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# Tourism making places at the Norwegian–Russian border

– Narratives amidst geopolitical change

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Master's thesis in Master of Philosophy in Visual Anthropology

SVF-3903, May 2023



## Abstract

This thesis discusses the construction of place through place narratives on the Norwegian–Russian border in the town of Kirkenes, Northern Norway. Based on ethnographic fieldwork from April to July 2022, the study explores how tourism to the Russian border constructs three places: Russia, Kirkenes in relation to Russia, and the Norwegian–Russian border. Border tourism is analysed in light of geopolitical turmoil due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and its impact on local identity and cross-border relations. Inspired by Doreen Massey’s (1994) theory of place, this thesis analyses how the local tourism industry negotiates places between insiders (locals) and outsiders (tourists), presenting local narratives, tourists’ narratives and narratives created on the border tours. Following Margaret Rodman’s (1992) notion of multilocality, place is seen as consisting of multiple realities as it is experienced differently. It is argued that narratives of Russia affect how people perceive place on the Norwegian–Russian border. Furthermore, it is contended that the locals and the tourists perceive the place in distinct ways, as the local and tourists’ narratives differ – and even oppose one another. The collective memory of Russians as friendly neighbours has contributed to positive narratives of Russia in Kirkenes, while the tourists arrive at the border with Western narratives of Russia as the “antagonist Other”. The tourism industry distributes both these opposing narratives. The geopolitical situation is affecting the narratives and it is argued that the Russian border is now perceived by outsiders as a place of reactivated tension, both attracting and repelling visitors, while for the locals the border remains a rather neutral reality. At present, however, Kirkenes’ local narratives of Russia and of the relationship with Russians are becoming contested.

Keywords: *place, place-making, narrative, border, tourism, collective memory, place identity*

## Acknowledgments

First of all, I extend my gratitude to Booking Kirkenes and Barents Safari for inviting me to join their tours, and to Odd-Johnny Andersen and Hans Hatle for the warm welcome.

Thanks to Bodil and Regnor Pedersen for their hospitality and courage. Thanks to all the tourists who allowed me to film their experiences. Through my interactions with several individuals in the local tourism industry, I gained a more comprehensive perspective. I am grateful to Dag Norum, Magnus Mæland and Urban Wråkberg for sharing their valuable insights on Kirkenes.

Thanks to the Barents Institute for providing me with accommodation and workspace in the Barents House. I am grateful to the personnel for welcoming me into their work community.

I thank my supervisor Bjørn Arntsen for his support and genuine interest in my topic, and Bjarge Schwenke Fors for inspiration and encouragement. Thanks to Arvid Viken for conversations and Peter I. Crawford for dedication to us students.

To my fellow classmates, thank you for the journey we have shared, and to my family and friends, thank you for supporting my move to a new country and in pursuing my goals.

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# 1. Introduction

In the far northeastern part of Norway, the small town of Kirkenes in the municipality of Sør-Varanger is facing a crisis in spring 2022. After the closing of the local iron ore mine the town has recreated itself as a border town, relying on relations and co-operation across the border to Russia. On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022 the Russian Federation declared a war on Ukraine. Suddenly, there is a war in Europe. Heavy sanctions are imposed on Russia and diplomatic connections are cut off. The local society of Kirkenes is in a state of shock: the town's identity is crushed. The local economy is founded on the Russian market and hundreds of employees are threatened with losing their job<sup>1 2</sup>. Even the tourism industry is at risk, after profiting off this border identity, bringing tourists to the Norwegian–Russian border for years.

Little did I know, in November 2021, how things would turn out for Kirkenes as I chose the location for my master's project fieldwork. I had been interested in the place identity of this town, with its peculiar location inside Norway as the only municipality bordering Russia, myself coming from another country neighbouring Russia, Finland. After the attack on Ukraine, however, Kirkenes' place identity was questioned and it became an explicit topic in local discussions. People expressed sadness and bewilderment, not knowing what lies ahead. It was momentous to be in the town at this time. I was there to study the local tourism industry, but the context in the project became an entire local community in the midst of geopolitical turmoil.

The aim of this project was to explore how tourism is “making places” in Kirkenes. In this thesis I will discuss tourism to the Russian border in the light of geopolitical events affecting Kirkenes. The theoretical endeavour is to explore what kind of place narratives tourism is creating of Russia, the Russian border and Kirkenes in relation to Russia, employing Doreen Massey's (1994) notion of place constructed through social relations. Massey's notion of global and local perspectives merging in place construction can be

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<sup>1</sup> Stian Strøm & Jo Hermstad Tronsen, “Vestlige sanksjoner mot Russland rammer Kirkenes: 80 ansatte kan bli permittert”, *NRK*, Mars 18, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/vestlig-sanksjoner-rammer-kirkenes--80-ansatte-kan-bli-permittert-1.15896580> (accessed November 5, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Hanne Larsen, Knut-Sverre Horn, Anniken Pedersen & Christina Gjertsen, ”Ministrene hadde ingen hjelp med seg, men skaper likevel håp”, *NRK*, July 26, 2022 <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/mener-sanksjonene-ma-tilpasses-virkeligheten-i-nord--ministrene-lover-a-hjelpe-sor-varanger-1.15883223> (accessed November 5, 2022).

observed particularly well in tourism, where locals (insiders) and tourists (outsiders) meet and produce place through their interactions. The tourism industry can be seen as a mediator between insiders and outsiders, and an agent constructing place with place narratives emerging from these encounters, so I prefer to talk about \_tourism\_ making places, as this refers not only to the local actors and perspectives, but also to the outsiders' perspectives.

This study incorporates diverse actors involved with the place: local tour operators, tourists visiting the place and local people outside tourism business. It is an attempt to discover how a place is perceived and constructed by different actors and how the narratives created within tourism relate to the local narratives in a situation where they are being questioned.

The study is based on a visual method of filming with a video camera and the research project includes a short film called *Almost in Russia*. This paper will refer to the film which, in turn, has been influenced by these theoretical reflections. This written thesis provides the theoretical context of place narratives, which can be seen at play in the film.

## 2. The ethnographic context

### 2.1. Tourism and border tours

Tourism in Kirkenes has previously been primarily summer tourism. The cruise ship company Hurtigruten has for many years brought visitors to the town, but in addition the natural environment and the war history of the area has also attracted tourists. Germans in particular have long visited the area to learn about their own family histories during Norway's occupation in World War II. Winter tourism has emerged more recently, as Asian winter tourism in the Finnish Lapland has brought tourists also to Kirkenes. In addition, tourism across the Norwegian–Russian border has been a part of the local touristic landscape – both people in Sør-Varanger traveling to shop on the Russian side, and Russians crossing likewise to Kirkenes. Local operators in Kirkenes had also organised tours to Russia – until the Covid-19 pandemic put a halt to it, also reducing the number of

people employed in tourism. In 2021, 210 persons worked in the Sør-Varanger tourism industry (transport excluded)<sup>3</sup>.

Tours to the Norwegian–Russian border have been provided since the early 1990’s. During the Soviet times, independent visitors would come to see the border, but in the 1990’s local actors began to offer trips to the border for the cruise ship tourists. Today, there are several operators bringing tourists to the border, of which this study includes two: Barents Safari and Booking Kirkenes.

Booking Kirkenes is a local company founded in 1999 (then called Pasvikturist) by Arne Wikan, nowadays led by German-born Monika Raab who has lived in Kirkenes for over 20 years. The company was the first to offer cross-border tours to Russia, and offered trips in Russia until 2020. The company expanded to serve as a tourist office, selling tours from other local companies as well. During the pandemic they had to reduce their workforce from six employees to three, with an additional worker in summertime. The company offers bus and snowmobile tours to various spots along the Norwegian-Russian border. 1) The most popular tour visits the Storskog border crossing point 15 kilometres from Kirkenes, where tourists can stand in front of the gate to the Norwegian customs area. There is also a small gift shop nearby selling mostly Russian items. While driving to Storskog, one can distantly spot the Russian customs station, an Orthodox church, and the village of Boris Gleb on the Russian side. 2) Skafferhullet is an old border crossing point with a rusty gate and Norwegian and Russian border posts. A Norwegian border patrol tower can be seen up on a hill. 3) The village Grense Jakobselv, about 60 kilometres from Kirkenes, is a popular spot to visit the border. The route is predominantly in a military zone, and tourists can see both Norwegian and Russian border patrol towers. The tour stops by the Jakobselv river, with the Norwegian border post on one side and the Russian border post on the other side. The tour ends in Grense Jakobselv, by a Lutheran church and a sandy beach, and a Norwegian border patrol station on a nearby hill. Finally, 4) in the Pasvik Valley south of Kirkenes, there is a replica of an old border watchtower, now used as an observation tower for tourists to see the city of Nikel on the Russian side. However, this site was not included in this study as it was never visited on the participated tours.

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics Norway. 08536: Employed persons per 4th quarter, by region, industry (SIC2007), contents, year and sex. 55 Accommodation, 56 food and beverage service activities and 79 travel agency, tour operators. 2021.

Barents Safari is similarly a long-running Kirkenes tour operator. The company was founded in 1996 by Kirkenes-born Hans Hatle, who still manages the company today. The company employs six during summer season (15 in wintertime) and a basecamp in the village of Sandnes, about 10 kilometres outside Kirkenes. The company provides various tours, such as king crab safaris, snowmobile tours, quad and e-bike tours, etc. The border tours are either 1) quad tours to the current border crossing point in Storskog and the former one in Skafferhullet, or 2) riverboat tours along the Pasvik river where the border goes in the river and on the riverbank. The company has built a base just by the riverbank borderline, where the visitors are able to step off the boat to a terrace “café” and an outdoor exhibition of old photographs, and to visit the borderline by the two border posts. Here you can see the Orthodox church in Boris Gleb in the distance on the Russian side. On the way to the destination the boat stops by an Orthodox site, a cave marked with an icon. This study includes the river boat tours.

## 2.2. The tour guides

The two guides of the two companies followed in this study were both born in Kirkenes, and are ethnically Norwegian men around 70 years old. They possess extensive personal knowledge of the area, but have no formal tourism education. The guides have always known of each other and have some common contacts. They both live in Kirkenes or close by with their wives, and are locally-acknowledged actors in tourism.

Odd-Johnny Andersen (born 1955), guiding for Booking Kirkenes, has been working as a tour guide for six years. He ended up in tourism only later in life. He has an education as an electrician and a social worker, having studied in Lillehammer. He has a diverse work history, including working as a seaman in merchant marine, and 20 years of different jobs in the iron ore mine in Kirkenes. He has also worked as a fire fighter, an ambulance emergency worker and in civil defence. Before entering the tourism industry, he worked in a white-collar job for the newly-opened local iron ore mine. After the mine went bankrupt in 2015, he struggled to find employment at his age and re-evaluated his skills, eventually realizing his valuable knowledge of the local area could be utilized in tourism. Odd-Johnny considers his local experience an asset in his work, and shares his family history stories related to the area. Odd-Johnny is a calm, pleasant and humorous guide with endless knowledge. He guides in Norwegian, Swedish and English. He says he always tries to find



out what his customers are most interested in and personalizes the tour to the customer's wishes.

Hans Hatle (born 1949), guiding for Barents Safari, has been working in tourism ever since he founded the company in 1996. He previously worked for an aircraft company and as an army officer collaborating with NATO. Through his occupations he has acquired skills in several languages and guides in Norwegian, English, German and French. Hans is a natural storyteller enchanting his audiences with an energetic presentation reflecting his background as an army officer. Shifting from one language to another, he serves international groups and elderly customers. While the river boat tour presentations seem to follow a script, questions and his conversations with the tourists add variety to every tour. Hans is a rather outspoken personality and a river boat tour with him is an entertaining show in ideal settings.

### 2.3. Border tourists

Most tourists in Kirkenes come on the Norwegian coastal express, Hurtigruten, Kirkenes being the turning point of the route. Those taking the round trip from Bergen to Kirkenes and back spend only about three hours in the town, while those flying into or from Kirkenes might stay overnight. Cruise ship tourists participating in the border tours generally come from Central Europe or The British Isles, The United States, Norway or other Scandinavian countries. Before the pandemic, Asian tourists visiting Kirkenes also bought tours to the border, but in 2022 are still absent. The tourists visit the border as part of their more general journey in northern Norway, so most people on these tours are not traveling to specifically see the Russian border.

The six tours followed in this study included visitors from the US, UK, France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, mainly cruise ship visitors but also some independent travellers. The tours consisted of 1) a river boat tour with cruise ship tourists from Central Europe, 2) two tours to Storskog (the border crossing point) with cruise ship tourists from Sweden, 3) a tour to Storskog and Grense Jakobselv with a Norwegian group from Oslo, professionals visiting a conference in Kirkenes, 4) a tour to Storskog and Grense Jakobselv with a family from Wisconsin, US, and finally 5) a tour to Storskog, Skafferhullet and in the Kirkenes city centre with a family from Oklahoma, US.

