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Framing the High North: Public discourses in Norway after 2000

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ABSTRACT *The article presents an overview of the main public debates in Norway that can be said to have framed and defined the High North since the turn of the millennium. It is based on a qualitative study of over 3000 articles published in four Norwegian newspapers issued between 2000 and 2006. Our discussion is structured around three overarching, interconnected narratives we think capture the essence of the Norwegian public discourses on the High North between 2000 and 2006. These are Fragments from the 1990s; The great narrative of the High North; and Mixing cold water with hot blood. The first half of the 2000s is characterised by an almost total absence of the High North as a discursive and politically coherent concept. From 2004, however, usage grew fivefold, alongside an extensive, dynamic discursive mobilisation. When the Russians decided in 2006 to shelve the Shtokman project and critical voices were heard condemning Norway's environmental performance in northwest Russia, public opinion swung back again. A feeling of cold reality replaced the sense of optimism towards the energy potential of the north, and an exercise in collective soul-searching commenced – similar to that of the early years of the decade. We believe the type of discursive change we document in this article constitutes policy trends both in connection with the High North and other sectors where policy is subject to intense public debate and appraisal. We hope that discourse analysis has enabled us to investigate and share how Norwegian public discourses on the High North are socially produced, framed and maintained but at the same time are always in flux and open to 'new' directions which should be possible – at least in theory – to trace by going back in time.*

KEY WORDS: Norwegian High North politics, High North, Discourse analysis, Discourse, Story line

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Introduction

When a left-centrist coalition Government took office in Norway in 2005, it designated the High North¹ as *the* key strategic and foreign policy target area (Office of the Prime Minister 2005). In doing so, the Government acknowledged developments over the past few years which at the level of rhetoric at least was the emergence of something new in post-Cold War Norwegian foreign policy. Only a few years before, few raised questions about the division of resources and security in relation to the Barents Sea region. The USSR had collapsed into a quagmire of economic and social problems; it hardly counted as a military threat to Norway any more. There was no real discussion of petroleum exploration in the High North, and the joint management of the Barents Sea fishery resources by Norway and Russia proceeded more or less amicably after the border disputes of the 1970s had settled into a tolerable modus Vivendi (Hønneland 2006:42). Norway had ambitions as a mediator between hostile parties on the global stage, and ‘South’ sounded perhaps much more progressive than ‘North’ to participants in the foreign policy debates.

How, then, did the High North suddenly become a debatable subject – and a politically opportune one at that? In this article we will, based on newspaper articles, tell a story of highs and lows in one of the broadest and most prominent Norwegian public debates on domestic and foreign politics and policies – a debate which has engaged a broad range of actors from the whole country. The High North is not only topping the foreign policy agenda,² but has very much also become the ‘people’s business’.

We have decided to present our findings and structure our discussion through three overarching, interconnected narratives. We think they encapsulate and capture the essence of the Norwegian public discourses on the High North between 2000 and 2006 as they appeared through our readings of approximately 3000 articles from four Norwegian newspapers. Our narratives are called *Fragments from the 1990s*; *The great narrative of the High North*; and *Mixing cold water with hot blood*.

We begin by reviewing the article’s analytical structure. We then give an account of the context from which the High North discussions emerged after 2000, and identify and discuss the three overarching narratives separately. We round off with some thoughts on their interconnectedness and possible ways ahead.

Discourse analysis

Because discourse maintains a degree of regularity in social relations, it produces preconditions for action. It constrains how the stuff that the world consists of is ordered, and so how people categorize and think about the world. It constrains what is thought of at all, what is thought of as possible, and what is thought of as the ‘natural thing’ to do in a given situation. But discourse cannot determine action completely. There will always be more than one possible outcome. Discourse analysis aims at specifying the bandwidth of possible outcomes (Neumann 2008:62).

