

Kirkenes and Nickel: The tale of the Northern brotherhood

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the unique case of two border towns twinning - Norwegian Kirkenes and Russian Nickel. The results of this study explain why this experiment, unlike other similar twinning projects involving Russian cities, can be called a near-success story. The twin towns have managed to create an extensive system of cooperation in such areas as economics, logistics, ecology, health, education, sports, mass media, youth and women's cooperation, promotion of dialogue between indigenous peoples, cooperation with international organizations, etc. The results of this study also offer explanation for the relative longevity of the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project, which has managed to survive a number of crises in Russia's relations with Norway and the West as a whole for a long time. At the same time, the article analyzes the reasons for some of the failures that befell this project. The author concludes that the experience gained during the implementation of the project is useful for the development of twinning projects in Europe not only in historical retrospect, but also in the future, when Russia's relations with its neighbors normalize after the end of the Ukrainian conflict. The author also explains why the Kirkenes-Nickel case has not only local but also global significance, and what other twin cities can borrow from the cooperative experience of the two northern towns.

1. Introduction

The case of twinning between Norwegian Kirkenes and Russian Nickel is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it was almost the only case when the sistership ties between the two towns, established back in the Cold War era and being of a rather formal nature, turned into a full-fledged twinning based on close and diverse cooperation in different areas.

Secondly, it was unusual that this project was not a purely local (intermunicipal) initiative but was politically supported at the regional and national levels. The idea of the twinning project was officially approved by the Foreign Ministers of Norway and Russia. The governments of the two countries clearly wanted to give this project a pilot character, which would allow for a breakthrough in Norwegian-Russian cross-border cooperation.

Thirdly, it was also unusual that the Kirkenes-Nickel partnership was not limited only to the development of town-to-town relations, it turned out to be part of a broader cooperative plan from the very beginning. In particular, there were plans to make both towns part of a free economic zone and a common industrial park on the border between Norway and Russia. There was also an idea to use labor force from Nickel in the Kirkenes mines. Several bilateral initiatives were launched to attract investment to some joint industrial projects. To facilitate the cross-

border movement of both towns' inhabitants, a Russian-Norwegian agreement was concluded on the establishment of a special visa-free regime for the residents of the Norwegian Sør-Varanger commune and the border zone on the Russian side. In other words, unlike other twinning projects, this one was supposed to rely on a solid economic and legal base.

Fourthly, it is interesting to note that to a large extent the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning was based on a common historical memory dating back to the trade contacts between northern regions of Norway and Russia in the 17th-early 20th centuries and the Second World War. For example, both Norway and Russia remember that in the last years of the war, the Norwegian Resistance was active in the Kirkenes area, helping the Red Army in the fight against Nazi troops. It was the Red Army that liberated the north of Norway from the German occupiers. In memory of these events, a monument to Soviet soldiers who died during the liberation of Finnmark was erected in Kirkenes. In October of each year, officials from the municipalities of Kirkenes, the Murmansk Region and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both states (including ministers) took part in the wreath-laying ceremony at this monument. Representatives of Kirkenes and Nickel participated in Victory Day parades in both partner towns.

Fifthly, the mechanism of interdependence between Kirkenes and Nickel, which arose in the course of close cooperation, allowed this twinning to last longer than all other similar European-Russian projects

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(for example, Narva-Ivangorod and Imatra-Svetogorsk). The twinning agreement was broken by the Norwegian side only in March 2024, that is, two years after the outbreak of the all-out war in Ukraine.

Finally, the case of Kirkenes-Nickel twinning has not only national or binational importance but also regional (European) and global significance. It demonstrated that twinning is possible between municipalities from countries with quite different socioeconomic and political systems and this model can be replicated in other regions of the planet.

The case of Kirkenes-Nickel twinning represents a sort of intellectual puzzle in the sense that it poses a number of intriguing questions to researchers: What was the motivation of both towns to cooperate with each other? Why did they start their twinning project at a time when all the other twin city pairs were disappointed in this type of cross-border cooperation? What are the reasons for the relative longevity of the twinning project, which has outlived other similar projects involving Russian cities? Is twinning a reliable tool of cross-border cooperation in the age of global turbulence? Will the experience of the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project be useful for future generations or is it irrevocably a thing of the past? Is it possible to find a theoretical explanation(s) for the phenomenon of Kirkenes-Nickel twinning?

The research purpose of this study, which does not intend to provide comprehensive answers to the above questions, is twofold: On the one hand, it examines the positive experience of Kirkenes-Nickel twinning, which will be probably in demand again after the end of the war in Ukraine and the normalization of European-Russian relations. On the other hand, the reasons for the longevity of this twinning, which allowed it to exist for so long, despite the geopolitical turbulence surrounding it, will be found out.

2. Theoretical framework

Several theoretical approaches are applicable to the study of the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project:

The *paradiplomacy theory* aims to explain the rise of subnational units (including municipalities) as international actors by the decentralization of the nation-state, the arrival of a 'post-sovereign' state, the crisis of the 'classic' models of federalism, the spread of network-type relations, the replacement of the international relations system by the paradigm of global governance, and the emergence of the globalization (Rosenau, 1997; Smith, 2001). The rise of the so-called "global cities" and trans- and cross-border city twins is seen as a natural result of the "fragmentation" (fragmentation/integration) process. However, in the case of Kirkenes and Nickel, this theory worked well only when relations between the West and Russia were friendly and cooperative. With the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project began to stall.

Another research approach is the *geographic diffusion theory*, which explained the relatively successful democratic transformation of Russian border subnational units through Europe's spatial proximity, which was conducive to the diffusion of Western resources, values, and norms across national borders (Kopstein & Reilly, 2000). This theory suggested that intensive cross-border cooperation and Western aid have contributed towards more profound, successful market systems and democratic reforms, as well as the Europeanization of Russia's border provinces and municipalities (Lankina & Getachew, 2006). This theory, however, has been criticized for making too strong an emphasis on the role of external factors, as well as for representing Russian subnational actors as passive objects of European manipulations, rather than decision-makers with subjectivities of their own. As some analysts underline, in reality, there is always interaction between external and domestic factors that generate and affect subnational units' international activities (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2014, 20).

According to the *marginality theory*, marginally/peripherally located actors can successfully play with their unique position both domestically (in relation to the center) and internationally (with similar marginal and/or central actors). Marginal actors can make use of their geographic

location by acquiring, for instance, the role of mediator or "bridge" between countries. They can turn their marginality from a disadvantage to a resource and transform themselves from remote and provincial territories to attractive places hosting intense international flows of goods, services, capital, technologies, and people (Browning & Joenniemi, 2003; Parker & Armstrong, 2000).

The *familiarity/unfamiliarity theory* is based on the assumption that twinning partners differ in terms of their history and current status. This difference can either intensify the relationship between twins or problematize their interaction. Differences may create curiosity or nostalgia that promotes cross-border cooperation, but if they are perceived as antagonistic, they can lead to aversion, resentment, and avoidance. These differences can promote a sense of familiarity or unfamiliarity. Familiarity relies on a shared cultural heritage and experiences of cooperation, combined with overcoming negative historical memories related to conflicts, although familiarity may include an intensified recall of past negative experiences. Unfamiliarity, in contrast, is associated with a view of cooperation as something entirely new and previously unexplored which may be attractive for the actors. If it manifests itself as fear of the unknown, unfamiliarity may impede the construction of a cross-border sense of community. It should be noted that the most important question here is how the past is interpreted. The success or failure of twinning largely depends on the interplay of familiarity and unfamiliarity among actors (Scott, 2013; Spierings & van der Velde, 2013).

