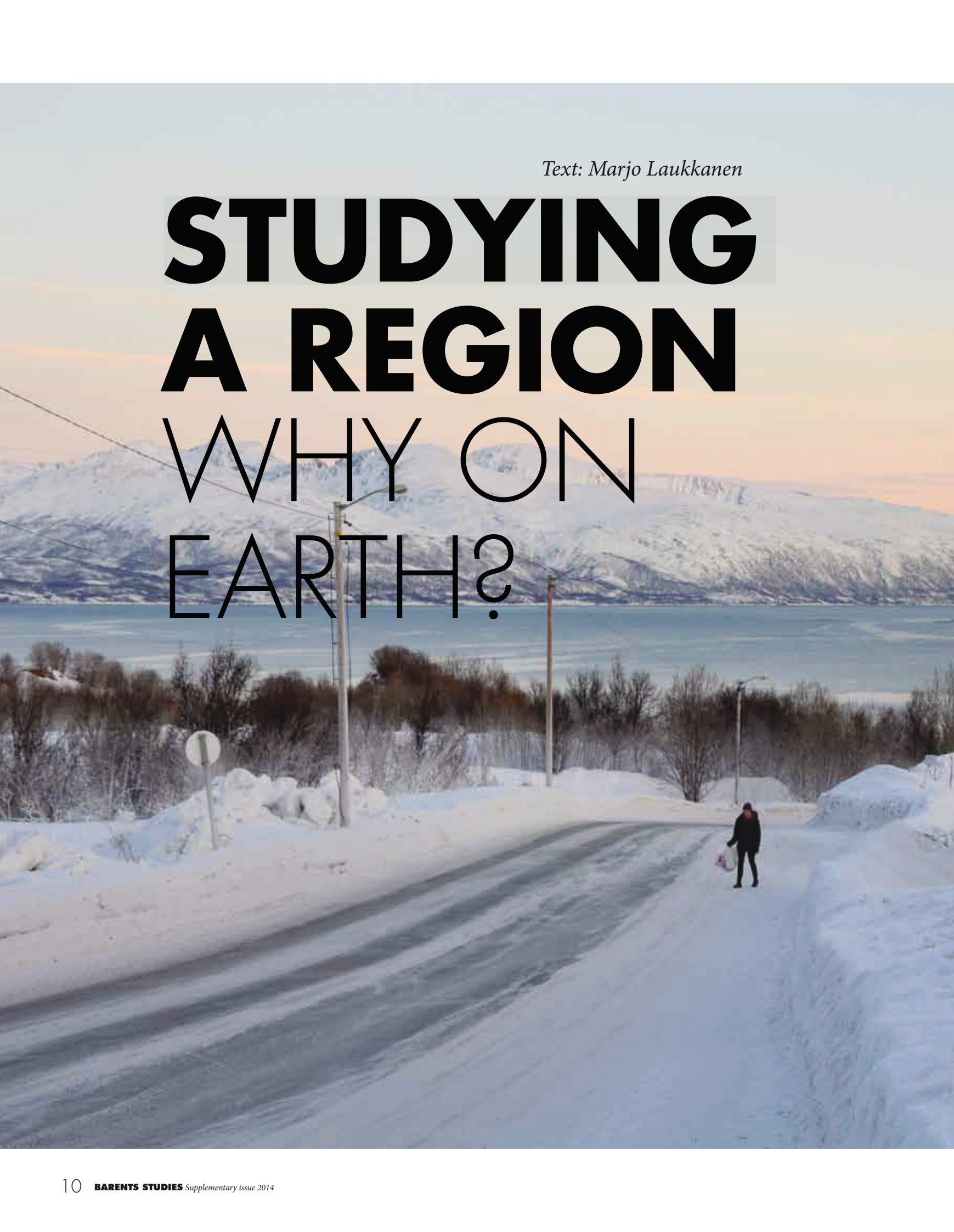


Text: Marjo Laukkanen

STUDYING A REGION WHY ON EARTH?