Discourses ‘carry with [them] the ‘memory’ of [their] own genesis’ (Neumann 2008:71). In other words, history is in some way always traceable in ‘new’, emerging discourses in that they always draw on established meanings and realities from the past. They do not start from scratch every time. Such a phenomenon is often referred to in the discourse literature as *interdiscourse* or *interdiscursivity*. Authors such as Foucault (1972), Courtine (1981) and Fairclough (1992) have all discussed and used them as analytical concepts in their work,

though the meaning they give to the terms varies, given their varying analytical focus. When we use *interdiscursivity*, we mean the implicit or explicit relations that a discourse has to other discourses. We shall do our best to illustrate these points along the way and plot a course for what we consider to be the most important public debates on the High North in the long decade between the mid-1990s and 2006. We want to find what counted as acceptable, legitimate arguments, scenarios and perceptions of the situation. What was included, what excluded under the terms of the debate? What was taken as read, and what questioned? The interesting aspect of a debate is not always or only the issue over which the dispute proceeds. As we see it, the absence of dissent or disagreement is just as important: that which comprises the unquestioned principles and established truths of the debate – and of political decision making. The most interesting thing, though, is to observe the fragmentation that occurs when these assumptions disintegrate and fresh principles emerge to define the dispute.

When we write or talk we adapt what we are about to say to the circumstances in which it will be said. But at the same time, the way in which we write or say something co-creates the context or situation. So we adapt speech to a set of circumstances which the same speech act has helped create (Gee 2005: 10). Discourse analysis comprises a set of theories and methods for investigating language in use and language in social contexts. It sets out new paths in the study of meaning. It provides a means of negotiating dialogues and debates as they constitute social acts and gives us a pattern of symbols and representations that are constitutive of social acts.³ Discourse analysis offers several ways of dealing with data and – if anything more importantly – a great deal of theorizing around these data (Wetherell et.al 2001). We work on what has actually been written or otherwise articulated to disclose the inherent patterns and likely social impact of discursive representations of the real world. In that sense, it is neither possible nor particularly interesting to search for social laws or how things are ‘in reality’. The discourses themselves provide the scaffolding, the preconditions of change and define the space in which thinking and talking within a given subject area or field can be considered ‘natural’.

We can perceive a discourse as a relatively homogeneous way of talking about something where a tacit understanding of the situation obtains. There are, conceivably, compatible sets of tacit rules governing the representation of certain issues. Difficult issues are constrained and framed by these rules; they reduce the level of complexity and ease comprehensibility. These simplified representations often go under the name of *story lines*. We shall be making good use of this discursive-analytical term in this article. Story lines, says Maarten Hajer, are

narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggests a common understanding. Story lines are essential political devices that allow the overcoming of fragmentation and the achievement of discursive closure (1995:62).

Hajer is particularly interested in how environmental issues get defined through discourses, how problems are constructed and represented and how such representation affects policy creation. People draw on simplified representations of the world rather than complex knowledge systems when they want to understand an issue. Not only do story lines help us construe or comprehend an issue, they can also play a fundamental role, suggests Hajer (1995:64), in creating social and moral order in different areas of politics because, among other things, story lines are condensed narratives or discourses containing simplified messages supported by metaphors with as much emotional as intellectual appeal. For instance, Norway, in the debate on petroleum and the High North, is often represented as ‘an environmentally friendly problem-solver with the world’s best technology’, while Russia risks

definitions like ‘an impoverished, environmental catastrophe with a great appetite for capital’.⁴ This is more or less typical of how story lines work – complex issues reduced to simple, easily digestible bites. There is, then, a set of tacit rules or norms governing or constraining how issues are represented in, for instance, the debate over the High North or other issues. If one keeps to the rules and constraints, and the issue is properly framed, the constituent parts fall immediately into place within the space defined by the recipient’s expectations. It is in this act of compliance with the rules that the discourse, we can say, is reproduced. But when the rules are violated, the discourse suffers a breach or dislocation out of which a new set of constraints and premises can evolve enabling a new discourse. Discourse determines actions by defining the space for acceptable behaviour in a given society at a given point in time. Discourses, then, will shape or govern political behaviour by virtue of determining which options are politically viable. In Lene Hansens words, ‘[t]o theorize [foreign] policy as discourse is to argue that [identity and] policy are constituted through a process of narrative adjustment, that they stand, in social science terminology, in a constitutive, rather than causal, relationship (2006:xvi)’.