In sum, this multidisciplinary approach provides a reliable theoretical basis to study the complex and multifaceted problem represented by the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project.

3. Geographic realities

Kirkenes is a capital town of the Sør-Varanger community, Finnmark county, which is located in Norway's far northeastern part. Kirkenes occupies a peninsula along the Bøk fjord, which is part of the larger Varanger fjord. This is the end of Norway's main road E6. The town is situated 2500 km from Norway's capital Oslo and just nine km from the Norwegian-Russian border (see Fig. 1). The Sør-Varanger community is the only one in the country that has a border with Russia. The border is 196 km long and Storskog is the official border crossing point. Kirkenes' geographic coordinates are 69°43'37"N 30°02'44"E.

From Norway's national perspective, Kirkenes and the Sør-Varanger community are perceived as both "the last frontier" of Europe *vis-à-vis* Russia and a contact zone with its Eastern neighbor (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2013).

The town's size is 3.67 km²; its population is 3721 inhabitants (2024). The "greater Kirkenes" (which includes the neighboring villages) has a total population of 6500 people (Visit Kirkenes, 2024). The population of Kirkenes continued to grow gradually, despite the ups and downs in its socio-economic development. At the same time, there was some aging of the population during this period. (see Table 1).

As far as the local climate is concerned Kirkenes has a dry climate with low precipitation year-round (as compared with other coastal destinations in Norway). The average temperature in July is 10 °C, while the average temperature in January is −13 °C. The snow season is from November to April. The Polar Night season in Kirkenes is from 21 November to 21 January. It is also the season for winter excursions such as skiing, dog sledding, snowmobiling, etc. The cold and clear winter weather makes Kirkenes one of the best destinations for Northern Lights observations (from late August to late March) and tourist attraction not only for Norwegians but also for foreigners, including tourists from Russia (before the start of the Ukrainian war) and East Asia (before and after the COVID-19 pandemic). The summer is short and lasts from June to September (it is also the season for summer excursions such as boat trips, fishing, hiking, etc.). The Midnight Sun season in Kirkenes is from 17 May to 21 July (Visit Kirkenes, 2024).

Kirkenes' counterpart, Nickel, is an urban-type settlement (by

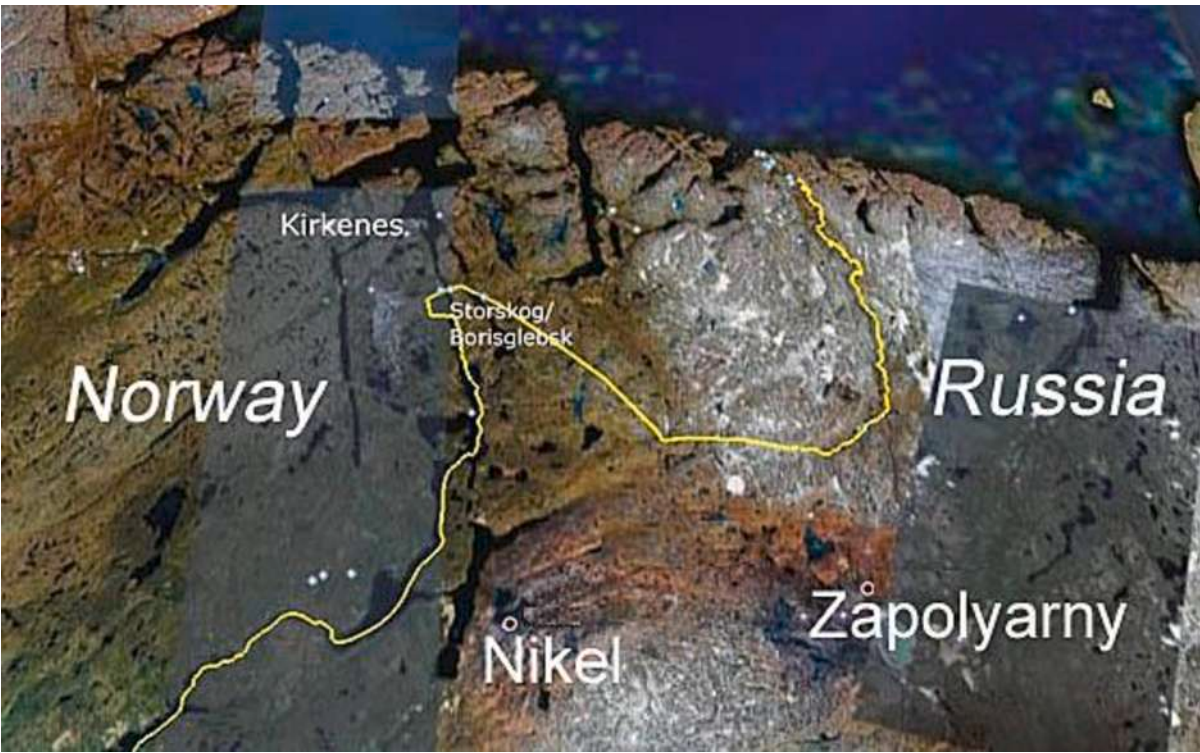


Fig. 1. The satellite image of the Kirkenes-Nickel Area.

Table 1
Population of Kirkenes, 1950–2024.

Year	Number of population	Men	Women	Mean age
1950	2168	1074	1093	33
1955	2277	1133	1144	34
1960	2378	1184	1193	34
1965	2473	1231	1241	34
1970	2575	1279	1293	33
1975	2661	1321	1339	32
1980	2713	1344	1368	33
1985	2757	1363	1394	35
1990	2820	1394	1425	35
1995	2899	1434	1465	36
2000	2987	1480	1507	37
2005	3076	1526	1549	38
2010	3244	1621	1622	39
2015	3452	1738	1714	39
2020	3599	1819	1780	40
2024	3721	1885	1836	40

(Source: <https://ru.zhujiworld.com/no/454985-kirkenes/?ysclid=m2dqo68nqn980885023.>)

Russian categorization) and the administrative center of the Pechenga District, Murmansk Region, Russia. It is located on the shores of the lake Kuets-Yarvi in the north-western part of the Murmansk Region. The distance from the region’s capital Murmansk is 196 km and from the Norwegian border is only seven km. Nickel stands on the route E105 which starts in Kirkenes and runs along Russia and Ukraine to Crimea. Nickel’s geographic coordinates are 69°24’50”N 30°13’55”E (see Fig. 1).

Nickel’s territory is 15.2 km². It has a population of 9210 (2024), which is more than two times less than during the heyday of the town in the Soviet times (21,838 in 1989) (Federal Service of State Statistics, Russian Federation, 2024). The population of Nickel grew steadily during the Soviet period, as metallurgical production continued to develop dynamically in the town. At the same time, in the post-Soviet era, the population of Nickel declined significantly as the neighboring mines and metallurgical plants were closed. As in Kirkenes, the

Table 2
Population of Nickel, 1959–2024.

