

Voluntary work in the shadow of COVID-19: Experiences from a Norwegian-Russian border region in the Arctic

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This commentary presents the results of a study on volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic in two neighbouring regions in the Arctic — Troms og Finnmark county in Norway and Murmansk oblast in Russia. Our research shows that volunteering is one of the most efficient crisis response tools and that it adds indispensable value to reducing the workload of public health and social care institutions in promoting health and well-being for vulnerable groups. In both Norway and Russia, responses to the pandemic included the rise of the volunteer movement, but volunteering has different traditions and scopes in the two countries. Established NGOs in Troms og Finnmark county took on new responsibilities for vulnerable groups. Such organizations were less developed in Murmansk oblast, and new volunteer structures in the form of united regional and municipal volunteer centres were quickly established in addition to existing organizations.

VOLRUSS project: Research in times of a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced many aspects of people's lives worldwide. We, as social scientists working in an Arctic border region formed by Troms og Finnmark county in Norway and Murmansk oblast in Russia, have been affected too. In March 2020, right at the start of the pandemic, we launched a Norwegian-Russian research project, *Adapting to a changing society: The case*

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of civil society in the Murmansk region¹ - VOLRUSS, which focused on the role of NGOs in the field of health and well-being. The project was planned before the pandemic, and in new circumstances our research involving joint data collection and crossing the borders between our countries, has been called into question by quarantine restrictions and closed borders. Furthermore, the object of the research has changed literally in front of our eyes, and this has brought challenges and also opened up new opportunities for research. In times of crisis, the civil society engaged in voluntary work had to adapt to new tasks and we as researchers had to adapt too.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced our research team to change the focus of the project and also influenced the ways the research was conducted. We decided to concentrate on the role of volunteer structures in providing assistance to the most vulnerable populations – the elderly, people with limited mobility and with chronic diseases, citizens in self-isolation. Right at the start of the project we realized that we had to work as a remote team and find ways of getting information during COVID restrictions. Reflecting on the situation that we have never experienced before, we have written about these changes and published an article “[Adapting to the unpredictable: The story of a Norwegian-Russian study of NGOs in the Murmansk region during a pandemic](#)” as the reflexive act of writing about the project’s disrupted start-up and as an exercise of flexibility and dynamics in the research process (Sørly et al 2021a). Further, we contributed with a chapter in a book with the title *Stories of change and sustainability in the Arctic regions*. Here we used the autoethnographic research method and presented our individual narratives of coping with the pandemic, overcoming its challenges and using new opportunities (Sørly et al 2021b).

This commentary shares insights from third publication from the VOLRUSS project focusing on the different responses of voluntary structures to the COVID-19 pandemic on the Russian and Norwegian sides of the Arctic border. A first draft of the work was presented at the Arctic Frontiers conference in February 2021, and the article was published in English in the Russian journal *The North and the Market* in the summer of 2022 (Nygaard & Riabova 2022). This work was presented at the XI scientific and practical conference “The North and the Arctic in the New Global Development Paradigm. Luzin Readings 2022” in September 2022 and the main results were summarized in the conference proceedings in Russian (Riabova & Nygaard 2022).

Volunteer work on two sides of the Arctic border during the COVID pandemic

The pandemic has significantly increased the importance of volunteer work in providing assistance to the population. Given the great significance placed on voluntary work, methods for organizing it and daily practices during the pandemic in the Arctic context are still understudied and need scientific investigation. This is important for understanding the role of volunteer structures in dealing with the crisis and in finding ways to improve the effectiveness of the assistance provided both in crisis situations and in the normal course of events.

¹ The project is financed by the Norwegian Research Council, grant No.303247. The project home page: <https://www.norceresearch.no/en/projects/adapting-to-a-changing-society-the-case-of-civil-society-in-the-murmansk-region>

The VOLRUSS project examined the activities of volunteer structures in neighboring Arctic regions – Troms og Finnmark county in Norway and Murmansk oblast in Russia – with the aim of finding out how volunteer work with vulnerable people was organized in the face of the pandemic in two national and regional contexts. We sought to deepen understanding of the role of volunteering in crisis response and how this activity was influenced by political and structural differences between the two countries.

The data presented here covers the early pandemic period from March 2020 to June 2021. Since face-to-face interviews were problematic in the situation of a just-begun and escalating pandemic, our main methods of gathering information were analysis of official and media texts, written requests from NGOs for a description of their daily practice, and telephone interviews with NGO leaders and staff.