## 2.4. Local people living in the border region

The municipality of Sør-Varanger has approximately 10, 000 inhabitants, of which about 3, 500 live in the urban settlement of Kirkenes. The main ethnic groups in the area consist historically of Norwegians and of two national minorities, the indigenous Sámi population and the Kven population of Finnish origin. Sør-Varanger has the highest percentage of Russians of any Norwegian municipality at 4.2%, making them the largest immigrant group there<sup>4</sup>. 16,7 % of residents have an immigrant background, with 68 different countries represented<sup>4</sup>. In elementary school one can study Norwegian and Sámi as a first language, and Finnish and Russian as second language. While 69,8 % of the inhabitants in Sør-Varanger are members of the Norwegian Lutheran church<sup>5</sup>, there is also an Orthodox parish under the Russian Orthodox Church.

In this study several local voices are present through discussions and encounters. The main actors representing locals outside tourism business are a couple living in Jarfjord, seven kilometres from the Russian border. Regnor Pedersen (born 1944) and Bodil Pedersen (born 1945) can be considered valid representatives of locals as they have lived most of their lives in the region. Bodil, the wife, is an ethnic Norwegian born in Jarfjord and Regnor, the husband, is of Kven / Finnish descent born in the village of Bugøynes known for being a Finnish settlement from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The couple have adult children living elsewhere in Norway, and the family language is Norwegian. Regnor speaks the old Finnish language especially spoken formerly in Bugøynes, but claims to have forgotten it due to lack of practice. He prefers to speak of a Finnish origin, but refers to Kvens when talking about his background, typical for the minority in this region. The couple have also lived elsewhere – Regnor studied in Trondheim, Bodil studied in Alta, and both later together in Tromsø. They are now retired, but Bodil used to work as a school teacher while Regnor worked as an engineer for the local iron ore mine among other places. He has owned a consultant company and also worked in Russia. They used to visit Russia for

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics Norway. 09817: Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents by immigration category, in total and separately, country background and percentages of the population (M) 2010 – 2023. Municipalities 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Norway. Church of Norway 12025: Municipal Facts, by region, contents and year. 2021.

shopping – especially buying gasoline – in their free time, like many others in the region before the pandemic.

## 2.5. Kirkenes, past to the present



Map 1. The Norwegian–Russian border. ©OpenStreetMap.

Kirkenes is an urban settlement in Sør-Varanger municipality in Troms and Finnmark, the northernmost county in Norway. The municipality borders Russia in the east for 196 kilometres, with Finland in the southwest. Kirkenes is located 15 kilometres from the Russian border and 50 kilometres from the Finnish border. The area used to be a common district inhabited mostly by Sámi (and Kven) populations until the border treaty of 1826, which divided the Sámi reindeer herding territories known as *siida* (Andresen 2005). The opening of the iron ore mine company Sydvaranger Ltd. in 1906 attracted new inhabitants and Kirkenes became a “Norwegian town”, the mine playing a central role in the local community (Viken, Granaas & Nyseth 2008: 27, 28). After the Russian Revolution in 1917 the border became a Finnish–Norwegian border from 1920 to 1944, when Finland gained independence and held the “Pechenga corridor” to the Arctic Sea. After World War II the border reverted back into a Russian border. (Viken et al. 2008: 27.) The war hit Kirkenes hard as Germany occupied Norway and the Soviet Union bombed the town fighting against the Germans. When the Germans retreated, they burnt the town as well as the rest of Finnmark and the Soviet Union liberated the area in 1944. (Wråkberg 2019: 5.) The

town had to be entirely reconstructed after the war, and there are still visual elements of the wartime (Viken et al. 2008: 27). After the war Norway became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Russian–Norwegian border turned into a border between NATO and the Soviet Union (Viken et al. 2008: 27), known as the closed Iron Curtain. During the Cold War years, the border became heavily militarized with a strong army, police and secret intelligence presence in the area (Viken et al. 2008: 27).

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Kirkenes was predominantly a mining town. At its peak, the mine employed 1,500. In the 1980's, the mine faced challenges, closing down in 1996. (Viken et al. 2008: 28.) The state funded the restructuring of the local economy and other sectors were developed, such as a shipyard contributing to the Kirkenes harbour servicing the Russian marine industry, while the public sector supported creating a large percentage of residents employed in public services. (Viken et al. 2008: 28).

The collapse of the Soviet Union had a major impact on Kirkenes and Sør-Varanger, with cross-border activities and border crossings increasing dramatically (Viken & Nyseth 2009: 57). In 1993, national authorities founded the Norwegian Barents Secretariat in Kirkenes, funding Norwegian–Russian collaboration and establishing the Barents Region, choosing Kirkenes for its headquarters (Viken et al. 2008: 30). The local economy has been based on the Russian market, and shopping centres have opened for Russian customers (Viken & Nyseth 2009: 60, 56). In addition to the presence of Russian seamen and tourists, a local Russian minority has formed in the municipality (Viken et al. 2008: 31). Various political and cultural activities related to Russia or to the border theme, such as festivals and seminars, have also emerged (Viken & Nyseth 2009: 59), and Kirkenes has become a political meeting point for national and international politicians and journalists to discuss Barents issues (Viken et al. 2008: 9-10).

The industrial sector has also discovered new possibilities: in addition to the mine reopening in 2009 yet closing again in 2015 (Wråkberg 2019: 6), there have been plans to develop Kirkenes as a transport hub for the Arctic Sea route, and as a supply centre for gas and oil activity in the Barents Sea (Viken et al. 2008: 29, Viken & Nyseth 2009: 57-59). A railway to Nikel has also been a plan at times (Viken et al. 2009: 57), as well as a railway connecting the harbour to the Finnish rail network (Bennett 2019). Chinese investments have been increasing in the area since the 2010's, especially in the form of

winter tourism, but there is also Asian interest in the oil and gas resources as well as the Arctic Sea route (Bennett 2019).

## 2.6. The effects of the war in Ukraine

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, people were gathered for the yearly Kirkenes conference discussing high north issues and cross border collaboration, business and politics. It was the second day of the conference, when the world woke up to news about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. People were shocked. That day, the Russian ambassador cancelled his participation in the conference. Lena Norum Bergeng, mayor of Sør-Varanger, gave a speech expressing support to the Ukrainian people, yet declared the need for continuing the grassroots-level “people to people” -co-operation of the Barents Region.<sup>6</sup> Former mayor and former leader of the Barents Secretariat, Rune Rafaelsen gave away a medal he had received from Vladimir Putin, president of Russia, in 2020 for building friendship between the people of Norway and Russia<sup>7</sup>. On the Russian side, the county governor Andrej Tsibis in Murmansk expressed support for Putin’s actions disappointing people in Kirkenes and making them realise that the political collaboration had to come to an end<sup>8</sup>. Cutting off contacts with Russia would lead to enormous change in the local society, and the town turned to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which recommended ending all contracts and meetings with the Russians<sup>9</sup>.

The European Union decided on sanctions against Russia, with Norway following suit. In Kirkenes, this would heavily affect the local economy, threatening approximately 300-600 workplaces as several companies in Kirkenes rely on Russian clients<sup>1, 2</sup>. One of the largest private employers in Sør-Varanger, the shipyard KIMEK which employed about 80 people<sup>10</sup> repairing and maintaining mostly Russian fishing vessels, prepared to lay off all

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<sup>6</sup> Jonas Løken Estenstad, Rolf Jakobsen, Dagny Elisabeth Ulland & André Bendixen. *NRK*, February 24, 2022, “Sterke reaksjoner i nord – russisk ambassadør droppet Kirkeneskonferansen”, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/angrep-pa-ukraina-vekker-sterke-reaksjoner-pa-grensa-til-russland-1.15867709> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Hilde Gunn-Bye, “Former Mayor Rune Rafaelsen Returns the Russian Order of Friendship Received from Putin” *High North News*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/former-mayor-rune-rafaelsen-returns-russian-order-friendship-received-putin> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Frode N. Børffjord & Eirik Sørenmo Påsche, “Stor propagandamarkering i naboby til Kirkenes: – Umulig å ha politisk samarbeid med dem”, *NRK*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/stor-propagandamarkering-i-murmansk--umulig-a-ha-politisk-samarbeid-med-dem-1.15900140> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Norsk telegrambyrå, “Ordfører: Kirkenes-samfunnet endret etter Ukraina-krigen”, *Nettavisen*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/ordforer-kirkenes-samfunnet-endret-etter-ukraina-krigen/s/12-95-3424266066> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Kimek. <https://www.kimek.com/about-us> (accessed November 14, 2022).

its employees due to the sanctions<sup>1</sup>. The ministers of trade and industry and of finance visited Kirkenes on March 8<sup>th</sup> to meet with the local companies which had tried to appeal to the government to understand the importance of Russian clients for the region<sup>2</sup>. On May 7<sup>th</sup> the Norwegian ports were closed for Russian vessels, but the government made an exception for fishing vessels<sup>11</sup> (later, in October 2022 the ban would be extended to include fishing vessels, but Kirkenes was one of the northern ports excluded from the ban<sup>12</sup>). The government also announced a support package worth 3 billion NOK for companies in Eastern Finnmark affected by the sanctions<sup>13</sup>. Later in spring, even Prince Haakon and the prime minister of Norway visited Kirkenes to show support for the region.

In April, the Storskog border crossing point was closed for goods transport in accordance with the sanctions.<sup>11</sup> Due to pandemic restrictions, the border traffic had already been reduced, as Russians were not visiting Kirkenes, and vice versa, people from Sør-Varanger were not traveling to Nikel and Murmansk. The war had effects on international tourism flows to Kirkenes as well. During the spring, two foreign cruise ship companies cancelled their tours to Kirkenes for the summer season, as they considered it to be too close a location to Russia<sup>14</sup>. Two years into the pandemic keeping international tourists away, the local tourism industry was worried that Kirkenes would now be considered too dangerous to visit, and that the tourists continue to stay away.

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<sup>11</sup> Håvard Grønli, Une Solheim, Christian Kråkenes & Kristina Kalinina, "Stenger grensa og hamnene for russisk transport", *NRK*, April 29, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/stenger-grensa-og-hamnene-for-russisk-transport-1.15944094> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Terje Engø, "Symbolsk endring for russiske fiskefartøy", *Kystmagasinet*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.kystmagasinet.no/batsfjord-kirkenes-rusland/symbolsk-endring-for-russiske-fiskefartoy/1442075> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Eirik Sørenmo Påsche, Frode N. Børfjord & Rune N. Andreassen, "Regjeringen lanserer kraftig krisepakke til Øst-Finnmark, men deler av den kan være ulovlig", *NRK*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/regjeringen-lanserer-kraftig-krisepakke-ost-finnmark-men-deler-av-den-kan-vaere-ulovlig-1.15898147> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Norsk telegrambyrå, "Cruiseskip dropper Kirkenes - for nært Russland", *Teknisk Ukeblad* May 21, 2022, <https://www.tu.no/artikler/cruiseskip-dropper-kirkenes-for-naert-rusland/519686> (accessed April 20, 2023).

### 3. Methodological aspects

#### 3.1. Access to the field

As I was going to conduct my master's project in Norway, I needed to find a field in which I could use the English language, limited by my insufficient skills in Norwegian. However, I ultimately ended up in tourism not only due to the language but also for its role as an industry dealing intrinsically with place and place narratives. I contacted three local tourist companies in Kirkenes and managed to agree on a collaboration with one of them. Upon my arrival to Kirkenes, however, the company cancelled our agreement and I was forced to find a new partner for my project. That changed the nature of the project, as I didn't have one stable and committed collaborator, but I was invited to join the tours of two other companies, Booking Kirkenes and Barents Safari. The change of plans meant that I would not be able to participate in the everyday life of tourism workers, but would be joining the tours. Commercial enterprises are not the most usual partners in academic ethnographic studies and there are some specificities in it. Companies may be cautious to cooperate, having to protect their own commercial interests. Luckily, both companies gave me access to their border tours. National borders are sensitive places, and studying, especially filming, in border areas can be considered suspicious, as I learned in a discussion with Bjarge Schwenke Fors, a border researcher. Ethnography on borders has its own specificities to consider as well. For example, on the Russian border I would not have been allowed to film a Russian border guardian if one were present, so I had to stay alert.

During the fieldwork period I lived in a residence of the Barents Institute, a research institute attached to UiT in Kirkenes, and I was kindly offered a desk at the institute office. The friendly institute staff connected me with local actors relevant to my project. The institute is located in the Barents House, an office cluster uniting organisations founded for collaboration in the Barents Region, which gave me access to a community of people working with Barents issues.

I had visited Kirkenes once before, more than 15 years ago on a holiday trip. My father and I had stayed at a local couple's house in Jarfjord – Regnor and Bodil, who were introduced in the first chapter. Regnor is a friend of my father's, whom he had gotten to know through work. During that holiday, we were taken to fishing, to eat king crabs and to

Bugøyenes. Even after so many years, I still felt drawn to Kirkenes and wished to return one day. Once there for my master's project, I called Regnor and Bodil to ask whether they remembered me. I hadn't been in any contact with them since that trip with my father, but my father had called them so they did know to expect me. They were the only people I knew in Kirkenes beforehand, so it was natural to approach them while seeking out perspectives of the locals in my study.

