

Briefing Note

Travelling with the Calotte Academy, June 2018

Peter Kujawinski

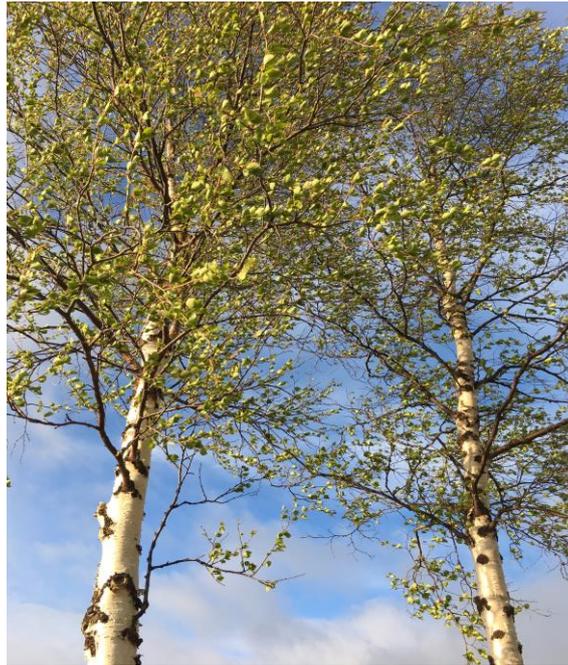
In Summer, the Rovaniemi airport feels empty, as if off-season is in full effect. To me this seemed strange because after all, Summer is historically considered the best time to visit Lapland. The temperature is comfortable, it is light almost all the time, and the forests and fields are in bloom. But now that Rovaniemi is the “official hometown of Santa Claus,” I guess it shouldn’t be surprising that the area seems so empty during the most pleasant time of the year. It underscores how the Arctic works in rhythms that are often counterintuitive.

I was in Rovaniemi to join the Calotte Academy, a traveling symposium of academic researchers that takes a bus ride through northern Europe to discover the Arctic in all of its complexity. My own journey to Rovaniemi began in the Canadian Arctic, where I had worked both as an American diplomat and later as a freelance journalist. In North America, the Arctic is sparsely populated and remote. This makes it difficult to get to, and the challenges people face while living up there are similar to the challenges anyone would face in areas that are difficult to access. The cost of living is very high and getting anywhere is a challenge. Therefore the Canadian and US Arctic have a high profile mainly because of the myths of living in a place so far north – not because of any lived reality.

My time with the Calotte Academy demonstrated that the European experience of the Arctic is quite different. First, of course, is the fact that the European Arctic isn’t as cold as the North American Arctic. As we drove through the beautiful forests of Lapland, I noticed a mix of hardwood, deciduous trees and pines. It could’ve been the forests of the north-central United States – of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. For example, here is a snapshot of late evening near Inari, where we stayed on the grounds of a wonderful conference center.

As we drove through northern Finland, the topography remained similar, though those of us from North America were constantly surprised at how developed the infrastructure was in these northern latitudes. Cell phones networks, roads, even bike lanes were ubiquitous.

Peter Kujawinski is a Strategic Communications Consultant and a former United States diplomat. He was a participant in this year’s Calotte Academy, an annual traveling symposium organized by the UArctic –NRF Joint Thematic Network on Arctic Geopolitics and Security, which also publishes the Arctic Yearbook.



To me, the work done in the European Far North to build infrastructure and professional links crystallized in the Norwegian town of Kirkenes. The history of the town was fascinating in its own right – a common Norwegian/Russian district until 1826 (and Sami before colonization), occupied by Nazi Germany and then taken over by the Russian army towards the end of World War II. And then of course there's the geographical aspect – it's further east than even Istanbul or St. Petersburg. It occupies a unique place in the northern European context.



In the picture above, you can see the coastal waters leading to the Barents Sea, taken from the Kirkenes heights.

Today, Kirkenes styles itself as an epicenter of the Barents region, which encompasses the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. When these Russian parts are included, the Barents region could easily be considered the most populated part of the Arctic. Here it is possible to perceive the sometimes conflicting currents of European integration, EU-Russian military concerns, environmental issues, and through it all, the desire to continue cooperation and trade.

While in the town of Kirkenes, I was pulled between two contradictory thoughts. First, Kirkenes was indeed very far away, on the margins of Europe, at the every edge of Norway. The town itself, though tidy and well built, is small – with a population of 3500 people.

On the other hand, Kirkenes is the center of the Barents region, an area that always seems to be on the cusp of attracting the world's attention, whether for natural resource extraction, military manoeuvres, or something else. The town is only 20 minutes from Russia and 40 minutes from Finland. I could well imagine that this town buzzed with expectation a few years ago, when European relations with Russia were at a higher level than currently. Now, the atmosphere seemed to be one of waiting. Or, to be more diplomatic, anticipation.