The data analysed in this article stems from a large corpus of texts which were obtained during searches in the press database Atekst for the period 1 January 2000 – 31 December 2006.⁵ Our study is based on systematic, chronologic and extensive qualitative readings of a total of 3,043 articles in the four selected Norwegian newspapers *Aftenposten* [The Evening Mail], *Dagens Næringsliv* [Today’s Business], *Klassekampen* [The Class Struggle] and *Nordlys* [Northern Light]. Our main emphasis when choosing quotes to display from our data set in this article has been on giving the reader the most fair and accurate description of how the debate appeared to us. Control searches we did in the Atekst database gave slightly more hits in the Nordlys newspaper, with Aftenposten as a close number two. The rest of the articles are relatively evenly divided between Klassekampen and Dagens Næringsliv. We feel this is reasonably reflected in the chosen extracts and references. What is more important though is the striking similarity in both content and form across the four newspapers over the whole period. Our discourses ‘appeared’ quite clearly to us from our data, voiced by a wide range of actors in all the newspapers over a relatively long period of time.

The newspapers are chosen on the basis of their slightly different profiles and focus areas, which improves the quality and broadens the scope of the analysis. Although in danger of oversimplification, one could say that *Aftenposten* represents the ‘national and conservative newspaper’, *Dagens Næringsliv* is the ‘business and financial newspaper’, *Nordlys* is the ‘regional, northern newspaper’, and lastly, *Klassekampen*, despite its uncompromising title, may be branded the ‘slightly radical and leftist newspaper’ (Jensen 2007:248).

We also draw on our own ‘cultural competence’ (Neumann 2008:63–65) in the various issue areas, acquired during studies and consultancy projects. Based on discourse analysis and our cultural capital, it is our own interpretation of the data that informs the discourses we extract and construct from the data.

Our search in the database for ‘High North’ (*nordområde**) had about 100 hits in the year 2000, 200 for the years 2001–04, followed by a steep rise to about 1,000 hits in 2005 and 2006. Like the politics, the debates of the early 2000s were rather low key affairs, centred on the prominent themes of the ’90s, but discussed with less urgency than before. The expression ‘High North’ features notably and mainly in the foreign policy debate. Two issues dominate. The first combined plans to downscale military presence in northern Norway and Russia’s response to the establishment of the Globus II Radar Station at Vardø. The second issue was nuclear security and was also twofold. Russia was planning to transport nuclear waste by ship

along the Norwegian coast, and Norway was putting together its own action plan to address the atomic waste situation in northwest Russia. In stories about the latter, the press blew alternately hot and cold, with positive stories about the long-awaited opening of the effluent treatment facility for liquid radioactive waste in Murmansk (which at the time of writing is still not operating), and negative stories about the Russian mafia and disappearing Norwegian money. From 2004 to 2005 there was a fivefold increase in 'High North' references in the Norwegian media. It can be explained partly by the sharp increase in references in public debates in relation to geographical areas and policy fields, which before used to be discussed under different headlines.

Fragments from the 1990s⁶

By the year 2000 a certain lethargy had crept into Norway's policy on Russia to use the Government's preferred term at the time (Hønneland 2005). The Barents cooperation⁷ – established in 1993 between the Nordic countries and Russia – was one of the most imposing foreign policy pillars of the early '90s; it was spoken very highly of. Creating the Barents region was a peace-promoting effort, aimed at accelerating economic growth in communities in the north of Norway still struggling after the fishery crisis of the late '80s. The Iron Curtain had disappeared for good, and east and west were finding common cause in the north. The idea was to promote peace, expand infrastructure and, above all, encourage growth in commerce, business and trade between the peoples of Norway and Russia. It was a golden opportunity, a northern gold rush waiting to happen, so to speak. No time to lose. Although some observers and critics were not convinced, their voices could hardly be heard above the din. This was the great period of excitement and anticipation about everything Barents and it held sway for several years in the public mind.

What comes in with a roar often goes out with a whimper. The post-Soviet economy was in critical shape, the more critical given the wild optimism and spectacular feats Norway and Russia were to achieve together. As the '90s drew to a close, press commentators were starting to question the viability of the large-scale projects Norway was managing in northwest Russia. Expectations, politicians and government officials quickly admitted, may have been too high. The condensed story line went something like this. 'Norwegian businesses invest in northwest Russia (often with Government support). Russian businesses were beginning to turn in a profit. Norwegians back out of their Russian partnerships.' Or when the subject was different forms of governmental support such as Norway's contribution to nuclear security and other environmental programmes in northwest Russia: 'Norway gives Russia money. Russians refuse to say how they spend it. They're probably using it to line their own pockets. And the programmes will fail anyway.' There are many examples of the story line in the press. 'Foreign Office blows NOK 1.1 billion in Russia – Wasted on pathetic schemes' (*Aftenposten*, 25 February 2000); 'Wing-clipped in Russia' (*Aftenposten*, 15 September 2000); 'Regrets Russian Adventure' (*Aftenposten*, 19 October 2000). The enthusiasm of the late '90s morphed into a discourse of disaster. There were stories about the Russian mafia and general plight of the Russian population. The mainstay of the early '90s 'misery narratives' was the perception of northwest Russia as a ticking environmental bomb and radiation hotspot (Hønneland 2003, 2005). As the decade progressed, the press printed stories of social disintegration and poverty, and the threat to Norway posed by Russian depravity seeping over the border crossings, bringing high-octane criminals, prostitution and infectious diseases in its wake (Hønneland 2003). The associated mafia narrative for its part