The main subjects in the film have seen a rough cut of the film and all of them have expressed contentment with the result, in fact they have been rather pleased. I am more than happy to have been able to work with the companies in a successful manner, as they gave me access to their tours for free. I hope that my film can contribute to the local Kirkenes community – including the local tourism industry – by providing a “reflection point”.

### 3.2. Ethnographic fieldwork in Kirkenes

The project is based on empirical work of a nearly three-month field period in Kirkenes from April 19<sup>th</sup> to July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Ethnographic fieldwork is a method aimed at producing knowledge by living in and sharing a social space with the people studied (Madden 2017: 1, 16). An ethnographer takes part in the everyday life of a human group, creates relationships and talks to people (Madden 2017: 16). It is qualitative research attempting to build in-depth description and analysis by immersing in a society (Madden 2017: 16–17, 76). My initial motivation was to study “place” in Kirkenes, thus my method was participation in the local life. During the fieldwork period I lived in one of the typical wooden houses just next to the city centre, on the second floor of a local couple's house. During the months which I got to spend in Kirkenes, I became immersed in the local life by joining events and activities, meeting and talking to people, reading newspapers and working on my project in the Barents House where I got to share lunch and coffee breaks with the employees and to read local newspapers. I tried to sense the ambience of the place in this particular situation and understand what was going on in the town. Staying in the place and being with the people for several months helped me to get to know this place in a way that I would not have been able to achieve through other methods. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this study does not represent all local perspectives and opinions. However,



the locals who have seen the film have expressed that it did capture the atmosphere in Kirkenes in this particular situation.

From the very beginning I felt welcome in Kirkenes and more “at home” than I did in my university town elsewhere in Norway. Almost every second person seemed to open up about having Finnish roots as soon as I shared that I myself came from Finland. People would even say, “We are a little bit like the Finns here.” They told me they would go on holidays in Finland and cross the border to buy groceries, and even road signs in the area include Finnish (or Kven) translations. I did not feel cast out as a foreigner as strongly as could usually be the case abroad. But I did feel like an outsider on weekends, when the town turned into a ghost town as the residents drove to their cabins, a prevalent leisure activity in the region. On top of not having a cabin to go to, I didn’t have the knowledge of “who’s who”, and my history was not connected to the history of the place, so I was indeed an outsider. While I did get immersed in the local life, it is important to acknowledge my position as an outsider when studying a place. Ethnography is in fact characterized by a dynamic of outsider’s and insider’s views, *emic* and *etic* perspectives, with both contributing to the production of knowledge (Madden 2017: 19–20). Even when immersing, an ethnographer should be able to “step back” in order to produce a critical account of the subject. Being in the field, in a place and with people, must have an aim for an ethnographer. (Madden 2017: 76–77.)

### 3.3. Participant observation among tourism

In addition to living in the place, I carried out participant observation within tourism, using the visual method of filming. Participant observation is a central method in ethnography, simultaneously combining the practice of “being with people” and of observing people (Madden 2017: 75). Participation refers to what was already defined as intrinsic in ethnographic fieldwork: living with people, joining everyday activities and “doing what others do” (Madden 2017: 16, 75). Alpa Shah (2017) argues that participant observation “is a form of production of knowledge through being and action” indicating theory emerging from action (Shah 2017: 48). Participation is thus not just a method but intrinsically connected to ethnographic theory as a praxis of producing theory from the particular (Shah 2017: 48–49).

Accordingly, I did what tour guides and tourists do: went on tours with them. Through participant observation I got to live the touristic experience on these tours. I interacted with the tourists right from the beginning of the tour to connect with them, and filmed conversations with them. As the tourists changed each trip, the tours lasting only a couple of hours and the guiding being rather intense, there was not an opportunity to create actual relationships, but we nonetheless did share the experience, and I tried to be there as myself, as another human being, and not take the role of a distant observer – while still doing my best to be reflexive.

As I participated in several tours with the company Booking Kirkenes, I got to know Odd-Johnny Andersen, the guide, a bit and we became some sort of a team, and I started to experience the tours from the guide's perspective as well. Accordingly, I was doing participant observation not only from a tourists' point of view but also from a tour guide's perspective.

Outside the tours, I had conversations off-camera with tourists lingering in the town and had the chance to meet tourists not participating in the border tours. I also spoke with local souvenir shop owners and hotel workers to get a more comprehensive understanding of the local tourism sector.

### 3.4. Interviews

I used interviews to gain contextual information for my study. I needed to understand the overall situation in Kirkenes and to learn about development in tourism in the area. The interviews were thematic, unstructured interviews or conversations. I interviewed people working in tourism or business development as well as employees and managers of the two tourist companies. As the relationship with the tour operators turned out differently than I had planned and I did not get to carry out participant observation with the employees outside tours, I ended up filming interviews with the guides, whose time given to my project was part of their costly working hours. With the interviews I managed to collect essential information on their views.

### 3.5. The effect of the camera

A place has a physical form. A visual method can show a place in its concreteness. In

ethnography, this means that by filming one is able to communicate the physical environment in which people live (MacDougall 2020: 3). The visual method produces a different kind of knowledge compared to text, something that the visual anthropologist David MacDougall (2006) calls “perceptual knowledge” contrasted to conceptual knowledge. Perceptual knowledge is communicated through appearance and cannot be verbalised. (MacDougall 2006: 5.) It is able to convey the experience of what people sense (MacDougall 2006: 5, 2020: 3). Regarding place, it is especially useful in showing the physical environment but also “co-presence”, a relationship between several objects in a space (MacDougall 2020: 2): how people are in a place, for example tourists or guides at a destination. A camera obviously affects the situation. Firstly, filming is intentional, and the person behind the camera reacts in their own ways to what is happening (MacDougall 2006: 3). The filmmaker’s engagement can influence the situation being filmed (Young 2005: 110). Secondly, filming affects how people behave. Thus, in visual anthropology one observes people under the specific circumstances of being filmed. (Young 2005: 101.)

In tourism, people come and go. In addition to the temporality of the stay, on every tour there are new people. One is not able to create an intimate relationship with tourists as an anthropologist. This affects how close one can get to the people, not just in a symbolic sense, but also literally with a camera. People on vacation are enjoying their free time, seeing a new place, taking photos and *looking at* things – not expecting to become *looked at* through a camera themselves. Suddenly, on a border tour in Kirkenes there was someone wanting to film them. The guide asked for everyone’s permission at the beginning of each tour and most of the guests agreed to being filmed, yet few seemed comfortable in front of the camera. They didn’t like to be the focus, which affected my camera work and, thus, my research. I don’t have close-up shots of the tourists, and every time I wanted to talk to a tourist on a tour on camera, I needed to ask for their consent. Not everyone agreed, and with those who did, the communication shifted into a more formal type, as they were now talking on camera.

The awkwardness of the tourists in front of a camera did reveal something about tourism itself as being connected in gazing at places, and a visual method in tourism studies is quite a twist – filming with a camera, one is looking at tourists looking. I tried to film and show how tourists were being in places, and how they were looking at places: how they took out their phones and cameras and took photos of the destinations, how they

positioned each other and themselves for the photos and just what they did at the border. In a film, one can see the tourists in the place and the materiality of the place – the corporeality of the tourists in relation to the materiality of the place. The physical being an essential part of a place, and the topic of the project being a place, the visual method can provide the spectator with crucial information on the topic. Naturally, the border tours consisted of verbal content as well, and this project deals with narratives. Through the audio-visual method one can observe how speech and narratives work in relation to the physical space/place.

The tour guides are used to performing, as that is what they do on tours even when there is no camera. When I filmed interviews with them or asked them questions after the tours, they would be talking a bit more as though they were “on camera”. In an interview, they had a chance to get their point of view across. In contrast, the local couple were not so used to performing nor, especially, being in front of a camera, and they seemed rather reflective on what they said. I didn’t get a chance to film them doing anything, only sitting at the table talking, so we have only their verbal expressions, their tone of voice and their facial reactions. The material which I filmed in the area the couple lives in, Jarfjord, communicates the local living environment, adding to the verbal function of the conversation.

In this project the visual method contributes to the understanding of how a place is perceived in various ways. We get to see the place ourselves, what the tourists are looking at in the place, and what the locals are looking at. Together, this written thesis and the film provide an understanding on how narratives work in the perception of space. Focusing on tourism, the project produces knowledge on how tourism constructs places and how tourists perceive space, making it a study on space, place and imagination.

### 3.6. A Finnish perspective

An ethnographer arrives to the field with a personal history and a sociocultural background, which affects the whole process of doing ethnography, from selecting a topic to writing an analysis. Reflections on one’s subjective experience and collective context should be included in an ethnographic study in order to understand how the ethnographer is part of the product of the research. (Davies 2008: 4-5.)

When I visited Kirkenes for the first time with my father, I knew nothing about tours to the Russian border. Our hosts, Regnor and Bodil, didn't bring us to there. The border wasn't really an issue for us, as the village where we lived ourselves, is located in eastern Finland, 90 kilometres from the Finnish–Russian border. I didn't grow up next to the border like our hosts, yet it was still close enough to notice its impact: Russians are the largest foreign population in the area where I grew up, the nearest city has a train connection to St. Petersburg with the station developed to cater of the logistics metropolis market, with a mall built to attract Russian tourists. I have crossed the border several times, even during the Soviet Union years, so I know what lies beyond that line. I saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, and remember the huge buzz about it, but was too young to understand the meaning of the events. I was born too late to fear a nuclear war, but did have a perception of the Soviet Union as a highly militaristic nation, and I remember the thrill of was quite crossing the border during the Soviet times. Still, I was rather surprised to hear about border tourism in Kirkenes – an activity I had not heard of happening in Finland (although I later learned of such tours from Finnish towns as well). I was rather amused by the phenomenon as I did not understand the point of just going to see a border.

My home country has a very different history with Russia than Norway, and especially compared to Kirkenes. The area known today as Finland belonged to Russia for over a century, until the year 1917. Finland and the Soviet Union fought one another in the Winter War during World War II, Finland loosing land to the Soviet Union. My personal experience had been that even my generation was taught to fear Russia somewhat, but it seemed like things had changed since my youth – until today, when the war in Ukraine prompted Finland to apply for NATO membership. Saying all this, for a Finn, the statue of a Soviet soldier in Kirkenes is quite a dramatic view. At the same time both Finland and Kirkenes have been defined as a place between East and West, and while there is an Orthodox parish belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church in Kirkenes, Finland has the Finnish Orthodox Church, but under the Patriarch of Constantinople, not Moscow.

The fact that I have lived close to and visited Russia myself does affects my perception of the country, which probably differs to some degree from that of the majority of the border tourists in Kirkenes. At the same time, I am younger than the majority of the visitors I met, and did not live through the coldest years of the Cold War. My Finnish background

provides me with some similar experiences of Russia to those of the locals in Kirkenes, but also some crucially different ones. As David MacDougall (2006) has noted, images are not only images of others, but also of the filmmaker (2006: 3). My background affects how I have (literally) framed tourism on the Russian border with my camera.

## 4. Theoretical reflections

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of the study. It is divided in sections discussing the concepts through which border tourism in Kirkenes is examined.

### 4.1. Place

In the recent decades, anthropology has changed its focus from places to displacement and movement in a globalised world of immigration and “multi identities” (Lems 2016: 217–218). More balancing views have emerged after the “spatial turn”, as Annika Lems (2016) writes: “(Place) is always there, where we are. Because we cannot escape its presence, it plays into the way we see and engage with the world”. (Lems 2016: 319–320.)

*Place* is a central concept in geography, defined in relation to the concept of “space”. Space and place have been considered separate: space is set out to be an abstract area, whereas place is associated with meaning and human attachment. (Cresswell 2015.) Cultural geographer Doreen Massey (1994) challenges the dualistic notion of place and space as distinct. For Massey there is no meaningless space, as the spatial *is* a social phenomenon. This means that there is no asocial, apolitical space separate from place and that they are rather intertwined than two separate concepts. The argument is based on a notion of space intrinsically connected to time, as there is no space separate from time – space is dynamic and exists simultaneously with time (Massey 1994: 2–3.) Massey states that the undynamic understanding of space derives from western dualistic thinking in which space is seen as passive while time as historical and political (1994: 6) Massey’s theory is a feminist critique of western dualism which has excluded social relations from the spatial (1994: 7).

Consequently, Massey criticizes the notion of place as a bounded and static entity (1994: 5). As the spatial is intrinsically social, place then would not be “a bounded area but open and porous network of social relations”. Places are constructed through interaction, in relation to other places, since in a place there are relations “stretching” beyond the local. Place is a product of interaction with the world: the global and the local entangle, as the global is part of constituting the local, the outside formulating the inside, implying that place is not constructed only on a local level but in relation to the global. (1994: 5, 9, 121.) Massey calls it a “global sense of place”, aiming at a new, “progressive” understanding of place (Massey 1994: 146–147).

