

# My BARENTS

**TO ME, CROSSING THE BORDER** into Nikel in the Soviet Union back in 1988 felt like a kind of moonwalk. Never have I entered a place more remote in terms of society, environment, geography and culture. The border I crossed, from Kirkenes in Norway, marked the beginning of a journey in space.

**IT WAS ALSO A JOURNEY** in history. Before 1826 no formal border existed at the top of Europe. The Sámi, Russians, Finns and Norwegians were all taxed by both the Czar in St. Petersburg and the King in Stockholm. Back between the First and Second World Wars – 1920 to 1944 – the land here was Finnish territory, part of the Petsamo Corridor. In Soviet times, the area became most infamous for its ecological disaster zones around the smelters and mining complexes.

The scariest part of recent history, however, was when I was growing up in northern Norway. As kids, we were told to look out for Soviet nukes and invasion forces, which we, living in a NATO member, believed could come at any time. In Murmansk, I met youngsters my age that believed the same about my country and our allies.

Working as I did for NGOs, and later as a reporter, the Russian North 25 years ago gave me a unique possibility to take part in a changing world, replacing distrust with cross-border contacts and wiping out propaganda with the exchange of common knowledge.

The post-Soviet establishment of Barents cooperation was a most welcome initiative. Moscow, Helsinki, Oslo and Stockholm formalised the initiatives taken by the people in the North. With national support for increased cross-border cooperation in the spheres of economics, culture, the environment and security, the goal was to support democracy in Russia and achieve more normalised relations across the borders.

Today, 22 years after the so-called Kirkenes Declaration was signed, there is no doubt that the Barents has proven to be one of the most successful areas of cross-border cooperation to be found anywhere along Russia's border with Europe. Political and people-to-people links have created a generation of friendship relations between citizens, organisations and institutions.

**I'M PROUD TO** have taken part. For me, who once upon a time felt that crossing the border was like a moonwalk, it is especially cool to see the thousands and thousands of people exploring the options in their neighbouring countries. It is shoppers from Murmansk I meet in the grocery store in Ivalo, researchers from Rovaniemi on the tundra in Nenetsia studying climate change, students from Arkhangelsk walking the corridors at the University of Tromsø or ice hockey players from the Kola Peninsula celebrating their crushing tournament victory in Kirkenes. And it is no less heartening to see the joint economic benefits normal relations across the formerly closed borders bring with increased tourism, trade and better infrastructure, like roads and harbours.

The wide range of people-to-people contacts is also what I believe builds the bridge over troubled political waters between Russia and its Nordic neighbours nowadays. It is understandable why three of the Barents countries have imposed sanctions on Putin's regime, but the best insurance against a new divided Europe like the old one we had during the Cold War is to keep the borders open for normal people and normal contacts. I'm afraid that will not be easy, but remember: it was not easy to break the ice and open the borders 25 years ago either.

I hope you will join me by continuing to travel across Russia's northern borders – also in times of a colder international climate.

*Thomas Nilsen*

Editor of Barents Observer, Kirkenes, Norway