



Refugee at an Arctic camp (Aynur_sib / Shutterstock)

Icy Routes to Safety:

A Humane Approach to Managing Ambitions of Refugee Weaponization at the European Arctic Border with Russia

By Pauline Baudu

Russia's border with the European Arctic was already receiving scrutiny following Finland's accession to NATO in April 2023. Last November, attention to the area further intensified as Finland saw an unusual influx of asylum-seekers crossing its border with Russia, resulting in Helsinki's decision to close all of its land checkpoints in light of openly-voiced concerns that Moscow was orchestrating the crossings. There are precedents to the recent situation at the Finnish border: in 2015, as Europe was experiencing a peak in refugee arrivals, an even larger number of asylum-seekers arrived within a short period of time in the sparsely populated Norwegian and Finnish Arctic borderland, leading to half-spoken suspicions over Moscow's involvement.

Despite these developments, Arctic migration routes through the Russian Kola Peninsula to Kirkenes in Norway and to Raja-Jooseppi in Finland, standing as the northernmost ways into the Schengen area, remain an understudied aspect of the borderland's geopolitical dynamics. There is limited research over what balanced, proactive and efficient policy responses to the instrumentalization of these routes by

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malign actors should look like. Yet, the use of large-scale population movements by Moscow to serve political or economic ends is well-documented.¹ In particular, in 2021, Moscow was suspected of orchestrating the influx of asylum-seekers at the Belarus border with Lithuania and Poland in revenge for EU sanctions towards Belarus²—an episode which prompted Finland to amend its legislation to be able to close its own checkpoints during “hybrid attacks”³. With rapidly changing strategic realities in light of the war on Ukraine, hybrid tactics against the European Arctic have been increasing in frequency and are expected to intensify.⁴ And future developments will likely continue to challenge existing policy approaches over the use of displaced populations as political leverage.

This piece aims to assess the ways in which the impacts of the war in Ukraine on both Arctic security dynamics and European migration policies may have provided Russia with greater incentives and opportunities to leverage Arctic refugee routes against its Nordic neighbors. Also included are policy options for both Norway and Finland to consider implementing to address this reality through a humane approach. Preventing future weaponization of vulnerable refugees requires acknowledging the importance of language and framing, avoiding narratives presenting refugees as a threat, and building societal resilience.

Russia’s northernmost border with the West in the spotlight

In November 2023, Finland’s border witnessed a sudden influx of people, mostly from Yemen, Morocco, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq,

traveling through Russia to seek protection from persecution and human rights violations in their countries of origin. According to Finnish officials, around 1,300 third-country nationals, among them many women and children, arrived from Russia without visas between August 2023 and January 2024.

Consequently, the Finnish government—which had already started building a fence at its border earlier in 2023 following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine⁵—decided to close its major crossing points in the South, causing arrivals to shift to northern checkpoints in the Finnish Arctic. On November 28, Helsinki closed the country’s last open—and northernmost—land border crossing with Russia, Raja-Jooseppi, citing national security concerns that Moscow may have been actively facilitating the arrivals as a hybrid operation. The Barents Observer, an independent Norwegian newspaper based in Kirkenes, reported that several Russian officials had acknowledged transporting migrants to the border via bus or bike following orders from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and that FSB border service personnel had been seen assisting the crossings.⁶ Since November, these concerns have been openly voiced by Finnish authorities, including Prime Minister Petteri Orpo,⁷ although the Kremlin’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied accusations about Russia’s involvement.⁸

Following the closure of the Raja-Jooseppi checkpoint—which remains effective at the time of writing*—asylum claims in Finland could only be made at air and sea ports of entry. As a result, hundreds of asylum-seekers remained stranded for weeks on the Russian side of the border

* On 8 February 2024, the Finnish government announced that all crossing points on the land border between Finland and Russia would remain closed until at least 14 April 2024. Source: Finnish Border Guard (RAJA), <https://raja.fi/en/restrictions-at-the-border-crossing-points-on-the-eastern-border-of-finland>, accessed 14 February 2024



in freezing winter temperatures falling below -25°C (-13°F). These circumstances prompted the governor of Murmansk to publicly blame Finland for the humanitarian situation, while Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zaharova asserted that it was a “sign of double-standards” from Helsinki.⁹ In addition, the mobility of Finnish and Russian nationals to and from Russia became equally restricted as a result of the border closure, sparking protests in front of Finnish city halls.¹⁰

Finally, in a later development that received relatively less coverage, the BBC reported in December that Russian authorities were pressuring migrants seeking to enter Finland into signing agreements to fight in Ukraine as mercenaries so as to “escape prison sentences” in Russia.¹¹

Although Finland appeared to be the primary target of the operation this time—in a sequence of events directly following its accession to NATO—the episode replayed a similar incident that occurred in 2015 on a larger scale, and impacted both Finland and Norway.

