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## Dealing with Russia

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At the beginning of May in Tromsø, Norway, 300 km north of the Arctic Circle, the bite of the cold is still felt. The few leafy trees in town have not yet put on leaves, the cracks in the sidewalks and on the road are filled with melting snow. But even more sensitive are the geopolitical tensions: warships regularly pass through the dark waters between the island and the mainland, a drone flies over the port in the white night without darkness or sun, Russian trawlers are no longer welcome... As Berk Vindevogel writes, « The Arctic is heating up, and not only literally ».<sup>[1]</sup>

The town of Tromsø is historically oriented towards the High North and its resources. From the end of the 19th century, the small population of fishermen and trappers, operating in the Svalbard archipelago, saw the arrival of explorers, planning their polar expeditions from this base. The famous scientist, explorer and future diplomat Fridtjof Nansen left from this coast in the direction of the North Pole in 1893 on board the Fram<sup>[2]</sup>. In 1928 Roald Amundsen took off from Tromsø before he disappeared on board a French seaplane in search of the crew of the airship led by the Italian Umberto Nobile, as a stele on the spot still testifies. Then came students and researchers, with the opening in 1972 of a university, the Arctic University of Norway (UiT), focused on medicine and knowledge of the polar environment. Since then, many other institutions have come to reinforce the Norwegian research potential in and on this area, most of them collaborating within the Fram Center created in the 2000s to coordinate research efforts on the High North<sup>[3]</sup>.

It is within this framework that the international conference Arctic frontiers is held every year since 2006, dedicated to economic, social and environmental research for the sustainable development of the region<sup>[4]</sup>. This year, the shadow of the war in Ukraine and the interruption of scientific relations with Russia looms over the conference. In the margins of this event, we were able to meet a dozen high-level scientists involved in this cooperation on the Norwegian side, thanks to our colleague from the Arctic University of Norway, Rasmus Bertelsen, who received funding from the Norwegian Research Council to bring together researchers and practitioners of European science diplomacy (now largely united in the EU Science Diplomacy Alliance) with their Norwegian counterparts, who are not part of the European Union<sup>[5]</sup>. To all of them we ask how they see the situation. What is the state of

scientific cooperation with Russia, and what is its future? From these off the record exchanges, we draw three conclusions.

### **Pessimism**

The first is that pessimism prevails. Despite the efforts of some to maintain relations[6], the political decision has been taken: on the institutional level, an “academic curtain” has fallen, cooperation with Russian scientists has been interrupted[7]. After two years of the pandemic, which had already limited exchanges[8], our interlocutors unanimously regret this and believe that it is not just a temporary lapse. Whatever the political and geopolitical future, relaunching these exchanges will take a lot of time and effort. Behind this unanimity, two positions stand out. Some, who are in the minority, consider that science should not have been affected, because it has nothing to do with politics. The others, on the contrary, and they are the most numerous, consider that the political benefits of cooperation are such that they outweigh the costs. Without improving the situation of Ukrainians on the front line, the severing of scientific relations with Russia makes the West blind, deaf and dumb on the Russian terrain. To the first, supporters of “stick to science”, it would be easy to remind that the intensity of scientific exchanges between Russia and Norway in the last 30 years was in fact possible only by political will. Mikhail Gorbachev’s speech in Murmansk in 1987 was a turning point from this point of view. Gorbachev probably did not wake up one fine morning with the idea that the Arctic had to be radically transformed through scientific cooperation, from a nuclearized and polluted zone to a zone of knowledge and shared prosperity. Scientists must have weighed in on this decision. Nevertheless, the political will was decisive to implement the cooperation. From the meeting of environment ministers in Rovaniemi in 1991 to the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996, a whole institutional framework was negotiated and built with and for scientists to intensify their exchanges and to channel funds – polar research is expensive and has received massive support in recent years[9]. Seen from this angle, we are witnessing a re-parameterization of this essentially political framework. To the latter, it might be appropriate to remind them that their voice must certainly be taken into account, but that it does not impose itself, naturally, in the name of a rationality that they profess. Like any policy, the one they propose is subject to discussion. The problem is that today it is almost inaudible. Yet the stakes are high. Inter-institutional and interpersonal trust is a precious legacy, perhaps the most precious, forged over the past 30 years of cooperation. Trust is the glue that has enabled significant progress in the scientifically informed management of pollution and shared resources. Abruptly interrupting cooperation means taking the risk of breaking this trust. In spite of satellites and other remote surveys, monitoring the evolution of the planet’s barometer, the Arctic, requires a human presence on the