Year	Number of population	Mean age
1959	16,305	27
1970	21,299	31
1979	20,031	31
1989	21,838	33
2002	16,534	36
2010	13,131	38
2012	12,966	38
2015	12,298	39
2020	11,012	40
2024	9210	40

(Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of the Russian Federal Service of State Statistics’ data.)

population has been aging in Nickel over the past half century, although compared to the population of the whole of Russia, local residents can still be considered relatively young (40 vs. 42) (see Table 2).

Nickel's climate is similar to Kirkenes one, with short summers and long winters. The average temperature in July is 13.8 °C, while the average temperature in January is −9.5 °C.

4. Historical legacy

The region of Finnmark was traditionally populated by the Norwegians, Finnish-speaking Kvens, Skolt Sami as well as by some Russians. Historically, this region was a contact zone between different ethnic and religious groups although until the 1970s the Norwegian state pursued the “Norwegianization” policies with regard to the indigenous peoples (Rogova, 2008: 11; Viken et al., 2008: 27).

The settlement on the site of Kirkenes has been known since the 16th century. Kirkenes got its name from the church built here in 1862 (Norwegian «Kirke» — church). Until May 14, 1826, Kirkenes was located on the territory of the Falledsdistrict (Common Area) — a condominium of Sweden and Russia, after which almost all disputed territories (including Kirkenes) were ceded to Sweden (Norway was a part of the Swedish kingdom until 1905) (Niemi, 2005). Kirkenes remained a small village until the beginning of the 20th century; in 1906, the development of iron ore deposits began south of the settlement, which contributed to the active development of Kirkenes. A/S Sydvaranger company was established to develop the iron ore deposit, which existed until 1996. In 1909, the company built a thermal power plant in Kirkenes. A year earlier, the town received reliable transport links to the central part of Norway: Kirkenes became the terminus of the Hurtigruten ferry line.

During the Second World War, Kirkenes had to go through many dramatic events. Kirkenes was occupied by Germany in July 1940. The town became a base for preparing an attack by German troops on the Soviet Arctic — up to 500.000 *Wehrmacht* soldiers were stationed in the town and its surroundings. In the vicinity of Kirkenes, the Hebukten airfield was located, which played a key role in the German air raids on the Soviet city of Murmansk.

During the war years, Kirkenes was subjected to massive bomb attacks; 320 Soviet air raids were carried out on the town. The most devastating bombing occurred on July 4, 1944, when 140 houses were destroyed by fire. Residents of Kirkenes took refuge from the raids in the Andersgrotta bomb shelter, where a small museum now operates. Over 7 thousand Soviet prisoners of war were held in prisons and concentration camps in Kirkenes and its environs during the occupation.

In the autumn of 1944, during the retreat, German troops destroyed most of the remaining buildings and structures of the town; only 13 residential buildings on the outskirts survived. On October 25, 1944, the town was stormed by units of the Red Army and the Marines of the Soviet Northern Fleet. Kirkenes became the first town in Norway to be liberated from occupation; locals greeted Soviet soldiers as heroes. After the war, a monument to Soviet soldiers who died during the liberation of the town was erected in Kirkenes. As noted above, this memorial is still a place where the Norwegian population, as well as Russian diplomats and ordinary people pay tribute to the liberators of Kirkenes.

In the post-war years, Kirkenes was actually rebuilt with allocations received by Norway under the US Marshall Plan. The restored Kirkenes became the first of the towns of Fylke Finnmark to receive paved roads. During the Cold War, the Soviet-Norwegian border near Kirkenes was one of two sections where the Soviet Union bordered directly with a NATO country (the other such border was with Turkey). Because of the



Fig. 2. The view of Kirkenes from the port area.

NATO-USSR confrontation the two countries' border regions were heavily militarized.

For most of the 20th century, Kirkenes remained the center of the iron ore industry, and a processing plant operated in the town. In the 1960s, the population reached 7 thousand people. In 1996, due to the unprofitability caused by the crisis in metallurgy, the Sydvaranger company was liquidated. Ore mining has been stopped.

After Oslo adopted its Arctic strategies of 2006 and 2009, in which significant attention was paid to the development of the country's northern territories (often depressed), a certain economic revival of Kirkenes began. In 2009, ore production was partially resumed (until 2015). Presently, about 30 people work to reopen the mine and maintain the remaining equipment (Arctic Economic Council, 2023). However, since the end of the 20th century, the urban economy has been re-oriented towards servicing the oil and gas industry in the Barents Sea region. Ship repair is an important industrial sector as well. Trade, tourism, and logistics services are taking an increasingly important place in the town's economy (see Fig. 2).

On January 11, 1993, at a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia and the Nordic countries in Kirkenes, it was decided to establish the Barents/Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC). The declared goal of the Council was to promote the sustainable development of the Barents region, which includes the northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland, as well as 5 members of the north-west of the Russian Federation. Within the framework of the BEAC, a lot has been done to solve the economic, infrastructural, and environmental problems of the region. Unfortunately, due to disagreements with Western members of the Council caused by the war in Ukraine, Russia withdrew from it in September 2023.

Nevertheless, since the early 1990s, Kirkenes, where the Barents cooperation was declared, has become a symbol of regional integration and cooperation with Russia - initiatives that paved the way, among other things, to the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project.

As for Nickel's history a Sami settlement has long existed on the site of modern Nickel. Similar to Kirkenes, the area around this settlement was part of the Russian-Swedish condominium until 1826, and then passed to Finland, which at that time was part of the Russian Empire. In 1917, Finland gained independence from Russia. In the Treaty of Tartu (1920), Moscow ceded the area of Petsamo to Finland and this region became a border area next to the USSR in the east and Norway in the west.

By 1934, Finnish geologists had discovered more than a dozen deposits of copper-nickel ores in the region. The Finnish government has leased the Petsamo nickel-bearing area to the Canadian company Inco. The latter transferred the mining license to its British subsidiary Mond Nickel Co, which, in turn, established a subsidiary Petsamon Nikkeli oy in Finland. In 1935, work began on the construction of a settlement and a factory site near the Kaulatunturi mine. The village of Nickel was founded in 1936 with the name Kolosjoki (similar to the name of the local river) on the site of an old Sami village and has since become a place of settlement for miners working at nearby mines. Mining of nickel-containing ore began in 1937.

With the start of the Soviet-Finnish war in 1939, Canadian specialists left Kolosjoki. However, the company continued to operate, and a smelter was built. In 1940, an agreement was signed with the German company I.G. Farbenindustrie AG on the supply of ore and matte, and in 1941 a long-term agreement on joint production in Kolosjoki was signed with it. During the Second World War, nickel supplies from the Petsamo region were of crucial importance to Nazi Germany. When in October 1944, as a result of the Petsamo-Kirkenes operation, German troops retreated from Petsamo, they destroyed all the structures of the plant and mine during their retreat.

Immediately after the region was incorporated into the Soviet Murmansk Region (after signing the Soviet-Finnish Peace Treaty in 1944), the restoration of the metallurgical production in Kolosjoki began, the first products were delivered in 1946. The Pechenganikel Mining and

Metallurgical Combine produced matte — enriched copper-nickel ore.

The new name "Nickel" and the status of an urban-type settlement was assigned to it by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic dated November 27, 1945.

