

Testing the BARENTS IDENTITY

LAST SUMMER I lost a close friend. For me, Elena Larionova was a Barents person more so than anybody else. Living and working in Murmansk, she was the heart and soul of cooperation among journalists in the Barents Region. She once got a T-shirt with the text 'Barents Boss' on it. That was intended a joke but it also had some truth to it.

IN THE EARLY 1990s, the world was open in the North. After the end of the Cold War, dreams could be made to come true if only someone could seize the moment. The official Barents cooperation is a result of a brave political initiative of that era. But others had dreams as well. The Norwegian journalist Johs Kalvemo was one of them, Elena Larionova another. It was with them and some others that I was sitting in a restaurant meeting room in Ivalo brainstorming ideas for a journalists' network in the Barents. That was about 1993. In April 2014 I saw Elena for the last time, at the annual Barents Press International meeting in Kirkenes. She had still been able to gather a big delegation of Russian journalists to meet and talk with their colleagues from Finland, Norway and Sweden. There were a lot of people who knew each other from way back and could discuss in a good atmosphere the world that was changing around them. One could no longer use the word 'Barents' without often using the word 'Ukraine'.

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THE HOPES, wishes and theories of cooperation only come to life when there are individuals who want to be involved. Some, like my Barents Boss friend, can work wonders. For the rest of us, it is enough to know that we really have something in common. Very few individuals can identify with 'the Barents' and that's the way it will probably be. If there is something like a Barents identity, it is concentrated in the triangle Kirkenes–Murmansk–Rovaniemi, where the distances are manageable and there would most likely be some kind of contacts anyway. The Barents Region is an artificial structure, starting with the name. But there is more to it, as this issue of Barents Studies has set out to show. Real things are going on; real people are meeting.

PERHAPS BARENTS COOPERATION has not become what many people wanted it to be. Perhaps it would now be impossible to create. But still, here it is, now. If some true will for cross-border contacts has been built, the bonds will remain in these current turbulent times in international politics, and the region can serve as a model to the rest of Europe. If everything we have done has ultimately been only artificial, then Barents cooperation may slowly fade into history. Let us not have that happen.