portrayed Russians as cunning, calculating and ready to exploit the good intentions of easily duped Norwegians (Hønneland 2005). Here are a couple of examples.

Is Russian atomic energy minister, Yevgeni Adamov, running businesses worth billions alongside his work as a minister? According to a Russian newspaper, he is. These suspicions have now been confirmed by a committee of the State Duma. Allegations against Adamov have been in the air for some time, but never really taken seriously before the State Duma's anti-corruption committee a few days ago published a twenty-page report endorsing most of what Adamov's sharpest critics have claimed all the while. According to the report, Russia's minister of atomic energy continued to transact business deals in the field of atomic energy after he was appointed minister in March 1998. Mixing government office with private business interests is one of the commonest forms of corruption in Russia today. Briefly, it works like this. Senior figures in some ministry or other 'outsource' jobs to firms in which they themselves or their fronts have an ownership interest. The government shovels money into the firm's cash register. Government officials build mansions, buy top-of-the-range cars, or open accounts in foreign-based banks, way over what they would normally be able to afford. Speaking off the record, Norwegian officials deplore the state of affairs, and have done for some time. It is particularly irritating when corruption affects joint efforts to clear up the nuclear waste in the north of Russia. As a Norwegian observer talking to *Aftenposten's* correspondent some time ago explained, 'If we launch a project and the funding is mainly western money, you can bet your bottom dollar the Russians will dig up some business or other that's 'ready and willing' to accept the assignment. If we turn that offer down, you can bet your second bottom dollar that the Russians will quietly let the project gather dust on a shelf. If you investigate who's behind the firm, you'll soon see it belongs to people inside the Russian atomic energy ministry.' (*Aftenposten*, 6 March 2001)

Accelerating the pace of work with the Russians on atomic issues could translate into economic growth and job creation in Finnmark, believes Thorbjørn Jagland.[...] After many lean years, it finally looks as if two important issues are about to achieve a breakthrough. Collaboration with Russia on atomic safety and the Nikel pollution clean-up programme, said foreign minister Thorbjørn Jagland after a Murmansk meeting with the Barents Council yesterday. A solution in these two enormously complicated problems could be highly significant for Finnmark, Jagland told *Aftenposten*. If work on the safe storage of atomic waste in Russia gets up to speed it would mean more jobs and more business in northern Norway. (*Aftenposten*, 16 March 2001)

The Barents cooperation was not a major item of the public debates of the early 2000s, at least not if we take as our point of comparison how enthusiastically the Barents project was greeted just ten years before, or indeed the clamour of criticism when the partnership failed to 'deliver the goods' within what observers felt was a reasonable period of time (Hønneland 2005). Eyes were turned for a moment when the Orheim Inquiry presented its report *NOU 2003:32 Look North! (Mot nord!)* (NOU 2003) where it recommended scaling back the national component of the cooperation and elevating instead the Arctic Council and bilateral cooperation with Russia. The head of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat said in that connection,

If this proves correct, I would say it was unbelievable. The Barents cooperation is to all intents and purposes a complete success. One has managed to establish important links between people. [...] And there's talk about eliminating popular involvement. (*Nordlys*, 6 December 2003)

Finnmark County Governor Helga Pedersen was also disappointed.