The 2015 precedent and initial wariness over Moscow’s involvement

In September 2015, as the main migration track used by refugees was already shifting from the Mediterranean Sea to the Western Balkans route, an unprecedented number of asylum-seekers also started to enter Europe via Russia—at first through Norway. Indeed, Russian border guards had suddenly changed their document-check practices, allowing third-country nationals to cross the border without valid Schengen visas. Some asylum-seekers arrived in Russian cars,¹² while the majority of them bicycled through the border using a legal loophole[†]. By late November 2015, around 5,000

people, originating mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, had crossed the Norwegian border via Murmansk and arrived in the municipality of Sør-Varanger—an area of approximately 10,000 inhabitants.¹³ For the first time, Norwegian border guards’ capacities were so strained that they considered the risk of seeing people crossing the border fence even outside of the Storskog checkpoint—which eventually happened, when border forces arrested a man who had mysteriously managed to climb the Russian fence without being detected by the FSB.¹⁴ In November 2015, arrivals ended as abruptly as they started, after diplomatic talks were held between the Norwegian MFA State Secretary and the Governor of Murmansk.¹⁵ Yet, arrivals soon shifted to the Russian-Finnish border: between January and February 2016, more than a thousand persons applied for asylum after crossing the Russian border to Finnish Lapland.¹⁶ Arrivals abruptly stopped in late February 2016, when Moscow ostensibly ordered the FSB to strengthen control over refugee routes through Murmansk.

Oslo and Helsinki reacted rather firmly to these events. At unprecedented speed, legislative amendments were expedited to tighten national immigration legislation. Then-Norwegian Prime Minister Solberg even reportedly claimed that asylum-seekers from Afghanistan would be put “on a direct flight to Kabul”¹⁷, even as a governmental circular warned that asylum claims from Afghan people would be deemed “most often manifestly unfounded”.¹⁸ In June 2016, the Norwegian Parliament followed up with proposals that would have given Norway the strictest asylum regime in Europe. Although some of the toughest measures were rejected, the rest of the package was adopted with broad Parliamentary support.¹⁹

[†] Russian legislation forbids border-crossing on foot, and Norway had banned drivers carrying undocumented people, which made biking the only legally viable option.





Ilomantsi, Finland—July 15, 2020: Stop sign at Finland Russia border. (Kai Kuntola / Shutterstock)

To this day, it is still unclear how Arctic routes suddenly became so popular among refugees trying to reach the Schengen area—and why the crossings suddenly stopped. More specifically, uncertainties remain as to the exact role played by Russian authorities, and what the expected outcome was for Moscow—i.e. whether Moscow may have inspired the idea, deliberately created the conditions for the situation, or merely seen an opportunity in it. In Norway, the event was only publicly recognized as a deliberate move by Russia for the first time in 2021, when former PM Solberg labelled it as a “test” of Norway’s response from Moscow. Some analysts described the episode as an influence operation aimed to destabilize Norway and Finland. Policy responses to the refugee arrivals did polarize public opinion²⁰: in Norway, as online websites were created to oppose the admission of migrants,²¹ other civil movements

campaigned for more humane immigration policies and criticized the government’s capacity to attend the basic humanitarian needs of asylum-seekers at the border. Finland was more vocal about Russia’s involvement in the incident; already in January 2016, Finnish news agencies STT and Yle reported that the refugee influx was orchestrated by the Russian FSB in coordination with local authorities, while two Finnish Members of the European Parliament claimed that Russia used the routes to influence Finland’s foreign policy.²² The incident was described as a deliberate move from Russia to force Helsinki into limiting its cooperation with NATO in the context following the 2014 invasion of Crimea.

Again in 2023, many saw the latest episode of refugee arrivals merely as a response from Moscow to Finland’s accession to NATO. While this seems like a highly plausible explanation, policymakers and analysts would benefit from looking at the full



range of circumstances stemming from the Ukraine war that may have emboldened Russia to leverage these routes again.

The Ukraine war's shift has incentivized Russia to leverage Arctic refugee routes (again)

The global strategic context has largely shifted since 2015, mostly as a result of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched by Russia in February 2022. Among the many geopolitical impacts of the war, some can be seen as having directly or indirectly increased the risk for Arctic refugee routes to be engineered again by Russia against its Nordic neighbors. These impacts include a shift in Nordic security approaches, the increased use of hybrid tactics by Russia against the European Arctic, and recent changes in European and Nordic immigration policies.