The idea of a socially constructed place leads to a notion of place as multiple: for Massey the spatial is an arena of power relations and any attempt to set a fixed, singular identity for a place is a “battle over power” to impose a singular meaning to a place (1994: 5). While there are dominant images of a place, they are prone to change over time as they become contested (Massey 1994: 121). The anthropologist Margaret Rodman (1992) uses the concept of “multilocality”: people experience place differently and thus several realities exist simultaneously. An ethnographer then should study the interests of different actors in the construction of space. (Rodman 1992: 643–644.) Rodman’s notions emerged as a critique towards the anthropological understanding of place as simply a setting for ethnography, a rather unproblematic view of place. Geographers analysed place as perceived, a lived experience, the “sense of place” (cf. Massey’s (1994) further development of the concept, “global sense of place”), an approach giving agency to the people living in the place. (Rodman 1992: 640–644). Place is constructed locally, but “local” here is understood as connected to and including the presence of other places (Rodman 1992: 643, 647).

#### 4.2. Place-making and place narratives

*Place-making* is a concept originating from cultural geography and urban planning. In cultural geography the term has been connected to the perception of space and to the way people give meaning to space. It is an organic practice, contrasting the notion in urban planning, where it is employed in architecture and city design. (Lew 2017: 449–450.) The term has become interdisciplinary and is often used in relation to tourism, mostly on terms of destination planning and marketing (see e.g. Granaas 2018, Hultman & Hall 2011, Lew

2017). Place-making has also found its way to anthropology (see e.g., Wortham-Galvin 2013, Lems 2016).

Yi-Fu Tuan (1991) has a phenomenological approach to cultural geography associating place-making with place perception, the “sense of place”. Tuan connects place-making to *narratives* by claiming that speech and language are an essential part of making places, of “calling places into being” (Tuan 1991: 686). Naming and using words are ways of differentiating space and directing attention, “making invisible visible, narration is able to create “a vivid presence” of an object”, and stories repeated in a group become public and “have mythic power”, binding people to a place. “Dramatic narration is able to create and sustain place”, Tuan writes (Tuan 1991: 686–690.)

Rodman (1992) criticizes Tuan for emphasizing the verbal overtly, herself including also the nonverbal under the concept of narrative: “narratives of places are not just told with words; they can be told and heard with senses other than speech and hearing”. (Rodman 1992: 649). Rodman, writing of multilocality discussed in the previous section, claims that the social construction of place actualizes in narratives of place. In accordance with her concept of multilocality, including an idea of multiple interests in a place, these place narratives can compete with each other. (Rodman 1992: 652.)

### 4.3. Collective memory

*Collective memory* is a concept originating from the notion of memory also as a social phenomenon constructing group identity (Halbwachs 1992). Later studies have focused on social struggles contesting identities (Cole 2001: 23–24), including “How societies remember” by anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989). Connerton claims that in order to understand any experience we must base it on a prior context, and that even a “new beginning”, such as a revolution, recollects the past (Connerton 1989: 6). Behind our actions there is “a background narrative” which people take for granted and don’t think of (Connerton 1989: 18).

James Wertsch (2008), among others, has criticized the notion of a social group possessing a memory analogous to that of an individual, and instead believes that memories should be seen as distributed among a group. He defines collective memory as



“a representation of the past shared by members of a group such as a generation or a nation-state”. Memories, he contends, are distributed through narratives shaping our understanding of the past, and we should analyse their distribution. Wertsch differentiates between “specific narratives”, referring to certain events and actors, and “schematic narrative templates”, general schemas unrelated to a specific situation. Collective memory deals with these generalized stories told differently each time but reflecting the same narrative: an implicit pattern underlying specific narratives. (Wertsch 2008: 120–123.)

The earlier remarks on collective memory have also been criticized for lack of awareness of the voice behind the memories. A social group tends to be presented as a homogenous group with one voice and common interests. (Cole 2001: 23.) Indeed, Urban Wråkberg (2019), analysing the collective memory of the iron mine in Kirkenes, has written: “more than one group of local people exists”. Speaking specifically of Kirkenes, he notes that it is a heterogenous and a politically divided community (Wråkberg 2019: 1–2).

#### 4.4. Tourism

The classics of tourism studies consider tourism an intrinsic element of modernity. According to Dean MacCannell (2013), tourism reflects modern society in a manner that no other phenomenon does. Complex, modern society has lost a sense of authenticity and seeks for the authentic somewhere else (MacCannell 2013: 13, 15). John Urry (2002) approaches tourism as an essential modern experience, as never before have the masses travelled as they do in the modern era (2002: 4–5). It is a characteristics of the modern citizenship, as today one is expected to go on holidays, considered to be good for one’s health (Urry 1995: 130). Urry considers reflexivity a crucial element in modern subjectivity – “that people are able to monitor and evaluate their society and its place within the world, both historically and geographically” (1995: 145), arguing that this reflexivity is connected to the expansion of travel and its visuality – for tourism is fundamentally a visual experience (Urry 2002). He calls the modern consciousness “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” (Urry 1995: 145). In the postmodern society there has been a dramatic proliferation of images, which has universalized the “tourist gaze” – that is, the visual consumption of places – so that tourism has changed the society in a fundamental way and has become a part of the cultural experience, losing its distinctiveness (Urry 1995: 148–149).

Globalisation, travel and reflexivity also affect places, as they become developed for visitors, the local culture reinterpreted with the global in mind (Urry 1995: 152–162).

Instead of authenticity, Urry (2002) argues that tourists seek difference; we travel to experience something that differs from the familiar (2002: 12). Traveling on holiday is a contrast to the usual workday, and a break from the everyday life (Smith 1989: 22–23, Urry 2002: 12). The tourist gaze looks for objects of difference and tourism is an opportunity to be in contact with what is strange to oneself (Urry 2002: 8, 12). The object is thus culturally and socially framed (Picard & Di Giovine 2014: 3), and anything can potentially become a tourist attraction, as it is the information about the object that arouses interest (MacCannell 2013: 128). Noel B. Salazar and Nelson H.H. Graburn (2014) argue that otherness plays an essential role in tourism. They write that “tourism involves the human capacity to imagine or enter into the imaginings of others” (2014: 1). Imaginaries of people and places are cultural frameworks and meanings which can be traced in shared images and discourses, in what “people say and do”. These collective imaginaries impact people’s behaviour, but are unacknowledged in public discourse, deriving from a general cultural imaginary produced through education and upbringing, media, art, etc. (Salazar & Graburn 2014: 2–3, 7). Edward Said (1985) uses the term “imaginative geographies” to discuss cultural interpretation and meaning making of geographical space, representations distinguishing other places and people from oneself. Imaginative geographies “help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” – defining something as “the Other” helps to define the culture or place itself (Said 1985: 55, 1). Tourism employs these imaginaries of otherness and emphasizes differences instead of communalities (Salazar & Graburn 2014: 11).

Similar to imaginaries, tales and narratives are also at play in tourism (Bruner 2005). Pre-tour narratives – preconceptions about particular places – affect not only tourists’ expectations but also the tourism industry, as it creates tours. These “master stories” help the guide’s work as tourists share in the narratives and use them to further interpret what they see or hear. According to Edward Bruner, the tourism industry relies on old narratives and is less active in creating new ones. Tourists go on tours to experience something that makes a good story, to buy souvenirs and take photographs in order to tell their own story afterwards, thus the pre-tour narrative is reshaped by the lived, embodied experience. The

destination itself has agency, as the master narratives do not determine the final narratives, but the tourists interpret their experience and reproduce new stories they share after the journey. (Bruner 2005: 22–26.)

#### 4.5. Border

International borders are places where two states meet, points of both separation and joining (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 8, 15). Borders define and secure territories both structurally and symbolically: they are signs of state territory but also of sovereignty. Borders are where states control the flow of “people, goods, wealth and information”. (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 15.) States thus show their power at borders, with borderlands becoming places for negotiating power (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 1). Hastings Donnan & Thomas M. Wilson (1999) write: “Ever since the creation of modern nation-states, borders and their regions have been extremely important symbolic territories of state image and control” (1999: 13). The state institutions which sustain borders are usually located in the border areas, and people living in the borderlands are affected by policies in a distinct way, as border communities become a part of negotiations on local, national and international levels (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 15, 5, 12). By looking at borderlands we are able to study power in and between states (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 4). “Border cultures” often stretch outside the boundaries of the state, with ways of life shared across the border, consisting of at least two national cultures. Identities in border areas are potentially hybrid, shifting and multiple as “local people define their membership in local, regional, national and supranational entities”, while the state and the residents negotiate their roles. (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 12–13, 79, 154.)

National borders and mass tourism are both part of the processes of modernization and industrialization as “the building of the modern nation-state and its systems of communication [come] with progress in transportation and communication” (Prokkola 2010: 224). Tourism and borders are inherently connected. Dallen J. Timothy (2001) distinguishes three different kinds of tourism related to borders. First, borders are zones of transition. Secondly, borderlands are areas of cross-border tourism. Third, borderlines themselves can become destinations – though this last one being is least usual type of tourism. Border destinations may be political, such as national or subnational borders, or non-political boundaries like lines of longitude and latitude. (Timothy 2001: 41–56.)

Borders attract visitors because they represent difference – in the case of political borders, cultural, linguistic or political difference (Timothy 2001: 42). The political relationship of the countries, differences in socio-cultural or economic conditions, and the image of the country across the border all affect how a border is perceived. The higher the degree of (perceived) differences, the more the border is considered a barrier, and can even arouse fear in people and prevent them from crossing the border (Timothy 2001: 32–33.) A border acts as an actual barrier when the crossing is restricted and it can only be crossed through checkpoints, with travel documents and procedures are required, or when conflicts and hostile international relations tighten the regulations, even closing the border (Timothy 2001: 12–31).

The permeability of a border and its symbolic meanings can change according to political and geopolitical periods (Prokkola 2010: 225). The Norwegian–Russian border has been defined as a barrier in tourism, being a strict NATO military border with only one crossing point (Fors 2018, Viken 2007). This limit tourist flow into Russia, but at the same time this strictness works as an attraction for tourists (Viken 2007). Arvid Viken (2007) has argued that tourism on the Norwegian–Russian border commemorates the Cold War, the border representing the Iron Curtain. Bjarge Schwenke Fors (2018) contends that local tour operators promote the border as “the border between east and west”, bestowing on it “a significance that goes far beyond that of an ordinary national border” (2018: 176.) In the Norwegian border region, Russia is staged for tourists, representing Eastern otherness by employing, for example, symbols of religious and political difference (Fors 2018: 175-191). Open or closed, the boundary must be made visual, as Timothy (2001) notes: “Differences are invisible until they are marked on the ground with tangible objects. Once this is done, they have potential to become tourist attractions.” (2001: 54.)

#### 4.6. Research questions

The presented concepts and theoretical lenses will serve as a reflection point for my analysis. No theory is merely applied in the study, instead the theoretical framework is employed as different perspectives of looking at the phenomenon of border tourism at the Norwegian–Russian border. The main research question is: what kind of narratives do border tourism in Kirkenes construct of Russia, the Russian border and Kirkenes in relation to Russia? Border tourism is studied in the context of geopolitics, and the analysis

explores how place narratives in Kirkenes are influenced by the current geopolitical situation, and how this situation affects border tourism.

My analysis will first discuss local people and their relationship to the border: what kinds of narratives are circulating locally? Then, I focus on the tourists: what kinds of narratives do the tourists have of Russia and the border? Third, I consider the tourism industry: what kinds of narratives do border tours construct regarding Russia? The underlying question, inspired by Doreen Massey's theory of place (1994), sums up these different perspectives: how does the tourism industry construct place as an actor between insiders and outsiders, the local and the global?

## 5. Local narratives



Following the notion of place, consisting of multiple realities and constructed through narratives (Rodman 1992: 643, 652), several place narratives are detected circulating in Kirkenes: the narrative of an industrial mining town, a border town, a political place and a multicultural community (Viken & Nyseth 2009). Narratives can be competing (Rodman 1992: 652), but in this case some of them seem to support one another (Viken & Nyseth 2009: 53). Traces of all of these narratives could be observed in Kirkenes still in summer 2022. The narrative of a mining town has been strong, as the iron ore mine company has had a central role in the town (Viken & Nyseth 2009: 57) and is part of the local collective memory in Kirkenes (Wråkberg 2019). Since the mine closed in 1996, however, additional narratives have emerged. Viken & et al. (2008) argued in 2008 that the narrative of a “border town” had become dominant, and it can be seen to have persisted ever since (see

e.g., Fors 2018). This chapter will discuss the different local narratives circulating in Kirkenes, of Russia, Kirkenes in relation to Russia and the Russian border.

