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Solidarities in the Arctic Border

19 Jun 2017

Guest post by [Karina Horsti](#), Academy of Finland Fellow at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä. Karina has completed research projects on cultural diversity policies, nationalist populism, and mediated representations of refugees and asylum seekers. Her current research examines public remembering of forced migration and the commemoration of deaths at Europe's borders. This is the fifth instalment of 'Border Criminologies' themed series on 'The Memory Politics of Migration at Borderscapes', organised by Karina.

Men, women and children ride bicycles in a snowy white Arctic landscape. Some hold the handlebars with bare hands and pedal wearing just summer shoes. These images captured [international media attention](#) in the autumn of 2015 when about 5500 people crossed the northernmost external Schengen border from Russia to seek asylum in Norway. The banal reason for the necessity of the bicycle was a seventy-year old ban by Russians to pedestrian traffic on the road leading to Norway and a recent threat from Norwegian authorities to prosecute drivers who would transport passengers without visas.



The so-called refugee crisis had become a daily news topic in Europe but the attention was further south: North African fishing boats and rubber dinghies crammed with people in the Mediterranean Sea had become familiar visual tropes. This form of irregular border crossing was perhaps so familiar that it had become a normalized part of the refugee experience in the eyes of the public in the global North. On the contrary, images of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers cycling in the Arctic landscape stood out. These images symbolised the creativity of migrants and human smugglers to find alternative strategies as the Balkan and Eastern European countries began to build fences to prevent the land route from Greece to Germany. Or perhaps, as many suspected, it was an opportunity for the Russian regime to threaten Europe that had put sanctions in place due to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine.

Locals in the Norwegian border town of Kirkenes learned about this new kind of mobility in their region by reading it in the news. One of them was Merete Nordhus, a nurse who first responded with much needed humanitarian assistance. She started to collect winter clothes and boots through Facebook and offered them to people who were waiting for the border crossing in Nikkel, the town on the Russian side. For her and several others in Kirkenes this was only the beginning. As Merete says, she has two lives, one before refugees arrived in her town and one with them. She took an active part in offering humanitarian aid, then became friends with some of the asylum seekers, and it was soon obvious to her that warm clothes would not be enough. Merete became a witness of the unfair treatment of asylum seekers, who were stored in a disused military camp next to the airport, 15 kilometres from the town. They had no space other than their bunk beds, no internet, and two showers for 200 people. The locals staged a protest in freezing -30C weather 'to show our solidarity', as Merete describes.

Moreover, the mayor of Kirkenes [Rune Rafaelson](#) expressed publicly his embarrassment for the ways in which people were treated. He thought that it was an insult to the reputation of the tradition of Northern hospitality. This distinction between people in the North and the central government in Oslo comes up often in the conversations with the people in Kirkenes. National identity in this region is open to multiple identifications. After all, the town is located in the indigenous Sami region and people often remind us that they've been having friendly daily exchanges across the border with Russians for years. Being Norwegian in Kirkenes is a distinct form of identity.



[HTTP://WWW.PRESSTV.IR/DETAIL/2015/11/29/439663/RUSSIAA-DEPORTATION-REFUGEES-NORWAY-TENSION](http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2015/11/29/439663/RUSSIAA-DEPORTATION-REFUGEES-NORWAY-TENSION)

In January 2016 the Norwegian authorities, decided to forcibly return those who had valid Russian visas across the border, and locals protested again outside the camp. Three of them were arrested and given fines for obstructing police work. Eirik Nilsen, a former miner, said that he didn't think of the consequences but acted intuitively. He took asylum seekers into his car and drove them to the center of Kirkenes where they sought protection at the Lutheran Church. In the end, just 13 people were deported by bus and left at the train station in the Russian city of Murmansk. Global media attention, the condemnation by human rights organizations, and finally the Russian authorities' unwillingness to allow people to return, made forced returns impossible for Norway.

Eirik Nielsen and Merete Nordhus shared these stories with a group of eleven academics during our Nordic explorative workshop [Borderscapes, Memory and Migration](#) in Kirkenes in February 2017. By then, the Russians had taken control of the border again, and there were no longer any asylum seekers cycling to Kirkenes. The municipal sports hall that had been a temporary shelter was back in use for the local Taekwondo and handball teams. Some refugees had been relocated in the town but most had been sent to various reception centers elsewhere in Norway. However, Merete and Eirik continue to be engaged in refugee activism. Eirik volunteered twice in Idomeni refugee camp in Greece. They both received a lot of support and prizes for their actions.

Now as they look back to their experience a year ago, they realize that their direct involvement with assisting refugees has changed them. News from the world's war zones have suddenly become personal and phone calls from strangers who accuse them of betraying their country no longer hurt as much as they did in the beginning. Eirik has even received a death threat. Their emotional landscape has also changed. 'Every time I pass by the airport and the place where the police stopped me and forced the Syrian family out of my car so that they could return them to Russia, I get the chills', Merete recalls.

What turned Merete, a nurse and Eirik, an iron ore miner, both in their forties, into human rights activists? Merete explains that her response might be inherited from her grandmother who experienced the destruction of Kirkenes during WWII when the Germans and Russians fought in the area and German troops ended up burning everything as they withdrew. During the fighting 3000 locals hid in the tunnel of the local mine for three months together with their livestock. Eleven children were born in the tunnel. The winter of 2015 was not the first time Kirkenes had welcomed refugees. People still remember the stories from 1939 – 1940 when the Finns arrived to seek protection during the Winter War Finland fought against the Soviet Union. And, the same sports hall was used to house refugees from Kosovo in the late 1990s. 'We have a long history of protecting people', Eirik and Merete explain.

In 2015 the local iron ore mining company Sydvaranger Gruve went bankrupt and Eirik lost his job. He was part of the workers union, which had been a fundamental part of the mining community since the mine was opened in 1906. Throughout the turmoil with the mine, he had been part of the workers solidarity movement for years, and now, thinking back in time, he believes that this experience contributed to shaping his response to the refugees. 'I couldn't see other people's rights being violated, I couldn't, and I had to show my solidarity', Eirik says.

The stories of Eirik and Merete show how attentiveness to the suffering of strangers can be prompted by past experiences of ones own or that of others, by stories that have collectively become shared memories. In Kirkenes, the response to the cycling asylum seekers extended from the initial humanitarian assistance towards human rights activism, and so a politically challenging form of solidarity developed. For Eirik and Merete, these were not two different moralities, offering help or fighting for the respect of human rights, but rather, they became entangled into one moral response. Being unjustly treated by hate mongers and police officers singled them out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, in that position, they still felt privileged in comparison to the asylum seekers. Multiple identities of the North and histories of solidarity in the Arctic borderland transformed Merete and Eirik, producing in them an ability to bear witness to injustice being done to others; those who Eirik and Merete saw as guests, or possibly as fellow citizens.

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