I would say the report has all the signs of having been made by a panel of experts. It's all well and good counting polar bears and ice floes, and wanting resources to step up competence building. But it all has to happen from the bottom up, with a basis in our local situation. The Inquiry's perception of the issues is completely alien to us in Finnmark. We are discussing resources, and rights make up a key element in this discussion, but the Inquiry has not addressed this at all competently. [...] [On the Barents cooperation:] It's been done without the requisite respect. The Barents cooperation has been an overwhelming success with the public. But they want to turn it into a simple regional affair. One of the reasons is because the bureaucrats have lost their enthusiasm. Is the Barents cooperation there so that bureaucrats can enjoy themselves at work, or

is it so that we who live here will get some benefit from it? No, it does get me down. (*Nordlys*, 9 December 2003)

Reports of dismal failures of joint Norwegian–Russian projects continue to surface from time to time, and, surprisingly, faint reminders of that initial sense of enthusiasm towards the Barents cooperation. It sounds like an echo from the 1990s when Svein Ludvigsen (member of the Storting for the Conservatives) writes: ‘Now’s the time for a new push in Norwegian policy on the Barents. [...] If the Pomor trade could be resuscitated it would create completely new opportunities for the northernmost Norway’ (*Nordlys*, 17 July 2000). Comments made by Rune Rafaelsen (of the Norwegian Barents Secretariat) look somewhat more to the future: ‘The enormous deposits of oil and gas in the Barents region, especially in the Russian areas, will turn what we have today of Barents cooperation upside down’ (*Nordlys*, 4 February 2002).

Where politicians were wont to visit northern Norway or the Barents region, foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre travelled to the High North whether the destination was Kirkenes, Murmansk or anywhere else (onshore or offshore) north of the Arctic Circle (located at a latitude of 66° 34'). High North policy was the new buzzword for Cold War security policy, policy towards Russia in the 1990s and the Barents cooperation. It was a timely designation signalling optimism and vitality, largely personified by foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre, with his professional confidence and dynamic manner. The expression won a place in the debates on domestic policies as a ‘cool’ variant of northern Norway stimulus packages smacking of rural policy and provincial melancholia. We believe we are on solid ground in our claim that the High North was ‘talked and written into existence’ in the sense of Neumann’s (1994) *region building approach*.⁸ The new High North policy is the story of ‘it’s happening in the north’.

The great narrative of the High North

For this is a story that is beginning to be told as we near the cusp of election year 2005; more than anything, it is a story about where northern Norway fits in the wider world. The white paper promised by the Government following the Orheim Inquiry report (NOU 2003) had been postponed several times. It was scheduled first for the spring of 2004, but appeared a year later. In terms of concrete proposals it can hardly be described as anything but disappointing. Steps should be taken to continue talking with our allies on matters relating to the High North (= the High North Dialogue) and strengthen collaborative mechanisms with Russia. This notwithstanding, something was beginning to happen. About a year later, influential figures in the north exploited the burgeoning political interest in the High North to add to the narrative ‘it’s happening in the north’, with an ‘it’s happening *now!*’ In extension of this, the High North became *the* foreign policy issue of the autumn 2005 election campaign.

We at the newspaper [*Nordlys*] have long been urging the political parties – of all hues – to bestir themselves and look at the north. Because if they do, they’ll see the Norway of the future, land of opportunities. It’s along the coast and in the north this future can be created by adopting a proactive coastal and High North policy. The next petroleum Klondike will unfold in the High North, and it is in the north we have an enormous potential for economic growth and value generation. (*Nordlys*, 4 February 2005)

Our vital national interests lie in the north. This should be the target of Norwegian foreign policy over the foreseeable future. We stand on the brink of the greatest foreign policy challenge of the post-WWII era. (Thorbjørn Jagland, chair, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, to *Nordlys*, 16 June 2005)

There had already been an extensive debate over the prospect of commercially extracting the oil and gas reserves under the Barents Sea. Oil and gas deposits under the Russian Barents Sea were sporadically referred to as very significant. Around the mid-2000s, the potential reserves under the Russian shelf were increasingly mentioned by participants debating Norwegian commercial exploitation, and indeed, in connection with the wider discourse on the High North per se. The ensuing story line was partly visionary, though based on a relatively conservative assessment of the interests of the different states. ‘Shtokman will be one of the world’s biggest gas fields when it finally comes on line. The Russians will need foreign technology and capital to develop the field, and Norwegian companies stand a good chance. The ripple benefits will be highly significant for northern Norway.’ If we include the interests of the great powers, the story line is filled out as follows: ‘The US is interested in Russian gas, and Norway will have to take care not to be marginalised by an international partnership in the High North’ (Hønneland and Jensen 2008).