A shift in European Arctic security: from reduced cooperation to NATO enlargement

The major reshuffle in Arctic security dynamics has mostly been reflected in increased military tensions and weakened regional cooperation frameworks. This shift has particularly impacted European Arctic countries due to their geographical proximity with Russia, and to Moscow's insistent nuclear signaling,²³ reminding its neighbors of the strategic importance of the nearby Kola Peninsula. As a result, Nordic countries have fundamentally reassessed their security and cooperation approaches towards Russia, with direct impacts at the border.

While the Russian-Nordic borderland has historically been about a mix of strategic considerations and cooperation practices, cross-border cooperation has now become largely frozen. In September 2023,

Russia chose to withdraw from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), a move which put an end to joint institutional and people-to-people initiatives and to simplified border-crossing rules for local residents.²⁴ The Norwegian Arctic town of Kirkenes in Sør-Varanger, a historical symbol of cross-border cooperation, promptly limited its ties with Russia both in application of European sanctions and amid growing resentment from the population. Within a few months, the town's friendship agreement with Severomorsk was discarded²⁵, a petition circulated to remove street signs welcoming Russians,²⁶ the Storskog border closed to goods traffic, and controls on Russian fishing vessels in Kirkenes increased.²⁷ At first, border management remained one of the only operational areas Norway and Russia still cooperated on, before being also put on hold after the latest refugee incident in November 2023.²⁸ In Finland, Rovaniemi decided to end its city-to-city partnership with Murmansk in March 2022, and Arctic cross-border cooperation programs have been suspended.²⁹ These developments are important to consider when assessing cross-border threats from Russia: although reducing border permeability may limit vulnerability to Russian interference and is essential in signaling political resolve, communication channels were important to prevent misunderstandings and to promote stability in the region.

Another significant change following the invasion has been the shift in the European Arctic's security architecture and in the Nordic countries' transatlantic alignment and engagement with NATO. Both Norway and Finland have boosted their defense spending³⁰ and their military support to Ukraine,³¹ and have strengthened their transatlantic security partnerships by enhancing bilateral defense cooperation with the US³², and by intensifying joint Arctic military exercises.³³ NATO itself has



reconsidered its traditionally cautious approach to the region by including the High North for the first time in its new Strategic Concept, in June 2022. The most significant move, however, has been Sweden and Finland's applications to join NATO, and Finland's formal accession to the Alliance in April 2023 (finally followed by Sweden, in February 2024).

While Finland's border with Russia previously acted as a deterrent for Finland to seek NATO membership (as Helsinki wanted to avoid what it considered an unnecessary provocation), the same border had become an incentive for Finland to join following the invasion of Ukraine. The border has also increased in strategic significance due to expectations by NATO allies that Finland will bring its experience in managing its eastern neighbor, in particular in terms of intelligence-gathering. Finally, adding an extra 1,300 kilometers to NATO's land border with Russia has complexified the security challenge for Finland, as Russia's sense of encirclement and de facto increased operational inferiority may intensify its aggressive posture- and its willingness to cultivate other forms of leverage on its neighbors.

The increased use of hybrid tactics against the European Arctic

The European Arctic has long been one of Russia's favorite playgrounds to test and demonstrate its hybrid capacities.³⁴ After February 2022, these tactics have increased in frequency, from espionage operations to the sabotage of critical undersea infrastructure. These tactics are generally interpreted as attempts to pressure Nordic countries into making concessions in their support to Ukraine, test their ability to respond, create division and uncertainty, and divert attention from Russia's behavior elsewhere.³⁵ The Finnish and Norwegian Arctic regions are particularly vulnerable to these threats due to their geographical proximity

to Russia, to the cross-border interdependency they retain with North-West Russia³⁶ and, in Norway's case, to its energy infrastructure that has become even more critical in its relation with Europe as the European Union has committed to end its reliance on Russian fossil fuel imports. Following the invasion, Northern Norway has been experiencing a succession of hybrid threats, from intelligence data collection by Russian tourists to the infiltration of a research center in Tromsø by a Russian spy. As a response, Kirkenes has allocated extra funding to its local police to counter influence operations, spying and sabotage.³⁷ As for Finland, Helsinki has also warned that joining NATO would make the country a more interesting target for Russia's intelligence and influence operations³⁸, with a particular focus on its Arctic.³⁹