Photos submitted to a photo contest about the Barents Region, organised by Barents Studies in 2013.

Tromsø, Norway. Photo: Ilona Mettäinen

Who needs
Barents
studies?

What's the point
in Barents
cooperation
anyway?

Let's try to
find out,
step by step.



FIRST STEP

Talk with a regional researcher.
Find out what the person is doing and why.

PROFESSOR NILS AARSÆTHER has a lot going on. Working at the University of Tromsø, he is leading a research project on municipal leaders in Norway that covers every one of the country's 429 municipalities from South to North.

"We try to find out what kind of leadership styles emerge, as mayors and administrative leaders face increasing demands both from the state and local citizens."

He is also involved in other studies. For instance, one deals with how the northern periphery has been modernised in the post-war period, in a process where the ideal of

industrialisation has played a pivotal role.

"It's a paradox at a time when a more flexible service and knowledge economy permeates northern cities and villages."

Professor Aarsæther is a well-known researcher in the field of regional studies. So he is just the right person to tell us what the point in all this is – why do we need to study regions?

In his view, knowledge about the interaction of different activities is essential for effective decisions on development in struggling regions – decisions made both for and by those regions. We need to know how to produce synergies among

different activities and what unintended consequences there are to be avoided.

Professor Aarsæther says that regional research currently has a very limited role in decision making in the North. Too much attention and hope have focused on single activities instead of the interplay between activities and how people respond to changes. These processes should be given more attention in the form of interdisciplinary research.

"If decision makers were told that public care for older people is the most rapidly expanding sector in the North, they would not believe you anyway."

More attention should be devoted to the interplay between public-sector platforms and private-sector innovations in the North.

Nils Aarsæther

Professor at University of Tromsø, Norway

Money follows political attention

The North, the Barents Region, the Arctic... How do you choose what to study?

“Researchers have no choice but to study whatever field is getting political attention at the moment, because this is where the money for research is. But researchers can sometimes influence decision-makers by getting media attention for matters that tend to evoke crisis responses.”

Research related to the Barents Region has expanded during recent decades. There is research on climate effects, mapping of natural resources, risk and security studies, health and culture studies - to mention just some topics. But, according to Aarsæther, there is still something missing.

“Research has followed the logic of scientific disciplines, while broad, regional and community-focused studies have received less institutional backing and over time these have experienced stagnation. Research entrepreneurship seems to be a

necessary component if the situation is to improve.”

According to Aarsæther, entrepreneurship-like leadership and commitment is needed to form and maintain long-term projects across Arctic-based institutions. Especially now that key institutions – like Stockholm-based NORDREGIO – have shifted their focus to the Baltic region and to European-level issues, universities are invited to compete southwards and globally. As career opportunities open up in those directions, we may see a brain drain of potential research leaders in the North.

What is the future of Barents research in the middle of all this?

“It is dependent on research entrepreneurship, which can link up a series of geographically scattered research departments, universities and colleges through long-term project work – like the *Arctic Human Development Report* – rather than declarations of collaboration with their delegations of top-ranking academic leaders.” →



Kåfjord, Norway. Photo: Tarja Lämsman

The relation between regional and national politics is a topic that I would like to see studied more. What are the possibilities for regional actors in national politics? What kinds of positions are available for them in global crises?

Esko Lotvonen

City Manager of Rovaniemi, Finland



Murmansk, Russia. Photo: Kamill Jagodzinski

SECOND STEP

Talk with regional decision makers.
How do they see Barents cooperation and
the future of the region?

“IT’S WORK THAT requires persistence but we can already see concrete results”, says Esko Lotvonen, City Manager of Rovaniemi.

Lotvonen has been involved in Barents cooperation from the very beginning. For him, regional cooperation and development is a self-evident must.

“None of the Barents regions has a lot of resources or money, except perhaps Norway. We need to do and understand things together. It improves efficiency and reduces overlap.”

Nowadays there is one big question mark though: How does the crisis in Ukraine affect regional cooperation? It all depends on power politics.