Our study found that in both Russia and Norway at the onset of the pandemic (March-June 2020), the volunteer movement grew to help the most vulnerable populations. Volunteering in the two countries was organized according to different approaches, depending on the state political structure, traditions and the scope of volunteer activity.

In Russia, the response to the crisis was carried out within the framework of a centralized system and involved all levels of government and many sectors. The regional level received significant decision-making power on measures to combat the pandemic. In Murmansk oblast, the Governor headed the newly established Interdepartmental Operational Headquarters to counteract the spread of the coronavirus infection. This body included representatives from over 40 organizations, such as the Murmansk Regional Office of Rospotrebnadzor (Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Welfare), Healthcare Ministry of Murmansk oblast, and others. In Norway, the main responsibility for the implementation of the national policy to combat the pandemic was given to the municipal level, which acted jointly with the public health authorities.

In Russia, the need for quick help in times of crisis has led to the emergence of new organizational forms of volunteer work. On March 17, 2020, the public movement the All-Russia People's Front announced a general NGO mobilization to protect the population from the coronavirus. Three days later, the #WeAreTogether campaign launched across Russia on the initiative of the All-Russia People's Front, the Volunteer Medics public movement, the Association of Volunteer Centers and the Dobro.ru, the largest platform in Russia for the development of civic engagement.

As part of the campaign, regional volunteer headquarters were formed in all regions of Russia in four days to provide assistance to the population. Murmansk oblast was one of the first to create new structures, the United Russia party and the All-Russia People's Front regional volunteer center, and soon after on this basis the United Volunteer Center of Murmansk oblast and a network of volunteer centers in all 17 municipalities of the region. The centers were created in cooperation with regional authorities, large public movements (All-Russia People's Front, Volunteer Medics and Volunteers of the Victory) and local governments. The local volunteer centers became platforms for joint actions by regional and municipal authorities, local volunteer organizations and NGOs, corporate volunteers, business and citizens.

In Norway, the national health authorities cooperated with the three major NGOs — the Red Cross, the Norwegian Women’s Public Health Association, and Norwegian Peoples Aid — to work out guidelines for close cooperation with voluntary organizations. This was in line with the governmental “Voluntary declaration” from 2015 prompting municipalities to map all voluntary organizations that were active in the communities and to work out a policy for volunteer work. The volunteer center (Frivilligsentralen) is an essential local structure to put this policy into practice. Troms og Finnmark county consists of 37 municipalities, and most of them had a volunteer center in operation when the pandemic hit. Developed public organizations have taken on new responsibilities for the protection of vulnerable groups of the population, and volunteer centers, working in cooperation with local governments, became the basic structures for municipal mobilization.

The local volunteer centers in Murmansk oblast answered the hotlines for people over 65 and people with chronic diseases, low-mobility people and people in self-isolation. Volunteers shopped for these individuals, delivered medicines and free groceries, helped with housework, and worked at checkpoints at road inspections. In April – October 2020, 700 COVID-volunteers in Murmansk oblast fulfilled 17,600 appeals for assistance and delivered more than 14,000 free meals to those in need (Edinaya Rossiya., 2021). In Norway, Red Cross volunteers helped municipalities with corona-related tasks. For example, the Red Cross in Tromsø helped the University Hospital to test staff for COVID-19, provided safe transport of infected or people suspected of being infected, operated a test station for foreign visitors at Tromsø airport, helped the elderly, disabled, and foreign workers in quarantine or isolation with shopping and ran a phone friend service for lonely and isolated people. The organization contributed with 4000 hours of voluntary COVID-related work in 2020 (Tromsø Røde kors, 2020).

The study showed that in Murmansk oblast, as well as in Russia as a whole, the basis for organizing volunteer work used a centralized model of volunteering with the support of state authorities and a leading role by large vertically integrated public organizations and movements. Under this model, volunteers in Murmansk oblast were able to quickly mobilize, increase in numbers and organize new structures “on the ground”. Volunteer centers became platforms for consolidating the efforts of regional and local authorities, volunteers, NGOs, citizens. On the Norwegian side, a decentralized model was used, this was volunteer work based on a developed network of municipal volunteer centers, with the support of local governments.

Although in different ways, volunteer structures in both neighboring Arctic regions have demonstrated the ability to mobilize and be flexible and effective to meet the needs of vulnerable groups in the initial phase of the pandemic, which was marked by extreme uncertainty. The experience gained can be used in crisis conditions related to various types of challenges, as well as to improve work in normal conditions.

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