ground, the transmission of standardized data between individuals, across borders. Half of the space concerned is under Russian sovereignty. At the same time, however, measures that come in response to Western research sanctions, such as, it seems, the fact that Russian researchers now have to ask their supervisory ministry for prior approval for any exchange, even if it is only interpersonal, with a counterpart from a so-called “unfriendly” country, had in fact been under discussion for several years. These counter-sanctions confirm a withdrawal that was underway before the massive invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, is it possible to pretend that nothing is happening, to put science in a weightless state, as if there were no war and massacres caused by the Kremlin?

### **“In Cod We Trust”**

There is, however, one sector in Norway that has so far been spared the sanctions against Russia: the scientific cooperation that underpins the joint management of fisheries resources in the Barents Sea[\[10\]](#). In this area, the Norwegian authorities encourage the continuation of bilateral exchanges with Russian authorities and researchers. While a historic agreement was signed in 2010 between the two countries to delimit their territorial waters[\[11\]](#), the joint environmental monitoring of this area makes it a reference on a global scale. The Barents Sea is the richest in cod and would be the best managed.

For Norway, as for Russia, fishing is an important economic and social activity. The authorities are convinced that the market alone, the law of supply and demand, cannot lead to optimal management of stocks. Certainly, wars are generally favorable to the increase of fish stocks, when the seas are unsafe and vessels are used for other purposes. And of course, anyone who overfishes normally lowers the price of his goods, forcing himself to work harder to preserve his income. This would be a disincentive to empty the Barents Sea. But this reasoning does not take into account very short-term incentives and escalation dynamics, which may lead everyone to help themselves before there is nothing left. The substratum of scientific data is crucial to maintain a necessary climate of trust and balance the system.

However, it must be recognized that it is not enough to want to safeguard bilateral cooperation for this to happen. Here again, the difficulties in obtaining reliable data or data at all from the Russian side have been perceptible for several months. Worse still, bilateral cooperation is largely blocked by the paralysis of multilateral bodies, such as the Arctic Council, under Russian presidency since May 2021, or by the suspension of Russia’s participation in the work of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, in which this country, long on the fence, had finally decided to commit itself[\[12\]](#). This particular case allows us to underline a very general one: scientific cooperation is based on multiple political frameworks embedded in each other.

What will happen now: a tragedy of the commons, biological warfare in the form of overfishing, or an awakening of common interests? What is the place of the scientists who have been so involved until now: executors of policies or creators of their own agenda?

### **The Lavrov affair and the politics of symbols**

The management of the University of Tromsø has been very active since the beginning of the 1990s to get closer to the Russian academic world. In particular, since 1992 it has signed a series of agreements with the universities of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk[13].

In 2011, to seal these partnerships and give a new impetus, the board of directors of the university decided to award an honorary doctorate to Sergei Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs; in March 2022 it was decided to withdraw this distinction, which is apparently a first in the annals of this young public university which already has a long list of prestigious recipients such as Rigoberta Menchú or Desmond Tutu. What earned Lavrov this doctorate and under what circumstances was it withdrawn? It was for having initiated a few years earlier with his Norwegian counterpart of the time (who for the first time in decades had the chance to be a member of a government with a majority in his favor), and later concluded, the long-sought agreement on the delimitation of territorial waters between the two countries. While the annexation of Crimea did not raise questions about this distinction in 2014, it was instead very quickly that politicians, the press and public opinion in Norway turned to the university demanding that the symbol be returned. The board of trustees had little time to make a decision, and decided to effectively cancel the doctorate. Conclusion: symbols work both ways. As tools for bringing people together, they can become an instrument for distancing them. They are supposed to strengthen ties, but they can weaken them permanently. What response will be given to this symbolic sanction? What will be the long-term consequences for relations between the university and the Russian research ecosystem, and therefore for the university itself, for which these relations represent a unique competitive advantage in Norway? What weight do university officials have in Oslo, a capital city that seems much farther away from Russia? Should universities limit the awarding of honorary doctorates to scientific personalities, certainly less prominent, but less versatile? Academic diplomacy is becoming more aware of itself when challenged.

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