In Soviet times, Nickel became one of the leading centers of the mining and metallurgical industry of the Murmansk Region, reaching its heyday by the end of the 1980s. At the same time, given the strategic importance of Nickel, its border position, as well as the high degree of militarization of the entire region, the town was closed to foreigners. The border with Norway was also closed. Soviet citizens from other regions of the country needed a special pass to visit this town for business or personal purposes.

In the post-Soviet period, Nickel, like many other Russian centers of heavy industry, found itself in a crisis situation. Both industrial activities and population have radically decreased over the last three decades.

The town's backbone enterprise was, until recently, the Pechenganikel Mining and Metallurgical Combine (part of the Kola Mining and Metallurgical Company (MMC) of the Norilsk Nickel corporation), which employed about 2200 workers (smelting and sulfuric acid production lines employed about 700 people) (see Fig. 3). The smelter for processing copper-nickel concentrate of the Kola MMC was closed in December 2020, which put an end to long-term disputes between Russia and Norway over transborder environmental damage caused by this plant (Lenta.ru, 2020).

The local business community and municipal authorities are considering various options for reviving metallurgical production based on high environmental standards but have not yet found potential investors for this kind of project.

5. Changing geopolitical landscape in the post-Cold War era

With the end of the Cold War, a number of important geopolitical, economic and historical/cultural factors emerged that prompted Kirkenes and Nickel to cooperate closely.

First, the nature of Norwegian-Russian relations has been dramatically changed after the end of the Cold War. The two countries preferred to perceive each other as partners rather than competitors or enemies. They joined and actively worked in the main regional multilateral institutions – the BEAC and Arctic Council (established in 1996). Kirkenes hosts international and Norwegian national BEAC secretariats as well as the Barents Institute (part of the Arctic University of Norway) specializing on the study of cross-border cooperation. The Norwegian-Russian agreement on the delimitation of the Barents Sea was signed in 2010. This put an end to a long-term conflict between the two countries and paved a way to numerous cooperative projects ranging from fishery and joint research/educational programs to Sami peoples' contacts and collaboration between sub-national units and municipalities.

Second, the demilitarization of the region took place. Both Moscow and Oslo have significantly reduced their military presence in their northern regions. For example, in the late 1990s, the Russian motorized rifle division stationed in Pechenga near the Norwegian border was reorganized into a brigade, that is, into a smaller military unit (Istoricheskaya spravka, 2013). The size of the 61st marine brigade stationed in Sputnik has also been reduced. Moreover, a significant part of this brigade in 1995–2002 took part in two Chechen wars far from the Arctic military theater. Norwegian armed forces were optimized as well. The demilitarization process has had a positive effect on the overall situation in the region and has contributed to the growth of mutual trust between Norway and Russia.

Third, the previously closed Norwegian-Russian border was open, and citizens of both countries could move freely through it if they had visas. The flow of travelers visiting both countries for business and tourism purposes has increased dramatically. Residents of Kirkenes and Nickel, towns located 40 km from each other, first of all, became participants in these lively people-to-people contacts. Unlike the Cold War



Fig. 3. The view of Nickel during the polar night.

era, borders have ceased to be dividing lines, they have become zones of contact between different civilizations, peoples and cultures.

Fourth, a number of economic reasons pushed both towns to cooperate more closely. For example, the port of Kirkenes became a convenient base for Russian fishing vessels, where they unloaded their catch, got fuel and food, and carried out ship repairs if necessary. There was also a change of crews who went on vacation to Murmansk, and new crews arrived to replace them. Oslo had a plan to build a railway from Nickel to Kirkenes and modernize the existing railway from Murmansk to Nickel in order to switch part of the cargo traffic between Northern Europe and East Asia from the Murmansk port to the Norwegian northern ports, including Kirkenes. Kirkenes has also become a favorite place for residents of the Murmansk Region for tourism, shopping or using the Kirkenes airport for flights to Europe. According to Anastasia Rogova (2009: 31), Russians frequently visiting Kirkenes even did not have the feeling of being in a foreign country. They called Kirkenes “Kirsanovka” or “Kirik” with connotations of a small local and nearby village easily reachable from the Murmansk region. Norwegian tourists also became frequent guests in the Murmansk region.

In this regard, intensive people-to-people contacts in the Norwegian-Russian border area contributed to increasing familiarity between the local residents, which can serve as a good illustration of the familiarity/unfamiliarity theory’s applicability to this twinning case.

Fifth, starting in the late 2000s, the governments of Norway and Russia began to pay great attention to the development of their northern regions and urban settlements. As mentioned above, in 2006, Oslo approved its first High North Strategy (*The Norwegian Government’s high north strategy*, 2006) which was updated in 2009 (*New building blocks in the North. The next step in the Government’s High North Strategy*, 2009). Norway’s Arctic strategy prioritized development of tourism, mineral-based industries, expertise and business activity based on Arctic conditions, transport and electric power infrastructures as well as strengthening innovation and development capacity.

The same developments took place in Russia where the first Moscow’s strategy for the development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian

Federation (AZRF) was issued in 2008 (Medvedev, 2008) and followed up by its new version in 2013 (Putin, 2013). Among other things, these documents specially addressed the problem of the so-called mono-towns where the local economies were formed by backbone companies/enterprises.

The Norwegian-Russian focus on the development of their northern territories was accompanied by the granting of greater autonomy to regions and municipalities, including the sphere of their external relations. This contributed to a more intensive involvement of local actors in the processes of globalization and regionalization which, in turn, as the paradiplomacy theory maintains, facilitated various cross-border cooperative initiatives, including twinning projects.

Finally, as mentioned above, some common historical memories also played a positive role in bridging the gap between two border towns and increasing familiarity among the local population. These memories date back to the so-called Pomor trade which took place from the 17th century to 1917 when the Bolsheviks came into power in Russia. This trade was conducted by the Russian population of the coastal areas of the Kola Peninsula and Arkhangelsk region (called Pomors) and the residents of northern Norway. The Pomors sold Norwegians grain, flour, salt, iron ore, timber, birch bark, candles, hemp, ropes and so on, while Norwegians provided Russian with various fish (cod, pollock, halibut, haddock, etc.) (Niemi, 1992; Shrader, 2005). The Pomor trade was critical for the northern regions’ economy of both countries and played an important role in maintaining friendly relations between Norway and Russia. It is interesting to note that even the Norwegian and Russian military have exploited the positive connotation of the term by naming their joint exercise in 2013 as Pomor. As mentioned above, the liberation of northern Norway from the Nazi occupants by the Red Army has also contributed to common historical memory in a positive way. So, for the population of both Norwegian and Russian border regions, the post-Cold War cooperative projects were a resumption of traditionally good/friendly relations between two neighboring peoples.

To sum up, in this context, the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project became a natural end-result of the post-Cold War geoeconomic and

geopolitical developments.