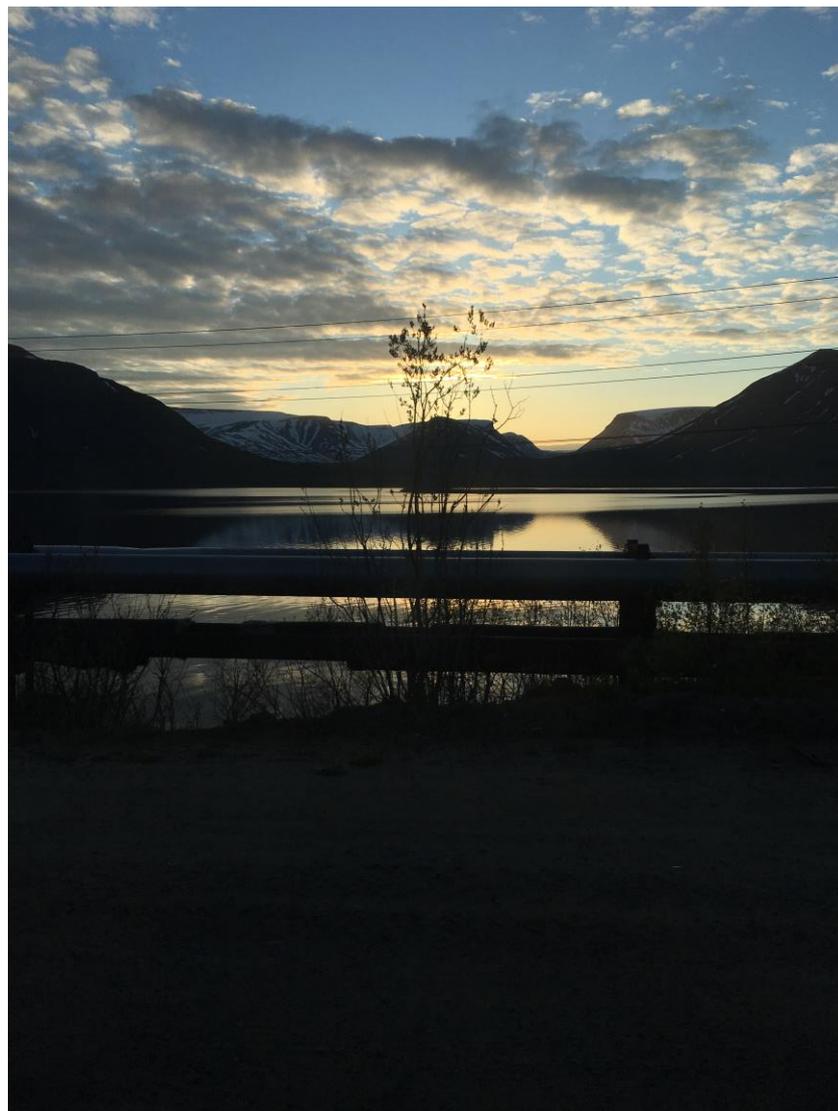
After our time in Finland and Norway, we visited Russia for several days. For an American like myself, the European Arctic is accessible, but the Russian Arctic feels different. Of course, a big reason is the recent downturn in relations between Russia and the West, as well as the palpable weight of the government. Checkpoints were many, and it was unclear what or why they were checking papers so often.



A picture of the factory city of Nikel, near the Norwegian/Russian border

We spent many hours in the bus, driving through areas that wouldn't seem out of place in Norway or Finland – swift-flowing rivers and thousands of square miles of forest. Other areas, like the massive factories and smelters on the road to Murmansk had clearly ruined the vegetation of the surrounding area.

After a few days in Russia, we returned to the nearly empty town of Rovaniemi. The only work going on was in the Christmas village, as workers prepared to expand even more. It seems the interest in the Arctic – especially in the Winter – never stops.



Sunset near the Arctic Russian town of Kirovsk

As a non-academic, I wasn't sure how much I could contribute to the Calotte Academy, but I'm so thrilled to have participated. Not only did I learn about a wide variety of issues I wouldn't ever have understood before, but there is a certain rhythm of traveling together on a bus that stands the test of time. It was the perfect introduction to the European and Russian Arctic. I was left with an impression of a region of great possibility – and great uncertainty. Because of the many changes going on in the Arctic, it's unclear whether the Barents region will become central in the way it

had been in recent history, or whether it will recede and become even more of a backwater. Given the amount of attention, and the patient, deliberate building of relationships that I witnessed, my bet is this area will grow in importance in the decades to come.