### 5.1. A border town

For the residents of Sør-Varanger, the Russian border is a part of their everyday life – something that “has always been there”, as several people expressed. As such, it is a practical reality of which they have to be conscious when fishing from a boat or driving a snowmobile along the border river, ensuring they stay on the right side. I was told that one might face Russian border guardians fishing on their own side, too. Bodil Pedersen, born and still living in Jarfjord, seven kilometres from the border, commented that the border “has never affected us”. The only impact she identified was that “we have always known that we are being watched”. Both the Norwegian and Russian states monitor the area, so both states are using their power in the borderland (Donnan & Wilson 1999), but the people living in the area are used to it. As Bodil sees it:

*It has always been there and it has never been a problem. We have never defined it as a problem.*

While living along a state border could be considered a rather neutral reality, the border town narrative places an emphasis on living by the border and contact with Russians. The narrative emerged in the early 1990s as a consequence of the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of the border leading to an increase in border crossings and cross-border contact, and to the formation of a Russian minority in Kirkenes. Cultural cooperation projects and friendship agreements had already existed across the border during Soviet times, but the 1993 establishment of the Barents Region escalated the funding of cross-border projects (Viken & Nyseth 2009: 60–62, Viken et al. 2008: 28). These actions were part of national security policy after the Cold War (Hønneland 1998: 277), an example of border regions being symbolic places for state control (Donnan & Wilson 1991: 13), however the border town narrative is also recognised on a local level (Viken & Nyseth 2009: 59). The municipality has been active in strengthening the image of a border town not just by promoting cultural and commercial cooperation, but also in a performative manner, for example including Cyrillic on street signs (Fors 2018: 185). In Kirkenes, one can spot commercial actors using “Barents” in their company names, with public

institutions also incorporating references to cross-border contact in their names, such as the *Barentshallen* sports hall or the *Samovarteatret* theatre. The town even has the nickname *Lille Murmansk*, “Little Murmansk”<sup>15</sup>. National policy affects border regions distinctly, but the local regions can become committed to projects (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 11–12), as how, in Kirkenes national policy seems to be intertwined with the local place-making agenda. Local commercial and cultural actors constructing the border town identity understand the peculiarity of the place in relation to Russia within Norway (and beyond), providing an example of how a place is constructed in relation to other places, the outside becoming part of the inside (Massey 1994: 5).

The border town narrative seems to have been adopted by the average inhabitant along these past decades in Kirkenes. The locals are in contact with Russians, and have largely all been to Russia themselves, which is part of the reason the border isn’t seen as “a problem”, as Bodil Pedersen explained:

*We have visited Nikel sometimes and bought fuel. And many have travelled to Russia for holidays.*

In 2010, Norway and Russia agreed upon on a border citizen visa permitting the border region residents to travel freely within 30 kilometres from the border for 15 consecutive days<sup>16</sup>. People generally cross the border for purchasing cheaper products or, as a high school student mentioned, spending a weekend with a group of friends – typical cross-border tourism in borderlands (Timothy 2001: 56). Delegation tourism and also more independent tourism already existed in the Soviet times, but after 1991 the increased cross-border contact allowed for easier border crossing to meet friends and family (Viken 2007: 12–13). Today, Russians are considered a part of Kirkenes, which can be observed through comments made about how the town changed when Russian tourists disappeared during the pandemic – people claim that Kirkenes is not “the same anymore”, nor as lively as it used to be there.

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<sup>15</sup> Hanne Larsen & Kristin Humstad, “Strid om russiske skilt i «Lille Murmansk»”, *NRK*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/krigen-i-ukraina-forer-til-strid-i-kirkenes-om-russiske-gateskilt-skil-fjernes-1.15918212>. (accessed April 10, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Norwegian Government Security and Service Organisation (G.S.S.O.). Grenseboeravtale. [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/jd/vedlegg/grenseboeravtale\\_eng.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/jd/vedlegg/grenseboeravtale_eng.pdf) (Accessed January 3, 2023).

## 5.2. A friendly neighbour

As locals are connected to global networks (Massey 1994), they are aware of the master narratives (Bruner 2015: 22) regarding Russia and are able to reflect upon their position in the world (Urry 1995: 145) in relation to the more general Western narrative of Russia, – especially negative ones, as in times of conflict. Without specifically mentioning Russia, I asked Bodil and Regnor Pedersen about the experience of living by a state border, but in answering they referred specifically to Russia, declaring that there was no problem – implying that I had assumed the opposite in asking that question. Regnor continued:

*It's because we have never had such an experience with Russia... in the sense that this border has the longest time of peace with Russia, there have not been any conflicts or problems.*

*---We see that the border is there and that Russia is on the other side but we have never seen it as a threat that Russia is so close.*

He frames the local, unproblematic relationship with Russia as though it is an exception and refers to the peaceful history, which is not uncommon in Kirkenes. The two guides followed in this study stated something similar in an interview done separately from the tours:

- *We're always like good neighbours. We've been good neighbours for centuries.*
- *And we have never had conflicts.*
- *Never conflicts. Norway is the only neighbouring country which has never been in a war with Russia.*

Aagedal (2009, as cited in Fors 2018: 100) calls this the “peace myth”, a narrative of a peaceful border, which was also circulating in summer 2022 as people reflected upon the changed geopolitical situation. Recounting a narrative of a peaceful border can be seen as an attempt to make sense of the events and to obtain agency in a disempowering situation, as that is what storytelling can do (Jackson 2008: 15–16). In a situation where friendly relations with Russians are questioned, people in Kirkenes turn to the history to justify their relationship with Russia.



In addition to the narrative of a peaceful border, the collective memory of relations with Russia in Kirkenes also seem to include a narrative of the Soviet Union as the town's liberators from Nazi occupation during World War II. A statue of a Soviet soldier stands near the city centre, commemorating the 1944 liberation of Kirkenes, with locals participating in commemorations. They often express that their history with Russia is "different", comparing their experience to what it might look like from the outside (Urry 1995: 145). To me, a Finn, people would say, "It's a totally different story to what happened in Finland".

Aagedal also references the "restoration myth", the idea of historical relations with Russia having been restored in more recent Barents collaboration (2009, as cited in Fors 2018: 100-101). The promoters of the Barents Region have even argued that the region is a continuation of a historical "Barents Region" which existed already before the Bolshevik Revolution, using the "Pomor trade", a form of bartering between Russians and Norwegians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as an example (Nielsen 2001: 163, 169). Such notions of a peaceful border, of Russia as a liberator, of historical contact with Russians can all be seen as specific narratives contributing to a generalized story – the collective memory of Russia as a "friendly neighbour" (Wertsch 2008: 120–123).

### 5.3. An exceptional relationship with the Russians

*Russia as an enemy, but for others...--- Russia has not been an enemy for us.*

This comment by Regnor Pedersen reveals the local awareness of the exceptionality of Kirkenes' relationship with Russians, indicating their reflexivity of their place in a global perspective (Urry 1995: 145). In the current context The narrative of Russians as friends has adopted a new tone in the 2022 political context, with defensiveness against assumed accusations evident in such statements. As guide Hans Hatle stated:

*We are not naïve, but we are not anxious as people in Oslo try to say: "Oh, they must be silly up there and too friendly". Why shouldn't we be friendly? They're our neighbours, and always have been – that's how life is.*

The other guide, Odd-Johnny Andersen, referred to the local exceptionality towards Russians:

*It's also important to note, what you said about 60 different nations here, all living peacefully side by side, no arguing about language, culture, religion in this area. [It] is growing by having peaceful relationships with anyone, even with the Russians.*

Once again, the locals speak with an outsiders' perspective in mind (Urry 1995: 145), reflecting on their own position inside Norway and how their experience of Russians differs from that of their fellow citizens. Place is negotiated in relation to other places in a situation in which the local narratives are contested, just as place is always constructed in relation to other places (Massey 1994: 5). Regnor Pedersen reflected upon the narratives in the context of the current geopolitical situation, from a local, national and global perspective:

*We hear that the Russians are an enemy of Norway or of NATO, but we've never experienced that sort of enemy relationship. Certainly, we know that it exists... what's happened this past year... we're aware of world politics.*

As the Ukrainian conflict activated state policies affecting Kirkenes forcefully, national news reported how Kirkenes was "hit" by the sanctions against Russia<sup>17</sup> and how "few in Norway feel the war in Ukraine in their bodies as heavily as the residents of Kirkenes"<sup>18</sup>. The narrative of this special relationship with Russia could be traced in local demands of exemptions to the sanctions due to the crucial economic relations the region has with Russia, with appeals to acknowledge the Russian people as "our neighbours, our family, our friends, and colleagues"<sup>19</sup> – emblematic in Kirkenes' decision to not end its sister city agreements with Russian towns, unlike other northern Norwegian cities<sup>20</sup>. Such relationships are seen as a distinct between Russia and Norway and, based on this

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<sup>17</sup> Stian Strøm & Jo Hermstad Tronsen, "Vestlige sanksjoner mot Russland rammer Kirkenes: 80 ansatte kan bli permittert", *NRK*, Mars 18, 2022, [https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/vestlig-sanksjoner-rammer-kirkenes-\\_80-ansatte-kan-bli-permittert-1.15896580\\_](https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/vestlig-sanksjoner-rammer-kirkenes-_80-ansatte-kan-bli-permittert-1.15896580_) (accessed November 5, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Norsk telegrambyrå, "Ordfører: Kirkenes-samfunnet endret etter Ukraina-krigen", *Nettavisen*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/ordforer-kirkenes-samfunnet-endret-etter-ukraina-krigen/s/12-95-3424266066> (accessed November 14, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Trine Jonasse, "Condemns Russia, Not the Russian People", *High North News*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/condemns-russia-not-russian-people> (accessed January 4, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Trine Jonassen, "Sier ikke opp vennskapsavtaler med Russland", November 8, 2022, *High North News*, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/nb/sier-ikke-opp-vennskapsavtaler-med-russland> (accessed January 4, 2023).

relationship, a narrative also emerges of the people of Kirkenes possessing special knowledge about Russia, for example with local companies marketing their knowledge and providing consultations regarding doing business in Russia, promoting Kirkenes as a “centre of excellence in Russian business relations”<sup>21</sup>.

In Kirkenes, the local experience of Russia – also in the current situation – was contrasted to the experiences of other parts of Norway. “We can’t go around being afraid of our neighbours”, stated Odd-Johnny Andersen. Regnor Pedersen further commented, regarding these differing perspectives:

*There is tension between Russia and NATO.---- Here, we don’t feel the tension, but in the south – where Russia is seen as NATO sees Russia, as an enemy – they create the tension. The tension is higher down there compared to what we experience up here. --- Then they come here and are worried.*

These statements imply that Norway as a country shares a similar narrative of Russia to that of NATO. In Kirkenes, however, a distinct narrative of Russia prevails, even amidst the current conflict, reflecting the typical nature of border regions whose distinct identity often stretches beyond the national (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 12). Kirkenes’ collective memory of peace with Russia is powerful, and the strong reactions of shock and sadness evident in responses to the attacks in Ukraine can be seen as signs of this. It is not easy to change a narrative that has been part of a place’s identity that is connected to a collective memory. It was difficult to consider their collaborators and neighbours as being part of what was happening in Ukraine, as it challenged the narrative of the “friendly neighbours”. However, the Pedersens admitted they had started to reconsider the situation:

*But what’s happened this year in Ukraine, it’s made us think. That it is our close neighbour who has done that all. We are not worried...*

- *unsure.*
- *Yes, you can call it that. We now often think about what they have done, and consider that we could end up in a similar situation, if it escalates in Europe.*

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<sup>21</sup> Sherpakonsult. Brochure 2010.

Since the war began, debate has begun regarding Kirkenes' place identity, evident through examples such as calls to remove Cyrillic street signs, an opinion which faced strong opposition from others. Such emotional reactions reveal the strength of the narrative. As discussions on social media grew heated, the town's mayor had to remind everyone of the friendliness the town had been proud of showing towards the local Russian minority<sup>22</sup>. By summer 2022, the Kirkenes community seemed confused. People were worried about the town's future, bemoaning how Kirkenes had once again, after the mine, built its economy on only one market. The narratives of Russia as a friend and of Kirkenes' exceptional relationship with Russia were being challenged by the war as the relations became cut off – typical for place narratives as they tend to be temporary and contested over time (Rodman 1992: 652, Massey 1994: 121). One example of the locals negotiating the relationship anew, was seen on the commemoration day of the liberation of Kirkenes in October 2022, as locals still gathered around the Soviet soldier statue, but turned their backs towards the Russian as they made their presentations during the ceremony<sup>23</sup> (the municipality did not participate in the ceremony at all<sup>24</sup>). The power of collective memory can be detected in how “new beginnings”, even revolutions, are based on the past (Connerton 1989: 6). Place identity connected to Kirkenes' relationship with Russians is still important for the town, but people were now challenging the official relations the town had with Russia. It should be noted, however, that not everyone in Kirkenes has identified with the place narrative related to Russia, even before 2022. Some claim that the “Barents identity” has been a top-down governmental project adopted by the local authorities, and does not appeal to the wider community outside the institutional Barents cooperation (Viken et al. 2008: 35-39).