6. The start of the twinning project

Kirkenes and the Pechenga District (part of the Murmansk Region), including Nickel, established sistership relations as early as in 1973, at the very beginning of détente between the East and West. However, prior to the 1990s, town-to-town relations were mainly reduced to some irregular sport and cultural contacts (Brednikova & Voronkov, 1999; Viken et al., 2008: 30).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, twinning became popular among north-European towns. For example, several city-pairs emerged in this region: Tornio-Haparanda (Finland-Sweden), Valka-Valga (Estonia-Latvia), Imatra-Svetogorsk (Finland-Russia) and Narva-Ivangorod (Estonia-Russia). For Russian border towns twinning was an effective instrument for both capacity-building and integration to the European geoeconomic, social and cultural spaces (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2011, 2012). The *City Twins Association* was established in December 2006 to integrate seven town-pairs from Central, Eastern and Northern Europe (including four above mentioned twins).

As compared to other north-European towns, Kirkenes and Nickel were rather late in terms of launching a twinning project of their own. It took more than 15 years of intense contacts between two municipalities and negotiations between local, regional and even national authorities to reach an agreement on establishing a twin-type partnership. Such a late start of the twinning project can be explained by the fact that before the end of the Cold War and immediately after it, contacts between Kirkenes and Nickel were very limited, unlike other twin towns. For example, Narva and Ivangorod, another city pair, in Soviet times represented a single socioeconomic organism and had a common infrastructure, which dictated the need for close cooperation between these cities even when they became part of Estonia and Russia, respectively. Economic ties have also existed between Finnish Imatra and Russian Svetogorsk since the 1970s, when Finnish engineers took part in the reconstruction of the paper mill in Svetogorsk and continued to work there in the post-Soviet period (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2017, 488–490). Kirkenes and Nickel had to start their twinning project almost from scratch, increase their familiarity and find potential areas for their cooperation.

Only in March 2008 an agreement on cooperation between the Sør-Varanger community and the Pechenga district (including a special chapter on Kirkenes-Nickel twinning) was signed (*Soglashenie o razvitii družhestvennykh svyazey i sotrudnichestva mezhdú munitsipal'nym obrazovaniem Pechengskiy rayon Murmanskoy oblasti (Rossiya) i kommunoy Ser-Varanger, guberniya Finnmark (Norvegija) [the agreement on the development of friendly relations and cooperation between the municipality of the Pechenga District of the Murmansk Region (Russia) and the Sør-Varanger community of the Finnmark province (Norway)]*, 2008). Interestingly, this document was in fact sponsored by the then Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov who decided to launch the twinning project at their talks preceded the signing ceremony (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2013, 8). Moreover, in June 2008 the twinning project was formally approved by the Norwegian and Russian Foreign Ministers at their meeting in Kirkenes. The same day a joint statement on the main priorities of Kirkenes-Nickel cooperation was published by the leaders of the Sør-Varanger and Pechenga communities (*Sovmestnoe zayavlenie o sotrudnichestve munitsipal'nogo obrazovaniya Pechengskiy rayon Murmanskoy oblasti (Rossiya) i kommuny Ser-Varanger guberniya Finnmark (Norvegija) v ramkakh proekta "Goroda-Bliznetsy" [the joint statement on cooperation between the municipality of the Pechenga District of the Murmansk Region (Russia) and the Sør-Varanger community of the Finnmark province (Norway) in the frame of the "Twin-towns" project]*, 2008).

These priorities included the following areas: support for small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs); creation of a joint Business Cooperation Center in Nickel; tourism; training programs for municipal officials;

environmental monitoring and protection; health care (including direct cooperation between municipal hospitals); education (direct contacts between local schools); library and museum cooperation; mass media cooperation; women and youth cooperation; cultural festivals and exhibitions; and sports (*Soglashenie o razvitii družhestvennykh svyazey i sotrudnichestva mezhdú munitsipal'nym obrazovaniem Pechengskiy rayon Murmanskoy oblasti (Rossiya) i kommunoy Ser-Varanger, guberniya Finnmark (Norvegija) [the agreement on the development of friendly relations and cooperation between the municipality of the Pechenga District of the Murmansk Region (Russia) and the Sør-Varanger community of the Finnmark province (Norway)]*, 2008).

In 2011, the 2008 agreement was renewed. The new version of the agreement just slightly changed priorities for bilateral cooperation, including the support for SMEs; creation of a common labor market; introduction of best management practices at the municipal level; education; organization of the regular festival *Barents Spectacle*; art exhibitions exchange; joint library and museum projects; commemoration of the Murmansk and Finnmark regions' liberation from the Nazi occupation in 1944; and organization of various sport events such as ice hockey and football tournaments, swimming competitions and so on. Given the 2010 Norwegian-Russian agreement on the introduction of the visa-free regime for the local residents, the action plan focused on issues such as creation of a special corridor and liberalization of the customs regime for border residents at the Borisoglebsk-Storskog border-crossing point (*Soglashenie o razvitii družhestvennykh svyazey i sotrudnichestva mezhdú munitsipal'nym obrazovaniem Pechengskiy rayon Murmanskoy oblasti (Rossiya) i kommunoy Ser-Varanger, guberniya Finnmark (Norvegija). 31 marta 2011 [the agreement on the development of friendly relations and cooperation between the municipality of the Pechenga District of the Murmansk Region (Russia) and the Sør-Varanger community of the Finnmark province (Norway). 31 March 2011]*, 2011).

In 2016, the agreement on twinning was renewed again.

These documents created a proper legal basis for a rather intense functional cooperation between twinning towns.

7. Functional cooperation

Twinning strategies aimed to several areas of cooperation:

Attracting investments. Both the Kirkenes and Nickel municipalities helped to each other in searching domestic and foreign investments to develop or renovate local mining, metallurgical and ship-repairing industries or transport infrastructure. For instance, the leadership of the Sør-Varanger community managed to attract the Tschudi Group, one of the biggest Norwegian investment companies, to reopen the Bjørnevattn iron ore open-pit mine in 2009. Interestingly, there was an idea to use in this mine the workforce not only from Sør-Varanger but also from Nickel and some other Russian mining towns which experienced a high level of unemployment at that time (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2013, 9–10).

The Sør-Varanger community also managed to attract investors to renovate the Kirkenes international airport, European highway routes 06 and 105 as well as the local road system. Remarkably, Kirkenes presented all these projects to the Norwegian side as gateways to the neighboring Murmansk Region or Russia in general, while for the Russian side these endeavors were advertised as a good access to Nordic countries and Europe.

As far as the Russian side of the twinning project is concerned, the Nickel municipality organized on the regular basis the so-called Russian-Norwegian Cross-Border Cooperation Days where potential Norwegian and international investors were invited: Kirkenes business association "Naringsshage", Norwegian Business Association, Foreign Investor Business Association, SIBA International Management and so on. Interestingly, the administration of the Pechenga District used these events to present this region as "Russia's north-western gate" for foreign investors (Bulygin, 2011).

To attract domestic and foreign investors the twins have developed rather active PR strategies. In addition to the "days of cooperation", they



Fig. 4. A Sør-Varanger community ad in the Pechenga newspaper: Welcome to Kirkenes – your nearest shopping center!

have organized various exhibitions, fairs, sent their representatives to international fairs and promoted themselves via mass media as promising business partners (see Fig. 4). Moreover, while travelling abroad the municipal officials have also joined these PR campaigns. Twin towns run bilingual newspapers and municipal and private websites designed for domestic and foreign audiences. The strategic aim of these PR policies was not only to create a positive image of twin towns in the international arena but also explain potential investors that both Kirkenes and Nickel were promising platforms for business cooperation rather than marginal players and depressive regions.

