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Sophie Hohmann, Marlene Laruelle

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From the Mediterranean to the Far North: A Refugees Corridor at the Russian-Norwegian Border

August 24, 2016 By Sophie Hohmann and Marlene Laruelle Commentary, Norway, Russia, Society and Culture

<http://www.thearcticinstitute.org/refugees-corridor-russian-norwegian-border/>

A pristine area that has largely been preserved from external influences, [the](#) Arctic faces dangers coming from climate change and the growing appetite of energy firms—not to mention the challenges associated with a burgeoning tourism industry. Social and cultural interactions have been crucial in shaping human development in the Arctic for centuries: scientific exploration, the progressive settlement of European populations on indigenous territories, and the urbanization of the Soviet Far North. One example among many, today between two-thirds and 90 percent of the [population of Russia's Arctic regions is urbanized](#). These changes are accelerating with the rapid globalization of the region and its integration into global flows of people and goods.

The Arctic's growing connectedness with the rest of the world became apparent in late 2015 and early 2016, when an “Arctic road” suddenly emerged for refugees fleeing the southern Mediterranean basin. In September 2015 the small industrial city of Nickel, Russia, located about 30 km from the Norwegian border and 125 km from the regional capital Murmansk, faced an unprecedented wave of refugees. Two to three months later, at least 5,000 people had passed through the town to apply for refugee status in Norway. We conducted research in Nickel, Kandalaksha, and Murmansk in March and July 2016 and interviewed local experts who were involved with managing this influx of refugees.

According to Tatiana, a consultant for border cooperation in Nickel city, refugees were from multiple origins. Some were indeed from Syria. For them, Russia is traditionally regarded as a friendly country with which strong ideological as well as familial ties exist. Syrians only made up 10 to 20 percent of the refugee flows, however. The other nationalities represented included Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Somalis, and Ethiopians. The ethnic diversity was such that the Norwegian Consulate in Murmansk had to distribute posters announcing the closing of its border in Russian, English, Pashto, Dari, and Arabic. As several local experts noted, many of the “refugees” who crossed the Norwegian border were in fact already based in Russia. Some Syrians were working in the region of Krasnodar, in southern Russia. Others, such as Afghans, had Russian visas as [foreign students or resident's permits](#). Some had requested refugee status in Russia, and, after having been turned down, tried their luck in Norway.

When Norway introduced a daily quota system, refugees had to wait in Nickel to cross the border. The [hotel](#) Zapoliarnee Sianie, where they were hosted, was packed and heavily guarded by the Russian police and the migration services (FMS). According to local personnel who asked for anonymity, migrants had to pay about USD 500 per week to stay at the hotel until they could cross the border. Those arriving directly from the Middle East were not prepared for the Arctic cold; they had insufficient clothing and their children very quickly fell ill. Medical

teams were sent to the hotel to provide basic care and medicine in order to prevent possible epidemics. Many people refused this medical help mainly for sociocultural reasons.

Several local experts collected information by interviewing migrants themselves. Those from Syria stated they had to pay between USD 2,000 and 2,500 for a “package” including a tourist visa to Russia, which was often issued in Beirut, Lebanon, and a plane ticket from their location to Murmansk via Moscow. This, in turn, activated some locally-based smuggler networks who would organize the transport from Murmansk to the Norwegian [or](#) Finnish borders at premium prices (up to USD 1,800) for a small distance of about 100 km to 300 km. As crossing the border on foot is prohibited, once in Nikel, the most fortunate migrants had to buy old Soviet cars, the less fortunate bicycles—all purchased at sky-high prices.

According to Alexandra Burtseva, from the Murmansk Humanities University, few refugees were interested in staying in Russia, where benefits are modest (approximately USD 170 per month) and the administrative system opaque. Getting Norwegian social benefits (about USD 600 per month) was obviously a strong incentive for many of them. But entering Norway was also often part of a strategy of reconnecting with family members or relatives based in Western Europe, especially in the United Kingdom. Once in Norway, refugees were accommodated in the [small border town of Kirkenes](#). After completing formalities for requesting asylum, they were allocated to other cities and other centers and fully supported with food, medicine, and clothing.

Norway closed its border de facto in November 2015, while the Finnish border remained open until April 2016. Migrant flows therefore switched to Finland, but the border is much further away from the city of Kandalaksha (111 km). Moreover, on the Finnish side, the small border village of Alakurtti was not capable of accommodating hundreds of additional people. According to Tatiana, some refugees thus found themselves forced to sleep in their cars in polar winter temperatures. Since March 2016, the Russian Ministry of Interior, specifically the Prosecutor General’s Office, has taken responsibility for assigning migrants to [two hotels in Kandalaksha](#) (the Pomor-Tour and the Greenwich). As confirmed during our interviews in Kandalaksha, refugees considered as illegal (expired visas, etc.) have been placed in detention centers before being sent back to their country of departure.

The Arctic corridor that opened briefly, and then closed abruptly, has had multiple implications for Russian-Norwegian bilateral relations and for the communities on both sides of the border. This closure undermined the regime of visa-free travel (residents living less than 50 km from the border may visit the neighboring country without visa) in force since 2012 for the local populations of the Finnmark and Murmansk regions. The communities on both sides have also experienced problems coping with such large numbers of refugees. On the Norwegian side, far-right groups, such as the “[Soldiers of Odin](#)”, have begun patrolling the streets of some cities to repel migrants, claiming to protect locals from asylum seekers. On the Russian side, at least one incident has been reported, in a Murmansk night club, where people identified as migrants were accused by locals of “[getting too close to Russian women](#)”. Fears of epidemics spread by refugees have also exacerbated the estrangement of local people, including

employees of the hotel requisitioned in Nikel, who have preferred to quit their jobs temporarily, as confirmed during our interviews.

Local scholars following migration issues such as Olga Zmeeva, from the Kola Research Center in Apatity, have noticed a rise in xenophobic discourses among the Russian population. The Murmansk region had already been shaken socially by the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian migrants fleeing the Donbas conflict. Since the Soviet era, the city has hosted a large Ukrainian minority specialized in fishing and mining. Despite the cultural proximity between Russians and Ukrainians, social tensions have increased. Indicative of as much, a [local narrative was spread](#) stating that Ukrainian refugees receive too much state aid, and are provided with housing and jobs before local residents. The arrival of Middle Eastern migrants accelerated these xenophobic feelings.

This short but revealing episode confirms how much the Far North is integrated into broader patterns, such as the European refugee crisis. It also demonstrates that good neighborhood measures put in place by Norway, Finland, and Russia can be rapidly challenged, especially in a post-Crimea geopolitical climate. However, contrary to the failure of the UK-French management of migration flows that gave birth to the infamous “Jungle” in the French Channel town of Calais, both the Russian and Norwegian authorities were able to avoid such a critical situation developing in Nikel, Kandalaksha, or Kirkenes.

Sophie Hohmann is a researcher at Le Centre d'études des mondes russe, caucasien et centre-européen ([Cercec](#)) and [Marlene Laruelle](#) is Associate Director and Research Professor at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University.