#### 5.4. An unspectacular border

Kirkenes' narratives regarding Russia may be contested, but its relationship to the border itself seems as neutral as ever. The locals don't consider the border to be anything

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<sup>22</sup> Public meeting and a panel discussion organized by the labor party in the local community center Samfunnshuset in Kirkenes on May 9<sup>th</sup> 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Sidsel Vik, Allan Klo & Kristin Humstad, “Minnemarkering for frigjøringen av Norge ble protestmarkering mot krigen i Ukraina, *NRK*, October 22, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/minnemarkering-for-frigjoringen-av-norge-ble-protestmarkering-mot-krigen-i-ukraina-1.16148961> (accessed January 4, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> *High North News* “Russlands generalkonsulat i Kirkenes inviterer til frigjøringsmarkering”, October 20, 2022, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/nb/russlands-generalkonsulat-i-kirkenes-inviterer-til-frigjoringsmarkering> (accessed January 4, 2022).

spectacular, they wouldn't consider showing it to their own guests. Bodil Pedersen, living seven kilometres from the border, said:

*We might point out the Schengen tower, that's the only thing, but we don't [typically] talk about it.*

When asked about the border tourism, she said she didn't see the point of it:

*I have always considered it somewhat strange. What's there to see? There's nothing to see there. And Storskog is so ugly, it's not nice at all.*

The Storskog border crossing point is known to be a rather unattractive place, with locals telling me, "you can't even see Russia from there". If locals wanted to see the border, they have their own sites in mind, where one can "actually see something". Even if the locals don't consider the border to be a destination, however, they still reflect upon their place from an outsider's perspective (Urry 1995: 145). Bodil Pedersen understands that the Russian border can seem exciting to people who are perhaps "frightened to be by the Russian border". She's observed the Western master narratives (Bruner 2005: 22) about Russia at play, and was clearly amused as she told me about how, in her youth, she had met a tourist in the forest, crying in fear about the Russians. Still, the locals would prefer to show visitors something else: the Pasvik Valley national park or the picturesque village of Bugøyenes, enjoying nature, king crab fishing, simple country life. Many stated that Kirkenes is a place for living family life close to nature, with most people disappearing to their cabins whenever they have free time.

As narration and narratives are able to create places (Tuan 1991, Rodman 1992: 642, 652), and places are experienced through cultural and historical meanings (Rodman 1992: 643) it can be argued that narratives affect how people perceive places. In Kirkenes the local narratives impact how the locals see the border and the place, and to them, a peaceful border is not a thrilling destination.

## 6. Tourists' narratives



### 6.1. Russia as an “antagonist Other”

People travel to get a break from their everyday life, to see something that differs from their everyday experience (Smith 1989: 22–23, Urry 2002: 12). Tourism enables a contact with something strange to us (Urry 2002: 8) and the tourism imaginaries often reflect notions of Otherness (Salazar & Graburn 2014). Tourists select destinations with these imaginaries in mind. On the Russian border tours from Kirkenes, tourists can be seen carrying imaginaries of Russia as crucially distinct to their “own world”, as the Other (Said 1985). predominantly elder, Western tourists have been used to considering Russia as an antagonist, especially during the Cold War years, an attitude which has been invigorated by the recent Russian aggression. Thus, tourists come to the Norwegian–Russian border with pre-tour narratives (Bruner 2015: 22), in this case, with Western master narratives of Russia (Bruner 2005: 22).

Western tourists' perceptions of the Otherness of Russia can be sensed through the way they act on the border, and how they perceive the place. There seems to be something spectacular about being in the physical vicinity of Russia for them, since these tourists want to go to the border in the first place. The exceptionality can be seen through in their excitement. At Storskog, the border crossing point, the father of an American family from Wisconsin patted his teenage son on the back, commenting aloud in awe, “Oh son, it’s Russia!”. On a riverboat tour, Central European cruise ship tourists positioned themselves next to the Norwegian border post to be photographed by the guide, asking him to make sure that the Russian border post could be seen in the background. At Storskog, lacking

the specific visual markers of a border to Russia, tourists pose next to the Schengen border -signpost. For the tourists, the Russian border represents a difference – as borders do – and that difference is marked with visual objects (Timothy 2001: 42, 54) which the tourists use to communicate their tour narratives. As we see in the film, the visitors stand by the border posts and make gestures indicating conquest of a place. We get to see the co-presence of people and objects and the environment, seeing the tourists' interactions with the space (MacDougall 2020: 2). By posing next to these visual objects and taking photos, the tourists mark the place as being special and are able to tell themselves and their friends how close they've been to Russia. During a filmed coffee break, one German lady told me how excited she was to be there:

*I've never had the chance until now to go to Russia, and I just have a glimpse of that country... --- It's a special feeling and I'm thankful that we had the chance to come here.*

Being close to Russia and having “just a glimpse” of the nation feels “special” to her, a statement emphasizing the exceptionality of the border to a country unknown to most tourists. It is a place where one can have a look to “the other side”, to a place where one has never been, a country which was evidently fascinating the German woman and her husband. The Western master narratives (Bruner 2005: 22) of Russia as an Other seem to cause the border to be perceived as a special place. The German woman's reflections reveal a narrative of Russia as being crucially different, as she notes specifically that there is in fact no difference in the landscape:

*When I see the nature, if I look at the trees or the river behind us... it's all the same in both countries – in every country... And then there is this artificial border. Sometimes I feel crazy about that, it shouldn't be there.*

The visual format of the film allows us to see the physical environment (MacDougall 2020: 3), and in the film we see that there does not seem to be any kind of difference in the landscape she's referring to, so the difference must be marked (Timothy 2001: 54) – even the tourists realise this.

For some, the border tour seems to almost substitute an actual visit to Russia. According to the tour operators, the majority of their guests have not been to Russia themselves. In

the current situation, visiting Russia is no longer even an option. One couple spoke about how they had planned a riverboat tour in Russia for the summer, but because of the circumstances, they had now replaced it with this trip to the Russian border as they visited Kirkenes. A Swedish tourist rejected the whole idea, commenting “Who would have wanted to go there anyway!?”. Some prefer to experience of Russia at the border without needing to step foot inside the country. The Western master narrative of Russia as an antagonist had become reactivated by summertime, after the spring’s invasion of Ukraine, affecting the tourists’ attitudes. Through my observations, I would suggest that, for Western people, Russia’s Otherness is derived largely from the antagonistic relations the West has historically had with Russia. Otherness and antagonism are intertwined in the way in which Western people experience being at the Russian border.

## 6.2. The Russian border as a place of tension

*It seems pretty cool, also makes you think a little about what’s going on in the world today with all the stuff going on in Ukraine and throughout in the world – the uneasiness, it’s not a good thing. --- So, it feels very surreal to be this close to the Russian border, and knowing that there’s that tension again.*

The reflections of a middle-aged man from Wisconsin, the US, revealed their excitement in being there at the Russian border in this exact moment. The tensions between Russia and the West seemed to make the visit even more intriguing for the tourists, so the western master narrative of Russia as an antagonist is part of what attracts tourists to the border destination. As a German man expressed on a riverboat tour:

*We wanted to come here because we read about the history and political situation, and also now it’s so acute to see what’s going on in here, so we wanted to learn how people are handling it and how they can cope with it, this very difficult situation.*

Border tourism from Kirkenes has been considered “a celebration of the Cold War” (Viken 2007) and even in summer 2022 there was a German couple on a “nostalgia trip”. If people had previously come to the Norwegian–Russian border to commemorate the Iron Curtain, the new conflict seems to have updated the interests, making today’s experience about the current tensions, re-activating the Cold War atmosphere. As a consequence of



these new tensions, opposite phenomena can be detected: after the war in Ukraine began, the guides noticed increasing interest in the border, with the people coming to the border expressing more excitement towards the border itself. Meanwhile, some groups did not dare to come, such as cruise ships cancelling their visits to Kirkenes. Odd-Johnny spoke of some tourists who had been cautioned by their travel agencies, who were afraid to get out of the bus near the border. Also Norwegians from other parts of the country also began to ask if there were ever Russian military vehicles visible on the Russian side of the border, and whether it was safe to visit. The Russian border as a place of tension is a pre-tour narrative (Bruner 2015: 22) affecting the tourists' mindset as they decide whether to visit the Norwegian border region or not. The German couple on the riverboat tour ultimately did not consider the border to be dangerous, evidenced by the fact that they had come on the tour, but the topic had been discussed before their trip, the woman said:

*Many of our friends in Germany asked why we are so adventurous, and wouldn't it be a little bit dangerous, but it's such a remote part of the country so we thought that it would be safe for us as tourists.*

Her husband continued:

*We are not concerned, we are safe here. We are not frightened, but it's a very strange feeling to come so close to the Russian border because of the situation.*

There was nothing visibly implying any kind of heightened military presence in the area, but the antagonistic master narratives seemed to affect how the tourists perceived the Russian border, what the visitors saw and felt, the tension they experienced that made it feel "very surreal", "special" or "strange" to be "so close to the Russian border". Before the war in Ukraine, these feelings of tension were being invigorated through the commemoration of the Cold War, revealing that it's the antagonism that attracts visitors to the Russian border, even in tranquil times. Now, however, the tension is active again, and the antagonist narrative renewed. Western tourists perceive the Russian border as a place of tension – whether there is in fact any tension or not, locally. The perceived tension and antagonism contribute to the barrier nature of the border, attracting the tourists to visit (Fors 2018: 191–192, Hunter 2015).

### 6.3. Southern Norwegian tourists adopting Western narratives of Russia

Southern Norwegian tourists seemed to share the same imaginaries (Gaburn & Salazar 2014) and master narratives of Russia with the foreign Western tourists. In addition to asking about Russian military presence along the border, they would also arrive with questions about possible tensions in the local environment. One tourist expressed relief seeing that the area was peaceful and well-guarded, commenting that “you don’t see any Russians”.

The Norwegians seemed just as excited about the border as the other Western tourists, taking photos and posing. They were aware of the notion of the north of Norway being an unknown area to the south, with one of the visitors from Oslo expressing right away in a tour that, “It’s very nice for us southerners to get to see this area”. Monika, the manager of Booking Kirkenes, indicated that most southern Norwegians haven’t been to the north of the county, but that the pandemic had affected this, with many southerners travelling to the north during the pandemic while international borders were closed. Some say that it only meant Lofoten, which is still far from Finnmark. On the border tour, the visitors from Oslo, were a professional group attending a conference, and one of them admitted that it’s unlikely that they would have ever come to Kirkenes if it weren’t for the work trip. As we hear in the film, she acknowledged that she’s travelled all over the world, but she’d never been to Finnmark before. Odd-Johnny shared commented that southerners are often not familiar with the history of the north, but that, as Kirkenes had been in national news recently, the southern tourists seemed to know a little bit more about the border region as compared to the foreign tourists, leading to more detailed questions. Questions about Russians and about living by the border reveal that this is an unfamiliar reality for visitors, though, with one tourist stating:

*Of course, where I live in Oslo, it’s far from the Russian border, and the history, they have more history with the Russians, and a lot of people coming from Russia that live in Kirkenes, so they are much more connected to Russia than we are in Oslo.*

It seems that, southern Norwegians, Russia is similarly connected to the imaginaries of Otherness, just as much as it is for the non-Norwegian Western tourists excited by the Russian border.

It should be noted, however, that not all tourists visiting Kirkenes are interested in the border. I met a German couple in the town centre as they wandered about and waited for the cruise ship to depart who could not have cared less about the border. As the man put it:

*If there's nothing interesting in this place, I guess they have to come up with anything they have.*

## 7. Narratives created by the tourism industry



The two tour operators I followed both stressed the importance of local guides, who have a personal history with the area, even if local is connected to the global (Massey 1994), and the reflexive consciousness of modern subjects enables people “to monitor and evaluate their society and its place within the world, both historically and geographically” (Urry 1995: 145). Both of the guides in this study do have international experience which enhances their ability to reflect upon Kirkenes and “its place in the world”. Raab, manager of Booking Kirkenes, is German, but has lived in Kirkenes for 20 years, and the company’s main demographic is Germans. Monika considers her position ideal as she knows Kirkenes well, but she also knows the interests of Germans. Her comment is emblematic of how the

tourism negotiates place between insiders and outsiders: the local must make sense to the tourists coming from elsewhere, and the stories told must be framed in a more global framework. Narratives are created through interplay between tourists and local operators. Thus, this chapter will look at the various narratives constructed by the companies offering the Russian border tours.

### 7.1. Russia's presence

All the Kirkenes border tours emphasize *the presence of Russia* in Kirkenes, as well as the border region, using it as a metaphor either for the town's physical vicinity of Russia, or as signs of "Russianness". By conveying Russianness, the tours construct an experience of Russia for the visitors without even entering the country, with Russia instead staged through name, symbols and storytelling (Fors 2018: 175). Early on in tours Odd-Johnny would often talk about how close the tour would get to Russia, assuming this to be exciting information for the tourists coming from areas not neighbouring Russia.

During the second week of May, a group of southern Swedes took a tour to the border crossing at Storskog. The large bus was almost completely full of cruise ship travellers, mostly couples in their 60s and 70s. As we departed, and already at the first turn, the guide, Odd-Johnny, pointed out a road sign indicating the way to Murmansk, just as he does in the film. It was the direction we were driving in, so it seemed as we were heading towards Russia. As we left the town, he pointed to another sign, now highlighting that Murmansk was written in Cyrillic. The road signs are a part of the actual infrastructure used in tourism storytelling to indicate the presence of Russia. The Cyrillic letters highlight difference, as difference in language can work as an attraction in tourism (Timothy 2001: 42). As mentioned earlier, the municipality has set up street signs in Cyrillic in the city centre partly for touristic reasons (Fors 2018: 185), however the guide points out the signs but without mentioning their origin, so for the tourists they function as a sign of Russianness in the area. Later, we arrived at the Paats River and, crossing the bridge, the guide pointed towards the hills, declaring: "*That is Russia*". The hills there are green and forested – the same in all directions. However, the Swedes turned their heads towards where the guide pointed, stretching to see the hills to the right, taking out their phones and snapping photos. Without the guide's comment, it would have been impossible to know that those specific hills were part of another country. The tourist gaze seeks difference

(Urry 2002: 12), but in truth, there was nothing different to be seen here. Yet the guide labelled the landscape as something worth gazing upon, as something different: “Russia”. The information about the object makes it interesting to the tourist (MacCannell 2013: 128), and a sign denoting “Russia” marks the object as distinctive (Urry 2002: 13, Tuan 1991: 686 ). The tour operators know the associations that the name “Russia” will evoke; how master narratives and imaginaries are activated through a reflective gaze.