In other words, in line with the marginality theory, both towns managed to convert their peripheral location from a disadvantage to competitive advantage and make them attractive places for investments and tourism.

Plans for industrial cooperation. There were several interesting industrial projects in the Norwegian-Russian border region. For example, in 2006 (i.e., prior to the agreement on twinning) some Norwegian experts proposed an idea of a Pomor Special Industrial Zone situated right on the border between the Sør-Varanger community and Pechenga District (Cherednichenko, 2008). There were plans to build there a liquefied natural gas plant (connected to the Shtokman gas field in the Barents Sea which was supposed to jointly develop by the Norwegian Statoil and Russian Gazprom companies) or metallurgy combine or oil refinery factory or deploy high tech research and development centers (Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2012, 42 and 2013, 11–12).

The Norwegian side has obviously planned to link the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project to the Pomor Zone plan. For example, prior to the signing of the twinning agreement, the then Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre recommended to the leaders of the Sør-Varanger and Pechenga communities to discuss how they could become a part of the Pomor Zone (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2013, 8).

However, none of these plans came true. On the one hand, the Shtokman project, to which the plans for the creation of the Pomor Zone were linked, failed due to the withdrawal of the Norwegian side from it. Thus, potential LNG, metallurgical and oil refinery plants were deprived of raw materials and energy supplies. On the other hand, the Russian national and regional authorities were not ready for such a bold experiment as the creation of an industrial park located in the border zone and where Russian national jurisdiction would be limited.

Developing transport infrastructure: The Sør-Varanger community

together with Oslo had an ambitious plan to make Kirkenes an ocean-class port and redirect a part of cargo flow going from East Asia to Nordic Europe and North America and vice versa via Murmansk. To implement this plan a 40-km railroad from Nickel to Kirkenes should be built and the existing railroad from Murmansk to Nickel should be modernized. To realize the plan, the World Port Kirkenes Group AS, was created in 2001. The company had even more ambitious plans aiming to connect Kirkenes to the Finnish railway system, Murmansk and Arkhangelsk harbors (World Port Kirkenes Group, 2002: 11). When the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project started in 2008 both municipalities were quite enthusiastic about these plans because they believed that a new railroad could contribute to creation of a multimodal transport corridor in the area.

These plans, however, received a cold shoulder in Murmansk because the regional government and business community did not want to make Kirkenes a competitor to the Murmansk port. In contrast with the Norwegian plans, they suggested a project aimed to the radical modernization of the Murmansk harbor to increase its cargo reload capacity. The plan to build a railroad between Nickel and Kirkenes has never been implemented.

After the failure of the Nickel-Kirkenes railway project, Finnish and Norwegian experts proposed as an alternative to build a railway from the capital of Finnish Lapland Rovaniemi to Kirkenes. However, this project also proved to be untenable due to its economic inefficiency and the protests of the indigenous Sami people, who feared that this railway might interfere with their reindeer husbandry (Kähkönen, 2022).

The project for the reconstruction of the E105 automobile route turned out to be more successful. The E105 route starts from Kirkenes and runs along Russia's routes R21, M10, M2, Ukraine's M20, M29, and M18 to Yalta, Crimea which is now a de facto part of Russia. Work on the reconstruction of the E105 in the border areas began (including the Borisoglebsk-Storskog border-crossing) in 2014. In September 2017, the part of the route that ran from Kirkenes to the Norwegian-Russian border and from the border through the territory of the Pechenga district was opened. A 248-m-long bridge and a 680-m-long tunnel were built on the Norwegian side. The cost of the work amounted to NOK 800 million. On the Russian side, a 16 km long section of road was reconstructed, the cost of the work amounted to 3.5 billion rubles (60 million Euro) (Mir24, 2017).

Creating a common labor market. By the moment when the twinning

agreement was signed in 2008 and some iron mines nearby Kirkenes were reopened in 2009 there was a serious shortage of labor force in the region. For this reason, there were plans to use Nickel labor force, which could work in the Kirkenes mines on a shift basis. However, this project was never completed, as a visa regime was not prepared for potential Nickel workers that would allow them to visit Norway five days a week. In addition, Norwegian trade unions opposed this project, seeing Russian miners as competitors to Norwegian workers. The final point in this project was put by the closure of the Kirkenes mine in 2015.

Despite the failure of this project, the very idea of cross-border labor migration was very promising. It has not been implemented in relations between Russia and European countries, but in relations between EU member-states this model has become quite popular.

Visa facilitation regime: To promote people-to-people contacts between twin towns a Norwegian-Russian agreement was reached on a local border traffic zone in November 2010. The residents of the 30 km border area on the Norwegian and Russian sides were eligible to get a three-year ID card which gave them a right to cross the border without a visa and stay on the other side up to 15 days (*Soglashenie mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Korolevstva Norvegija i Pravitel'stvom Rossiyskoy Federatsii ob uproshchenii porjadka vzaimnykh poezdok zhiteley prigranichnykh territoriy Korolevstva Norvegija i Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Oslo, 02.11.2010 [Agreement between the Government of the Kingdom of Norway and the Government of the Russian Federation on facilitation of the border local traffic between the Kingdom of Norway and the Russian Federation, Oslo, 02.11.2010]*, 2010). The whole Sør-Varanger community (with exception of the Sami village of Neiden) as well as the Russian towns of Nickel, Korzunovo, Pechenga and Zapolyarny in the Murmansk Region were covered by this regime.

The agreement was ratified in early 2011 and entered into force in May 2012. In June 2013, a protocol to extend the 2010 agreement to

Neiden and cover the whole Sør-Varanger community by a visa-free regime was signed.

As a result of the 2010 agreement the number of border crossings in Borisoglebsk-Storskog have grown considerably. In 2010 and 2012 there were more than 100,000 and 250,000 crossings respectively (*Pogoretskaya, 2013a*). The Borisoglebsk-Storskog border crossing was renovated and expanded to serve the increased flow of visitors from both sides (see Fig. 5).

It should be noted that Norway was the first Schengen country to introduce a facilitated visa regime with Russia. Poland was another country to follow the same model. In 2011, Warsaw and Moscow signed an agreement on a local border traffic regime for two Polish border regions and Russia's Kaliningrad Region.

Education projects: In accordance with the 2008 twinning agreement, Kirkenes and Nickel launched a number of exchanges between local elementary and secondary schools as well as language courses for school teachers of English and the Norwegian language courses for the Nickel inhabitants. These courses were organized by the University of Nordland (Bodø, Norway) and Murmansk State University for Humanities. These projects were quite useful for development of people-to-people contacts and increasing quality of education in the Nickel-based schools (*Lebed, 2011*).

In 2013, the University of Nordland and Murmansk State University for Humanities launched a joint international Master program in Border Studies (Borderology). The project aimed at training specialists in management of the Norwegian and Russian border regions. There was a high demand for specialists in border management in both twinning communities.

The first group should consist of 20 MA students who supposed to have some specific qualifications such as bachelor or specialist degrees



Fig. 5. The view of the Borisoglebsk-Storskog border crossing from the Norwegian side.

and professional experience no less than three years. That's why students' age was between 25 and 55 years old (Pogoretskaya, 2013b). Initially, the group should be composed of ten Russian and ten Norwegian students. Five slots were reserved for students from Nickel and Pechenga. However, the Norwegian side was unable to recruit ten students. Only two Norwegians and one Icelander joined the first group. For this reason, the number of Russian students was increased to 13.

