prospects of growth for the foreseeable future as part of increased cooperation between Norway and Russia. The Kirkenes-Nikel pair plans to join the City-Twins Association if the project succeeds. In any case, their decision to become city twins seems to indicate that the concept of twinning has retained its attractiveness in northern Europe, and has also become interesting for some of the states of the region to advance and support.

References


1 Established in 2006 by several city-pairs from Northern, Eastern and Central Europe. See in detail: Joenniemi and Sergunin 2008