Soon after, the bus pulled over, and the guide Odd-Johnny pointed out the Russian Orthodox church across the river in the distance. It was far away, but you could spot the golden onion domes glowing in the sunshine, and once again the tourists took out their phones. It may have been a tangible object in the landscape on the Russian side, but it was so remote that the photos wouldn’t have turned out well. The church can also be spotted on a river boat tour, and that tour also visits a cave, an Orthodox site marked by an icon, where the guide tells about the Orthodox history of the area and of the Orthodox parish in Kirkenes. Even the boats are named after Orthodox saints, with an icon placed in the bow. The Orthodox religion is used as a sign of religious difference, once again representing the East (Fors 2018: 176), and thus in constructing a sense of Russianness or Easternness in the area.

Returning to the bus tour, a few other structures could be spotted in the distance on the Russian side as the journey continued: the military base in Boris Gleb and a hydroelectric power plant. Once, with the American family from Wisconsin, we stopped by a riverbank where you could see the Russian customs station. The guide disappeared briefly, returning with an artificial road sign saying “Russia 490 metres”, as shown in the film, drawing attention to the physical vicinity of Russia. Evidently the guide assumed that this would make an impression on the American family. He pointed the sign towards the hills on the opposite shore. The film lets us see people in the environment (MacDougall 2020: 3): the tour guide directing the attention of the American tourists with a sign, pointing their gaze towards the hills. As again, there was no difference in the landscape along the border, the guides needed to mark and dramatize the difference through symbols and storytelling (Fors 1918: 181–182) as way of labelling the opposite shore as “distinctive” (Urry 2002: 13) and constructing a Russian presence. Taking photos, the tourists appeared to see something special – once again the name “Russia” differentiating a feature in the space (Tuan 1991: 688). The associations and narratives of Russia affect

how the tourists perceive the place and make them see something more than just a hill. However, the youngest child of the American family yawned and seemed more interested in dipping their toes into the cold, arctic river, as they hadn't yet been as exposed to the cultural narratives of Russia as the elder generations. For the child the hill was just a hill.

Finally, arriving at Storskog, the guide Odd-Johnny encouraged everyone to take photos by the gate leading to the customs area. The grandmother of the American family placed all the children in front of the gate for a photo, and Odd-Johnny took a photo of them all together, announcing that they were "almost in Russia!" – even though it wasn't even possible to see into the Russian side. Encouraging photo-taking and stressing the proximity of Russia, the guide generated a touristic narrative of having been to a special place, a place somehow different and worth visiting. Tour operators construct the Russian border with the tourists' narratives in mind, creating a special place, contradicting the local's perception of the border. This is an example of how the tourism industry constructs places from an outsider's perspective, as well as of local's reflexivity of their place in the world (Urry 1995: 145), as local Kirkenes actors understand that there is something special about the place for outsiders. During the Cold War, the locals saw how the border attracted visitors from elsewhere, so these links to the "outside" likely contributed greatly to the notion of Kirkenes as a border town as, according to Massey, place identities are formed in interaction (Massey 1994: 120). Kirkenes' organised border tours can be argued to have emerged due to what Massey calls a "global sense of place", with relations stretching out of the place and hence the outside becoming part of the inside (Massey 1994: 146–147, 5).

Driving towards the village of Grense Jakobselv, we stopped by a riverbank, where the border goes through the middle of the river. Odd-Johnny announced that "We are four kilometres from Russia", once again stressing the proximity of Russia. On the river boat tour, tourists are brought even closer, stepping out of the boat at the basecamp directly by the borderline as the guide, Hans, stands by the Norwegian border post, announcing to an international cruise ship group that, "Russia starts in two metres". Hans encouraged the tourists to stand next to the Norwegian border post and offered to take their photos, again contributing to the narrative of being "almost in Russia". In Storskog, there is a gift shop selling mostly Russian items so that visitors can even buy Russian souvenirs, even on the Norwegian side. Souvenirs work similarly to photographs as a means for post-tour

narratives (Bruner 2005: 24), though the shop owner did comment that tourists this year have been boycotting the Russian items.

History is also used to conveying the idea of Russian presence in the area. Tourists hear how, before the introduction of the border, this was a “common area”, and they hear about the volatile history, from border negotiations to the Soviet Union’s liberation of East-Finnmark in 1944, after which they controlled the area for 11 months. Odd-Johnny spoke about different occasions in history, when, if something would had gone differently, the area would now be a part of Russia. As he stated to an American tourist:

*I think – my opinion is – that it's only because of the NATO system, that Norway is not part of Russia.*

The area is presented as an area of ambivalence historically, an area that has been partly Russian or an area of Russian presence, or even the possibility that, without NATO, all of Norway could be part of Russia today.

The present-day Russian minorities in the area also plays a role in signalling Russianness as well. In the film, we are standing with the American family by the gate to the customs area when a car drives through. The guide recognises that it is being owned by a local Russian and announces this to the group – another sign of Russianness. One of the tourists notices that the car nevertheless has a Norwegian license plate and appears confused, asking the guide, “What kind of a car is that?”. “It was a Russian family living in Kirkenes,” clarifies Odd-Johnny, indicating that Russians also live on the Norwegian side. Odd-Johnny explains that the Russian residents in Kirkenes are allowed to cross the border. “Okay”, replies the American man, realising that Russians are in fact part of the local community.

In this case, Russian residents passing unexpectedly were used to narrate the present Russianness of the area. On the river boat tour, even the presence of a Russian employee of the tourism company contributes to the narrative, as the tourists are able to meet an actual Russian. He was waiting at the pier, ready to catch the boat. The guide, Hans, entertained the tourists with the commonly-known Russian expression, “Harašo!”, using language to contribute to the tourists’ impression of difference (Timothy 2001: 42). Hans jumped out of the boat and caught the employee by his arm, presenting him as “our own

Russian expert!”. A living Russian, an actual company employee with duties, but presented in a way that makes him part of the narrative of Russianness in the destination.

These are all examples of the creative ways by which the tour operators create the tourists’ experience of having almost been in Russia, a place which, for them, is a distant and rather unfamiliar country. Border tours emphasize the vicinity and the signs of Russianness in the area, knowing this appeals to the visitors. Yet in the end, there are few actual, tangible signs of Russianness in the area, so Russia needs to be staged (Fors 2018: 175–191), with the “presence of Russia” narrated through stories, signs, and symbols. Tourists look for difference (Urry 2002: 12), and Russia represents this “difference”, so the local tour operators construct the area as a place of Russian presence, identifying the area as “different” and exploiting the western narrative of Russia as the Other.

## 7.2. Amicability

In addition to the narrative of Russian presence, local tour operators also understand that they have another exceptional story to tell: one of *friendliness with Russians*. They know this is a that differs the region from the experience of those in the rest of the Western world. This is yet another example of the ability of modern subjects to reflect on their place in the world (Urry 1995: 145), as they know their relationship with Russians is an exception to the Western master narratives of Russia as an antagonist. The most apparent sign of how this relationship is used to attract tourists is through the Barents Safari advertisement at the airport, declaring Kirkenes as the place “Where Norway kisses Russia” – though in response to the start of the war in Ukraine, the company removed this slogan and replaced it with something more neutral, as Hans mentions in the film.

The exceptional relationship Kirkenes locals have with the Russians is narrated through examples drawn from both the past and present. Each tour includes the local history from World War II: telling of the German occupation and the Soviets liberating East-Finnmark. Even if Kirkenes is told to have been destroyed by Soviet Union bombings, the narrative is still positive: the Soviets liberated Kirkenes, making it “the first area in Europe” to reclaim its sovereignty. Since then, the story goes, the situation has been stable: “It has been very peaceful here, no discussion about the border or anything”, as Odd-Johnny told an



American family from Oklahoma. The tourists learn that “Norway is the only country bordering Russia that has never been at war with Russia”, thus the Russian border is presented as an exceptionally peaceful one, once again as an exception to the Western master narratives on Russia. Instead, the local narrative is shared with tourists. There are stories of co-operation even during the Cold War years, when the border was heavily militarized. At one spot on a bus tour, the tourists get out of the car on a roadside to see a hydroelectric power plant located in the river on the Russian side. The guide explains how it was built in co-operation between the two countries “when the Cold War was at its coldest”, in the beginning of the 1960s, and produced electricity for both the Soviets and the Norwegians despite being funded by Norway. It is presented as an exception to otherwise hostile relations between Norway and Russia:

*It's a little special that a NATO country would build a powerplant in the country of “the enemy”, this area of Norway needed more electricity, especially with the mining company, and the Russians also needed [more electricity].*

Odd-Johnny says the word “enemy” accompanied by hand gestured quotation marks, signalling the relativity of the notion – after all for Kirkenes, the Soviets were liberators – but the story is framed for the Western tourists who hold the master narrative of “Russia as the enemy” in mind. The locals had even been visiting a bar near the powerplant, the story goes, until NATO put an end to the risk. In this manner, the tour guides both acknowledge the local and Western narratives, and negotiating between the two in their presentations. Odd-Johnny would also share a personal story of visiting the Soviet Union himself during the 1960s, spicing up his tale with a stereotype on Russia: cheap vodka. It is a story of Russia that tourists would recognise, part due to tourism imaginaries and pre-tour narratives about Russia. The vodka stories continue even when the presentations deal with the more recent times, with the guides saying that Norwegians still buy “vodka, vodka and vodka” when visiting Russia, as Hans puts it in the film during a river boat tour, making the tourists laugh.

Shopping is presented as an essential characteristics of cross-border contacts and interaction between ordinary people, enabled by the border citizen visa. For the Norwegian tourists from Oslo, the guide Odd-Johnny contrasted this local experience of Russians with the image presented by the national media:

*What you read in Oslo in the newspapers and on the news – “It’s bloody terrible over there!” – to put it nicely, but that’s not how we experience it. Most of us here in Kirkenes and in the neighbouring city Nikel, we have a relatively good friendship. We are on good speaking terms, we have this people-to-people co-operation which is on a ground level. We are in contact with the people over there, in shops, a café, or on the street, talking to them.*

Kirkenes is narrated in relation to Norway’s capital, Oslo, both as places constructed in relation to other places, in interaction (Massey 1994: 121) – this time with tourists from Oslo, the guide reflecting upon how Russia appears to the southerners, and sharing the local experience. He emphasizes the difference between the Russian elite and the ordinary people:

*In person, we learn things about Russians that we don’t get to read in newspapers, where it’s mostly about politicians – Putin and all that, but not about normal Russians who are very down to earth. They might invite you for a dinner, very hospitable people. They have very little, but they are eager to share it.*

He continues by comparing Russian and Norwegian habits ending up with the suggestion to learn from “normal Russians”:

*When they come to Norway, they don’t experience the same thing [as us] – we have abundance, but we don’t share. And that is a little bit strange. We should learn from them, the ordinary Russians.*

People in the border area are presented as having a distinct knowledge and experience of Russians in contrast to the rest of Norway, and normal Russians are presented in a positive light, contrary to the antagonist image of Russians – particularly in recent times. If storytelling is agency (Jackson 2008: 33, 15) the positive counter narratives of the relations with Russians are perhaps used for negotiating the local identity through interaction with others (Jackson 2008: 34-35, 41) – in this case, with fellow citizens from the capital city. The local borderland narrative may contest the national narrative, as Donnan & Wilson (1999) write, describing borderlands as places for negotiating power. In

the Norwegian context, the Barents collaboration has been a national agenda item, so the local and national narratives merge. However, the southern Norwegian tourists are told the same stories of friendship with Russians as any other Western tourist, of friendship with Russians, and the relationship between Kirkenes and Russia is narrated as an exceptional relationship within Norway, indicating that this is a regional narrative.