The borderology master program was a combination of lectures and seminars with online learning. Students were trained in Nickel, Murmansk and Kirkenes for four years. During the first two years, students attended offline and online classes and had to produce term papers. The last two years were devoted to writing the master's thesis. The courses were taught in English by professors from the Faculty of Professional Studies (University of Nordland), Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences (Murmansk State University for Humanities) and practitioners from various Norwegian and Russian governmental and municipal bodies (Methi et al., 2019, 48; Ryzhkova & Sergeev, 2019, 130).

Russian students financed their studies under the program on the Russian territory themselves. Their training program in Kirkenes, as well as all training of Norwegian students, was funded by a NOK 4 million grant from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Methi et al., 2019, 47). The program's curriculum was based on the Bologna Process standards and should result in getting a MA degree from the University of Nordland (Pogoretskaya, 2013b).

To institutionally support the MA program on borderology the Kant-Bakhtin Center was established in Nickel in 2013. In addition to MA program-related activities, this center served as a platform for academic discussions, seminars and conferences (Ryzhkova & Sergeev, 2019, 131).

Of the 16 students in the first group, 11 graduated from the program. The second group consisted of 40 students. They were representatives of various countries: Russia, Norway, Germany, Great Britain, Ghana, etc. (Ryzhkova & Sergeev, 2019, 129).

Despite the fact that this interesting experiment was first interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and then by the outbreak of war in Ukraine, its positive experience will undoubtedly be in demand by Norwegian and Russian universities after the end of this conflict and the normalization of relations between these countries.

Indigenous peoples. The twinning project also played an important role in establishing cooperation between the indigenous peoples of the Barents region although very few Sami representatives live in both towns. As mentioned above, there are small Skolt Sami communities in the Russian and Norwegian border regions. The Skolts is one of the minor ethnic groups among the Sami people. They are distinct from other Sami groups not only linguistically and culturally but also by their religion because they adopted the Russian Orthodoxy in the 16th century. They currently live in the Finnish municipality of Inari (about 700), at several places in the Murmansk Region (around 400) and in the village of Neiden (Sør-Varanger community) (approximately 150) (Monoreel, 2024).

In 2010, the *Skolt Sami culture across borders* project was initiated by the Finnish, Norwegian and Russian Skolt activists and research centers. The project aimed to revive Skolt Sami culture, language and identity. The project had offices situated in Sevettijärvi (Finland), Neiden (Norway) and Murmansk (Russia) (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2013, 14–15). Several academic conferences and seminars on Skolt Sami history and culture were organized by the partner organizations - the Murmansk State University of Humanities, University of Nordland, Arctic University of Norway (Tromsø) and University of Lapland (Rovaniemi, Finland). The Russian Skolts regularly visited Neiden for joint worship in the St. Tryphon's chapel while the Finnish and Norwegian Skolts visited St. Trinity/Tryphon Pechenga monastery in the Murmansk Region.

Cultural cooperation. The twins managed to develop multifaceted cultural collaborative ties with each other. The centerpiece of this cooperation was the *Barents Spektakel*, a festival that was held in

Kirkenes annually since 2004. This festival was a combination of art and book exhibitions, theater performances, musical concerts, film, literature, poetry, discussion seminars and so on. The festival's strategic goal was to develop cultural contacts between nations and individuals of the Barents region with the aim to create common Northern culture and identity. In addition to cultural component, the festival aimed to discussion of most compelling Arctic problems such as climate change, environment protection, rational use of natural resources, conservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples and other local communities and so on. Community-building and communal self-organization were the festival's important objectives as well.

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the participation of residents of Nickel and the Murmansk Region in the festival has sharply decreased. It is mainly attended by Russian emigrants living in Norway and other European countries. Unfortunately, there has been a certain politicization of the *Barents Spektakel*. At its events, the Russian special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine and Moscow's policy towards the political opposition was sharply condemned (*The homepage of the Barents Spektakel-2024*). This made it virtually impossible for representatives of Nickel and the Murmansk Region to officially participate in the festival. In fact, this channel of cultural cooperation between twin towns has been blocked over the last two years.

Along with the *Barents Spektakel*, Kirkenes and Nickel (as well as the Sør-Varanger and Pechenga communities) have managed to develop direct contacts between artists, actors, dancers, writers, poets, libraries and museums which created a colorful 'patchwork' of cultural collaborative ties in the area. No surprise that these cultural ties between the twinning communities have survived both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian war and they are still preserved to this day.

Cultural and indigenous peoples cooperation in the frame of the twinning project was quite conducive to the rise of civil society institutions in Nickel and other Russian border towns. In this regard, it is safe to assume that the geographic diffusion theory is relevant for explaining how the twinning project promoted Europeanization of Russian subnational units.

Cooperation with international organizations. As many other paradiplomatic actors, Kirkenes and Nickel cooperate with various international institutions to get additional funding and recognition from them, as well as to elevate their international status. Among these international institutions, the BEAC, Arctic Council, Council of Europe, European Congress of Municipal and Regional Governments, European Regions Assembly, etc., should be mentioned. As said above, the BEAC has its international and Norwegian national secretariats in Kirkenes. It also had its office in Murmansk prior to Moscow's withdrawal from the BEAC. These offices were helpful in implementing and coordinating cooperative projects at the municipal level, including the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project.

The Sør-Varanger community is a member of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities which cooperates with the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, a leading European organization uniting subnational actors of the continent.

Kirkenes and Nickel had contacts with the City Twins Association and even thought about joining it in due time. However, since the association soon became inactive, both municipalities decided not to join it.

8. No happy end? Twinning in the age of geopolitical turbulence

With the outbreak of all-out war in Ukraine in February 2022, the leadership of the Sør-Varanger commune was in no hurry to break off relations with the twin cities of the Murmansk region. For example, in November 2022, the municipal council, after fierce debate, decided not to cancel twinning agreements with Severomorsk and Pechenga/Nickel. The council members pointed out that the decision to start the war in Ukraine was made in the Kremlin, and not in cities far from Moscow, and therefore there is no reason to punish long-term partners for what they

are not guilty of. On the other hand, they decided to put on hold these agreements.

However, in April 2023, the Sør-Varanger municipal council decided to terminate the agreement with Severomorsk “for the sake of the community’s security”. Five representatives from the Socialist Left, the Conservative Party, and the Center Party voted in favor of this decision, while four representatives from the Labor Party voted against it (Jonassen, 2023). The council members were discontent with the role of Russia’s Northern Fleet, based in Severomorsk, which it plays in the Ukrainian war. At the same time, it was decided that Kirkenes will maintain its agreement on twinning with Nickel.

It took almost a year for the Kirkenes town hall to bring the issue on scrapping the twinning agreement to the council’s meeting which was held on March 20, 2024. Terminating the agreement did not come without debate. 14 of the council’s members voted in favor of canceling the twinning agreement with Pechenga/Nickel, while 11 voted against it. The ruling Conservative Party together with the Centre Party, the Progress Party, and one member of the Socialist Left Party favored the cancellation of the agreement. The Labor Party, the Red (Communist) Party, and two members of the Socialist Left Party were against scrapping the twinning project.