“Currently Barents cooperation is dependent on support from the European Union. It would be a really big setback if current or forthcoming cross-border programmes were frozen. After that, we would go back to operating on our own budgets, which are tight.”

A boost from the ongoing Arctic

boom is important because the Barents is sometimes seen as too small a region on the national levels. Rovaniemi has had a strong role in both Barents and Arctic cooperation – and, according to Lotvonen, it will get even bigger. Rovaniemi will focus on its Arctic profile, and research is one important part of it. The city is working together with the University of Lapland to promote Arctic Design, and if the Arctic Centre becomes the leader of the EU Arctic Information Centre network, that will also be an honour for the whole city.

It might even be so that if regional cooperation fades for external reasons, the future of Barents cooperation as a whole will lie in international cooperation among cities and towns.

Slowly but surely

So, what are those concrete results that Lotvonen mentioned earlier? For a start, logistics have improved but,

more importantly, people-to-people communication has grown a lot in twenty years. Lotvonen says that the strength of the region is still the same as it was in the beginning: a variety of natural resources within reachable distances. He believes that industries like mining can be developed such that environmental values and peoples’ rights are safeguarded.

The City Manager of Rovaniemi admits that sometimes development doesn’t seem to take place as quickly as one might hope. For example, a railway connection from the Arctic Ocean to the Baltic Sea is still just an idea.

“However, one has to remember the time perspective. When we are talking about developing the region, we are talking about decades, not about months or a few years. There will be uphill and downhill, that’s for sure.” →



THIRD STEP

Talk with an expert on research and educational cooperation in the Barents Region. Choose someone who has first-hand knowledge about this 'Sleeping Beauty'.



“LIKE MEMBERS OF A big family, people living in the Barents Region, although rather different, have a lot in common based on their history, experience, communication, hopes and dreams”, says Marina Kalinina.

Marina Kalinina knows the region she is talking about. Her professional career has been connected with regional cooperation in the North for two decades already. Currently she is Vice-Rector of International Cooperation at Northern (Arctic) Federal University in Archangelsk (NArFU). The cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region is one of her and her university’s priorities.

It’s time to ask the essential question once again: What’s the point in studying a region?

“We need more knowledge about the changing Arctic, on how the changes will influence people living in this region and in the rest of the world. Intensive exploration of the mineral resources in the North in fragile ecosystems makes politics in the North more accountable and decision making more predictable and based on scientific research

results. We need more interdisciplinary and international research to be produced in and for the region.”

Time to wake up!

NArFU has been the national Arctic university of Russia for almost five years. It is situated in Archangelsk, which is the biggest city in the Barents Region. According to Marina Kalinina, the competition for federal university status was intense, and the achievement required a lot of effort from academic people, the regional government and the community. The international cooperation of higher educational institutions – predecessors of NArFU – also played a big role.

“We have had international cooperation in the Barents Region with universities in Norway, Finland and Sweden since the beginning of the ‘90s. It turned out to be a big advantage, and federal status has given us an opportunity to develop joint educational programmes, research networks and academic mobility further.”

Cooperation in education and research in the Barents has been described as a Sleeping Beauty, something that has a great potential to bloom. Is Sleeping Beauty still sleeping or has she finally woken up?

“Through collaboration tools the universities in the Barents Region have a chance to give students access to world-class teaching without having to go outside the region and to sustain education and research in the North. Today’s cooperation challenges force us to think whether we are able to make our national educational systems more transparent. Do we adequately realise the demands of the public and private sector? How can we tap the synergy in scientific research and the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples? What can we do together to develop further research-based education? The universities of the region are already collaborating on this, and I assume Sleeping Beauty is about to be woken up; and I hope that no evil fairy will ever put her to sleep again.” ●

We need young researchers who will develop cross-cutting northern research and Arctic research policy in the near future. This is a challenging task, where universities of the region should make joint efforts to contribute to the future of science in the North.

Marina Kalinina

Vice-Rector at Northern (Arctic)

Federal University in Archangelsk, Russia

Kyappeselga, Russia. Photo: Irina Nazarova