Just like the slogan “Where Norway kisses Russia” at the Kirkenes airport was removed, the war in Ukraine has also affected the friendship narrative. Stories about shopping across the border now conclude with a comment of: “but not anymore, everything has ended”. Yet the border tours are still relying on the stories of amicability with Russians as it is interesting to tourists as an exception to general relations between Russia and a Western country, monitoring the place (Urry 1995: 145) in this particular situation of strengthened antagonism between Russia and the West. Tourism in Kirkenes is distributing a local collective memory of Russians as a friendly neighbour, a general schema told by sharing several specific stories from the past and the present (Wertsch 2008: 121–123). The local narrative is a counter-narrative to the Western master narrative of Russia, affecting tourists’ narratives as they participate in border tours, interpret the experience and reproduce the new stories they share after the journey (Bruner 2005: 24–26). Narratives as linguistic phenomena are also a social practice which can have social effects (Fairlough 1989: 22–23), so the tourism industry can be seen as an agent with the power to construct place (Rodman 1992). In this way, the tourism industry is disseminating a local, long-existing narrative of Russia, and of Kirkenes in relation to Russia, but dominant images of places are prone to change (Massey 1994: 121) and the narrative is becoming contested in Kirkenes. The tourism industry might be the only local actor still profiting off the old narrative of friendliness with Russians.

### 7.3. Antagonism

Alongside the narrative of friendliness, the border tours also spread a narrative of *Russia as an antagonist*. Tours have to make sense to Western tourists, and must be framed in accordance with their understanding of Russia. Tour operators exploit Western master narratives on Russia to create an entertaining experience by the border, just as the tourism industry everywhere will organize tours with “master stories in mind” (Bruner 2005: 22). The border in this case is a state border, and state borders and borderlands are sites

where states show their power (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 1, 13); state borders are not just “local places”, and there are not only local narratives at play. Moreover, the Norwegian–Russian border is a border to Schengen, a supranational system. Furthermore, locals can have several memberships and identities and “define their membership in local, regional, national and supranational entities” (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 13). The people in Kirkenes and Sør-Varanger are also citizens of Norway, which itself belongs to supranational entities, such as the Schengen system and NATO, and considers itself a part of the “Western world”. The local is not a bounded entity (Massey 1994), and all these scales of membership of the locals can also affect local perspectives.

As Fors (2018) has observed on Kirkenes border tours, “the local tourism industry tends to exploit the closed nature of the border, turning it into an exciting ‘border experience’ for visitors” (2018: 178). From the start of the tour to Storskog, Odd-Johnny would stress that the border crossing “is the only legal crossing point” between Norway and Russia, further articulated and repeating this clearly later on in the tour. The closed nature of the border is further communicated through storytelling and by exploiting the regulations and other elements of border control. Approaching the border area, the guide announces that we are entering “a restricted area”, or, while driving towards Grense Jakobselv, mentions that “we are still in the military area”. At every border visiting site, the guides stress the importance of not getting too close to the borderline – while also cracking jokes – “Don’t fall in the river!” – giving tourists permission to joking too, such as the father of the American family from Wisconsin telling the kids: “Don’t go to the gate. Otherwise you won’t get back home to play hockey!”. Stories about people accidentally violating the border and the expensive fines they are given are told as an entertainment, while stressing the strictness of the border. On the way to the village of Grense Jakobselv the bus stopped by a signboard announcing the rules at the border, and the guide reads through it to clarify what one must not do when the bus stops by the river border. In addition to this, the guides stimulate tourists’ imaginations by telling stories about things one cannot actually see (Fors 2018: 179). For example, at the river site, the film shows Odd-Johnny telling an American man:

*Not very often one can see any Russians – they’re hiding behind the trees or rocks or something, watching us, making pictures, probably watching us right now.*

In the film we can see how Odd-Johnny looks at the tourist to see whether he buys the story, indicating how storytelling about the barrier nature of the border is a tool used to entertain tourists. Again driving towards Grense Jakobselv, the guide points out border patrol towers and, if they are lucky, border patrol cars pass by, working further to convey the border control in the area. The barrier character of the border works as an attraction (Fors 2018: 191–192, Hunter 2015), fitting into western tourists' master narratives of Russia as an antagonist, with storytelling further reinforcing the narrative.

The border is not only presented as a national border. It is always made clear that it is a Schengen border. As the guide Hans told the audience on a river boat tour:

*It is also a Schengen borderline. This is the outer edge of the Schengen area, and it's our duty to control that there is no illegal border traffic this way.*

"We" control the Schengen border, Hans says, entangling the local, national and supranational levels. At Storskog, tourists take photos standing next to the Schengen sign. The border represents a barrier between Russia and entities that the tourists are familiar with – systems and organisations of the "Western world". NATO is also present along the border, with guides speaking of a NATO "early reaction" system along the Russian border, and that "NATO takes care of the security in this area". Most of the tourists come from NATO countries themselves, so they can relate to such stories or information, and the tours make sense to them. In this way, the tours acknowledge the tourists' perspectives and construct the place in interaction with the outside (Massey 1994: 120).

As previously mentioned, Russia is presented by one of the guides as being such a threat that, without NATO, Norway would be part of Russia. Indeed, the antagonism between Russia and NATO is referred to in several occasions. The bus tour involves the insighting of the Russian village, Boris Gleb. The guide describes it as a "closed village", where "no one from NATO countries is welcome", which included some of the tourists themselves, such as the Americans. The hydroelectric power plant is presented as a strange cooperation, not only between Norway and the Soviet Union, also but between a NATO country and its "enemy" during the Cold War. The current situation has increased the antagonism, with Odd-Johnny mentioned on every tour how it is no longer safe to go to

Russia, because as a citizen of a NATO country “one cannot be sure they’ll get back home”:

*But if I want to go to Russia, I’m not allowed to. Or I might go, but the Russians say I’m not welcome because I’m from a NATO country and the Norwegian Foreign Minister says it’s not safe to go there.*

In Sør-Varanger, the Russian border seems to have become a place to reflect upon the current political situation of antagonism. The experience of being at the border, as well as tourists’ questions and comments, are all characterized by or related to the perceived tensions. The tourists discussed current events as Finland applying for NATO membership, with someone even asking me about it, a Finn, causing me to become a part of the destination itself. The Norwegian tourists from Oslo asked the guide whether there was “tension in society” and “what is the atmosphere like in Kirkenes?”. The guide answered with a smile, saying, “Should I give the official picture or...?”, then continuing on by talking about the friendly cross-border relations, indicating that there are two sides to the story also on the local level as well, two competing narratives (Rodman 1992: 652).

As noted earlier, the increased antagonism does seem to have enhanced the general excitement towards the Russian border – “Just as we saw during the Cold War”, stated Hans. On tours, the current situation was compared to the tensions of the Cold War period, as Odd-Johnny announced once, while driving:

*Now we are at risk of the Cold War coming back. We have the border between NATO and Russia, it’s almost like it was between NATO and the Soviet Union.*

The Iron Curtain is now the historical background for the border tours, but the current tension has reactivated the old narrative of antagonism attracting people to the border. The Russian border tourism encouraged by political antagonism has elements of “dark tourism” to it, similar to the tourism to the North/South Korean border, with its symbolism of conflict (Hunter 2015: 157). The Russian border is certainly a political destination, with tourists travelling there due to the geopolitical situation evoking discussions and reflections. Yet the narrative of Russia as an antagonist is not told only in relation to the

present situation. There are occasions in the history that are mentioned on the tours conveying the narrative of antagonism.

Referring to the mention that, had things gone differently, “this area would be Russia”, for example, one story tells how, after the border was declared in 1826, Russia laid claim to some of the areas given for Norway, as the villages had been built by Russians. Another story speaks of how, after liberating Kirkenes from the Germans, the Soviets had intended to keep Finnmark, with their troops staying longer than agreed upon until the UK and the US intervened. The story about the 1826 border negotiations, specifically, is told on each tour. Norway is said to have gained more than Russia, which Odd-Johnny presents as “the only good deal Norway has done with Russians”, making tourists laugh. The local tour operators exploit the western master narratives of Russia as an antagonist, knowing that this works as a motive for traveling to the border in the first place. Here, tour operators employ the outsiders’ perception of Russia as an antagonist, and once again the outside is constructing the inside (Massey 1994: 5). The barrier nature of the Russian becomes further enhanced, and the antagonist narrative and the heightened exclusiveness of the border entice visitors to the border itself, as Hans describes in the film:

*The more closed Russia is, and the higher the conflict level is, the more curious you are to visit Russia or the borderline and see Russians. --- Some [tourists] are scared to visit us, [others] come.*

## 8. Conclusion

Places are socially constructed, and narratives construct places; or, as Rodman writes, “places are narratives” (1992: 641–642). This study demonstrates how narratives related to Russia affect the perception of place along the Norwegian–Russian border. As the film reveals, there are few concrete Russian elements in the places tourists visit when on the Russian border tours, so narratives play a crucial role in the tours themselves.

Simultaneously, local narratives affect how locals perceive these same places. This study analysed these different narratives circulating locally in Kirkenes, among its visitors, and on the border tours. The local narratives and those of the tourists differ, or even oppose

each other: locally, Russians have been considered friendly neighbours, while for Western tourists, Russia represents an antagonist Other. For the locals, the Russian border is an unspectacular, endotic place, representing the “infra-ordinary”, as a French author Georges Perec (1997) calls it, whereas for the tourists it’s spectacular and exotic, as we tend to seek – and tourists travel for – the extra-ordinary (1997: 209–211). The film allows us to see in a concrete manner how the locals and the tourists notice different things in the same place: while the tourists want to see the border and gaze out at Russia, the locals enjoy the nature – highlighted at one point by the tour guide, Odd-Johnny, spotting a rabbit and admiring a sunset while the tourists are busy exploring a border church. Moments such as this conveys the notion of multilocality, that places have multiple meanings and several realities, as people experience places differently (Rodman 1992: 641–643). Culture and history affect one’s experience (Rodman 1992: 643), leading us to Massey’s (1994) remark on the indistinguishability of space and place: the spatial as a social phenomenon (Massey 1994: 2–3). Space conceptualised as intertwined with time (Massey 1994: 2–3), helps us observe how historical trajectories affect the perception of place on the Norwegian–Russian border, particularly in the current situation of geopolitical change.

The primary question of this study concerned border tourism and the narratives it is creating in relation to Russia – with the underlying question of how tourism is constructing places in Kirkenes. Border tours and the tour operators can be observed to be negotiating the places between insider and outsider experiences and perceptions, mingling local and tourists’ narratives. The narratives told on the border tours, of Russians as both friends and antagonists, contradict each other, lacking consistency. As tension attracts tourists to the Norwegian–Russian border, guides must tell stories of antagonism that make sense to the largely Western tourists. At the same time, the local guides have an exceptional story to share about a history of friendly relations with the Russians, which fascinates tourists as a curiosity. This inconsistency doesn’t seem to bother the visitors, in fact the tours work very well. As one person working in the local tourism industry said, “We are storytellers” – tourism is entertainment.

Currently, the war in Ukraine is affecting the narratives in Kirkenes, and there is ambivalence in the attitudes towards Russia. But there are two competing narratives of Russia and Russians. In spring 2023, I was told that private persons had been removing the Cyrillic street signs. The inconsistency of the border tour narratives is perhaps



becoming reflected in the reality of Kirkenes, where the place identity is becoming more complicated. It may be that it's only the tourism industry which still profits off the town's identity being connected to Russia, the only sector continuing to distribute the narrative of Russia as a friend.

The reactivated tension between Russia and the so-called Western world has caused outsiders to associate the border with tension, even perceiving it as a dangerous place one should avoid, even as it attracts other even more excited visitors. What has happened in Ukraine and, consequently, in Kirkenes, has impacted the local economy and identity as it attracts tourists to the border, with all these intersecting trajectories coming together in a single place, creating the "here and now" of Kirkenes, something that Massey calls "throwntogetherness" (Massey 2005: 140). According to Massey, places are formed through the negotiation of these intersecting trajectories (2005: 154). Tourism can be seen as a factor in these negotiations, with the tourism industry as an actor in negotiating a place between the local and the global. Since places are, in general, constructed not only locally but also in relations to the global (Massey 1994: 2), tourism is one of the ways how social relations "stretch out" of a place (Massey 1994: 9). As the Russian border tours have emerged out of these relations, contributing to a reflexive understanding of Kirkenes as a place in the world (Urry 1995: 145), and negotiating the place amidst changing situations, it can be argued that tourism is an actor *making places* as it provides a reflection point for society: what kind of story do we tell the world about ourselves?

In Kirkenes, the tour operators naturally have their own interests – such as wanting to continue to tell the story of friendship with the Russians – so they create one kind of a reality of the place for the tourists, the outsiders, a distinct reality alongside other parallel realities that exist in a place (Rodman 1992: 643). However, these tours can be seen as a social praxis through which "places come into being" (Rodman 1992: 642). Rodman argues that places are constructed locally, but in relation to other places (Rodman 1992: 643, 647), similar to Massey's notion of place identity being formed through interactions (Massey 1994: 120); this is exactly what the local tourism industry in Kirkenes is doing. In this study we have seen how places – Kirkenes, the Russian border and Russia – are constructed in interaction with other places – the East to the West, the North to the South. Places are entangled and localities are present within one another, the outside existing as a part of the inside (Massey 1994: 5, 7). The outside – world politics – have affected

Kirkenes heavily and, as everywhere, people in Kirkenes are hoping for an end to the war in Ukraine. In summer 2022, I heard people talking about the time after the war, but it is unclear, what the area's relationship with Russia will be like in the future. Kirkenes is in a *place* where they will need to reflect upon their *place* in the world anew. For now, the future of Kirkenes' place identity remains an open question.

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