As for the motivation of the majority, according to Harald Sunde, the only Socialist Left Party representative favored cancellation of the agreement, the brutality of the war made it impossible not to scrap the agreement. “Having cross-border contacts made life in Kirkenes exciting before the war started. Today is a dark day, but abandoning the official agreement was a necessity because of Russia’s brutality,” Sunde argued (Nilsen, 2024).

“In Pechenga, Putin’s soldiers are being trained to fight in Ukraine, said Kirkenes Mayor Magnus Mæland, - Enough is enough. The friendship agreement has been terminated. As we promised in the election campaign.” He added: “We cannot have friendship agreements with municipalities like Pechenga when the mayor over there drives around with a Z on his car”¹ (Nilsen, 2024).

The council members were also discontent with the fact that like most other Russian subnational units, the Murmansk Region has been commissioned by Moscow to partake in reconstruction of former Ukrainian towns taken by Russia during the SMO. For example, the partnership agreement between Murmansk and Primorsk (Zaporozhye Region) aimed to cooperation in areas such as housing, infrastructure, education, culture and sports – fields which are quite similar to those where Kirkenes cooperated with Nickel.

The opposition, however, criticized the council’s decision as a short-sighted and undermining Kirkenes’ international strategies. The members of the opposition believe that it is important to keep horizontal, network-type ties with Russia’s subnational units while relations between national governments are tense. They are quite optimistic about the resumption of twinning projects between Norwegian and Russian towns after the end of the Ukrainian conflict because these municipalities share much in common with each other and accumulated rather positive experiences in this sphere.

9. Conclusions

Based on the paradiplomacy, geographic diffusion, marginality and familiarity/unfamiliarity theories that have demonstrated their relevance, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Having begun as an attempt to overcome the legacy of the Cold War in relations between Norway and Russia, largely motivated by humanitarian considerations and aspiration to overcome the divisive effect of national boundaries, over time the project began to focus on the more practical needs of the two municipal communities.

Twinning strategies were aimed, firstly, at developing twins’ capacities in different areas of their activities, secondly, at solving specific problems faced by partners, and, finally, at increasing their familiarity with each other, that is bridging cultural and mental gaps between these communities. Positive historical memories about Pomor trade and liberation of Finnmark by the Red Army played a special role in making the twinning project a success story.

The twinning project addressed a broad spectrum of issues varied from special economic zone/industrial park plan, SME promotion, creation of a common labor market and renovation of the border transport infrastructure to cultural, research, educational, sport, youth and women’s cooperative initiatives. The introduction of a visa-free regime for the local residents was rather supportive for the people-to-people contacts under the twinning project and facilitated the cross-border exchanges in a broader context – between the the Sør-Varanger community and the Murmansk Region. It is amazing that such diverse activities have been developed by two small urban communities without much financial support from regional and national governments.

The fact that the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project was designed to solve specific and important problems for the twin cities made it not only a near-success story, but also ensured its longevity. The project managed not only to survive the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, when other similar projects with Russia’s participation were actually frozen, but also existed for two more years after the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022.

The Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project is an interesting and instructive case of cross-border cooperation between countries with different socioeconomic and political-administrative systems. It was a kind of experimental laboratory in which Norway and Russia tested new forms and methods of cross-border cooperation. The full significance of the project was well understood by both the Norwegian and Russian governments, who from the very beginning were the inspirers of this experiment. The results of this experiment are undoubtedly of great importance not only for these two countries, but also for the pan-European and global twin-cities strategies as a whole.

The Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project’s experience contributes to global knowledge in many ways:

First and foremost, this case points out that urban history provides a useful lens through which to understand how and why twin cities originate and develop. This study helps to understand the motivation of cities initiating twinning projects and what are the factors affecting such decisions.

Both cities are exemplary in the sense that they have demonstrated how to make the most of the shared historical heritage and memory in a positive sense. They managed to forget the Cold War era that divided the two border towns, and to bring back the memory of the Pomor trade and the liberation of Kirkenes and Finnmark by the Red Army from the Nazis, which contributed to the revival of former sympathy and the rapprochement of the two local communities. There are many cities in the world that are divided by national borders and have both positive and negative historical memories. The example of Kirkenes and Nickel helps such cities understand how they can forget about the negative past and establish cooperation with each other, including twinning.

This study also demonstrates the dynamic character of twin-city relationships and their volatility. Particularly, it shows how far their ups and downs are conditional on external factors – political and economic (in)stability in the home countries and the world, technological advances, administrative reforms, not to mention wars and pandemics. Other twin cities could learn from the experience of Kirkenes and Nickel and learn how to anticipate and prevent the dangers and threats to their cooperation.

The case of Kirkenes-Nickel twinning is interesting in a sense that the towns behaved entrepreneurially, willingly exploiting the twin-city brand for place promotion, hoping to jointly overcome their marginal location and improve their socioeconomic fortunes. Other twins could learn from this case how to use marginality for building new capacities

¹ The letter Z, which stands for one of the groups of Russian troops in Ukraine, has become a symbol of the entire Russian SMO.

and gaining competitive advantages.

Since Kirkenes and Nickel have tried a wide range of methods and forms of cooperation in the course of their interaction, twin cities from other regions of the world can choose from this arsenal those collaborative instruments that they find most effective and appropriate for their conditions. At the same time, the northern twins have demonstrated that in order to create a strong mechanism of interdependence, it is necessary that their relations be based, first of all, on such a reliable foundation as the trade and economic interests of both urban communities.

The Kirkenes-Nickel case is also instructive in terms of demonstration of importance of central governments' support to twinning projects at the initial phase. The governmental support for adopting a twin-city model enhances the status of the intercity relationship and sometimes materializes in financial, legal and institutional assistance to twins at the early stage of the project. In the case of Kirkenes and Nickel, the Norwegian and Russian governments also created a privileged visa regime for local residents, which greatly facilitated contacts between the two urban communities.

However, it would be wrong to interpret the Kirkenes-Nickel twinning project as a complete success. First of all, it should be noted that a number of important projects (joint industrial park, common labor market, railroad between twin towns, etc.) have not been implemented. The Norwegian and Russian sides have not been able to completely overcome the dividing effect of the border and create a borderland instead, in which there would be a multidimensional exchange of goods, capital, technologies, people and ideas.

Kirkenes and Nickel were unable to build a model of twin towns similar to the EuroCity, created by Tornio-Haparanda and functioning as a single economic, logistical, social and cultural organism. This was probably impossible, given that both towns belong to countries of radically different socioeconomic and political structure and there is a completely different type of border than in the case of Finland and Sweden. And yet Kirkenes and Nickel have not been able to achieve the degree of integration with each other and create a solid mechanism of interdependence that were planned at the beginning of the project.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to pay tribute to the brave attempt of two small northern urban communities to create a unique form of cross-border cooperation, which brought tangible benefits for themselves and the border regions of Norway and Russia. It seems that the experience gained by the two towns during the implementation of the project will be useful for the formation of non-hierarchical, horizontal and network-type relations between subnational actors of different countries and will also be in demand for the restoration of ties between Russian and European cities after the end of the Ukrainian war.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alexander Sergunin: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I declare that there are no conflicts of interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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