New migration dynamics, double standards, and disunity

The war on Ukraine has also produced new migration dynamics. Europe has experienced its highest levels of displacements since World War Two, with a peak of eight million Ukrainian refugees reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in February 2023. Yet, contrary to the reactions displayed during the "refugee crisis" of 2015, European responses have been largely rooted in solidarity and compassion. Soon after the invasion, national governments offered swift protection mechanisms, laxer border controls, and the possibility for Ukrainian refugees to choose their destination countries.⁴⁰

As a result, general reactions to Ukrainian refugee arrivals have highlighted the stark contrast with Europe's traditional immigration policies mostly focused on deterrence and border control, and with the dominant narrative framing non-European asylum-seekers⁴¹ as a threat. Some media



commentators have even used discriminatory language in the comparison of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees, suggesting the former are more worthy of protection.⁴² More recently in February 2024, city councilors in the Norwegian city of Drammen openly decided to only accept Ukrainian refugees—a decision which was condemned by Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store.⁴³

In September 2022, when thousands of Russians started to flee the country to escape the partial military mobilization of civilians, the double-standard manifested again amid a mixture of European responses. While some European nations declared they would welcome Russians fleeing the mobilization, others framed the issue as a security threat and decided to keep their borders closed and to tighten their visa policies. European nations went as far as questioning the legal right of Russian deserters threatened with repression by Moscow to

obtain international protection.⁴⁴ Because Finland and Norway were the two remaining Schengen countries bordering Russia to allow entry for tourist visa holders and the Arctic border crossings from Murmansk became the main points of arrival for Russians, Finland eventually decided to close its borders to Russian tourist visa holders.⁴⁵ In addition, Helsinki decided to build a three-meter-high fence with surveillance equipment covering 200 kilometers of its border in order to prevent irregular arrivals from Russia.⁴⁶

Policy responses to migration dynamics should be analyzed both for their efficacy and for the signal they send. Arguably, presenting migrations as a security threat and upholding double-standards in narratives and policy responses only increases the exposure and vulnerability of European countries to hybrid tactics specifically designed to leverage societal divisions and fear over migrations.



Uzhhorod, Ukraine—February 26, 2022: Ukrainian refugees rush to the Slovak border fleeing Russian aggression against Ukraine. (Yanosh Nemesh / Shutterstock)



The way forward: Shifting narratives and building societal resilience

The war on Ukraine and its policy ramifications have likely provided Russia with greater motives, incentives and opportunities to leverage the European Arctic refugee routes against its Nordic neighbors. Reduced cooperation and communication, added to the shift in Nordic security approaches and to NATO's enlargement at its border, have led to a greater risk of hostile activities by Russia. Russia has already increased its use of hybrid tactics against its European Arctic neighbors, underlining the vulnerability of Finland and Norway to threats situated below the threshold of NATO's Article 5. Finally, Europe's double standards on asylum rights, and the concerns over migration flows consistently expressed by European Arctic nations, further increase their vulnerability to coercion tactics that leverage population displacements. In the current strategic context, Russia may instrumentalize Arctic routes again as a threat, retaliation or coercion tool to sow divisions and force concessions.

Migrations in themselves are not a national security threat.⁴⁷ However, unpreparedness, division, and fear over the issue create vulnerabilities that are likely to be exploited by malign actors. Just like for any hybrid tactic, anticipating, preventing and responding to engineered migration flows requires tools that are not solely rooted in security considerations. Coherence and resilience, which are key to any deterrence strategy, can only be reinforced by a stronger agency on the national narratives surrounding migrations, and by normative measures that strengthen both the rule of law and European human rights standards.

New policies, resources, and legal instruments will be required to counter the risks of refugee instrumentalization and to manage future border crossings. Dedicating policies and resources solely on curbing arrivals would be counter-productive.⁴⁸ Instead, rethinking any policy that perpetuates the double standards towards non-European nationals would contribute to upholding the notion of equal solidarity.⁴⁹ Moreover, shifting the current "crisis" narrative regarding migrations to one which focuses on opportunities would help counter any attempt to instrumentalize fear by signaling openness and societal resilience. Norway and Finland are already considering attracting migrant workers to address their population aging and their chronic labor shortage in key economic sectors. Emphasizing and building on this approach will contribute to harmonizing the national public debate on the benefits of migrations.

Ultimately, Norway and Finland are well-positioned to anticipate and respond to the instrumentalization of population movements due to their excellent situational awareness, foresight, and general hybrid-countering capacities. They both have long traditions of building preparedness and societal resilience against Russian influence operations, upheld by the Finnish Comprehensive Security concept and by the Norwegian concept of Total Defence.⁵⁰ With Finland's status as a new member of NATO and the host of the Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, efforts to develop best practices through a humane approach when addressing the risk of refugee instrumentalization are likely to be bolstered.

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