A more diffuse and nervous sounding story line was mixed in: ‘The Russians have already started. We haven’t a second to lose.’ And in the great power variant: ‘The Americans are already involved. Them too.’ The origin of these assumptions is unclear, but that many do in fact believe that the Russians have been extracting oil and gas from the Barents Sea for some time – which is not the case per 2010– is in our view incontrovertible. Here are a few examples from the media. ‘The Russians are already well under way with installing an oil industry in the High North’ (*Nordlys*, 14 March 2003). ‘For every passing day, the pace of petroleum activity in the north is turned up a notch for Norway and Russia’ (*Nordlys*, 17 June 2005). An increase in the transportation of Russian oil (produced on land further east) down the Norwegian coast since 2002 may have created the ‘well under way’ impression. Whatever the reason, that the Russians were poised to begin work on production is viewed as a near certainty by many. What sort of response the story line prescribes is not entirely clear. It was often used in connection with more general arguments concerning the High North, in attempts, for example, to underscore the importance of the High North and the necessity of some course of action or other, such as the appointment of ‘a dedicated minister of High North affairs’. It became politically incorrect (against the rules in discourse terminology) to express ‘anti-High North’ opinions. Simply talking about the High North without a sense of optimism and confidence was considered bad manners – it would, in accordance with discourse theory, represent an unwelcome challenge to the dominant discourse, which has achieved this status after ‘a lot of discursive work’ (Neumann 2008:70).

In what follows we provide some quotes which we believe are representative of the great sense of urgency and euphoria to which the High North gave rise.

The Russians are sailing up as the leading oil and gas suppliers in the north. Both the US and EU are negotiating with the Russians directly, over the head of Norway, to get the best possible terms. American companies are lining up and will certainly want to make use of Norwegian off-shore know-how, which without our usual penchant for self-aggrandisement can be called the best in the world. Hydro and Statoil are obviously interested in the Barents Sea. (Jahn Otto Johansen, *Aftenposten*, 10 January 2005)

In our opinion, that the foreign office and Jan Petersen [then foreign affairs minister] are incapable of finishing a white paper on the High North in light of the *Look North!* report is almost scandalous. It sits in the ministry gathering dust while the US, EU and Russia have already entered the oil and gas era here in the north. (*Nordlys*, 12 January 2005)

The production of oil and gas, of which we only see the start, is in a totally different league from what Norway is used to dealing with. Just the disputed area between Norway and Russia is as big

as the whole Norwegian North Sea shelf. In addition, we must remain acutely aware of the possibility of landing in the middle of a new geopolitical tug-of-war. In a situation where Russia needs capital, the EU needs easy access to cheap oil, and the US needs a reliable supplier with a population that doesn't hate the US, Norway could easily become a midget among giants. When oil's on the menu, old friendships can quickly turn sour. (*Nordlys*, 4 February 2005)

The High North white paper is due out before Easter, foreign minister Jan Petersen assures us. And about time too, because Norway risks falling between every stool around. Russia and the US have hit it off in the north, applauded by the EU. Gas, oil, money and power have turned old enemies into bosom pals, leaving Norway in the cold. Will the Government's white paper have enough teeth to make Norway interesting again? It's a politically sensitive point, but the Grey Zone probably contains enormous quantities of oil and gas. Norway is under continual pressure to speed up talks that have languished in the doldrums for twenty-five years. [...] Whatever, what's happening is that American and Russian oil companies are heading the development of Norway's proximate waters in the north while Norway is hesitating. [...] In the meantime, the Russian giants Gazprom and Rosneft, working with Exxon and Halliburton, are ploughing ahead in the Russian zone. They are fully engaged in the development of the Shtokman gas field and an oil field like Prirazlomnoye (*Nordlys*, 19 February 2005)

It is hard not to notice the interdiscursive connections between the sense of enthusiasm that swept the country in the early 1990s and this sense of euphoria on behalf of the High North in the mid-2000s. The former was a compound of northern Norwegian engagement and conscious region building on the part of the national authorities. Regional building finds its inspiration in the nation building exploits of the past – the conscious efforts to persuade a population residing within a state's territorial jurisdiction to see itself as a unified people – accepting that regions are not given quantities based on natural factors, shared cultural attributes or political machinations of the great powers. Regions are, as we have already mentioned, what we make of them. They are created in writing and speech, often by political elites. We will always find reasons to consider a geographical area as a natural unit. A particular historical event, for instance, which can be drawn on to act as a symbol of unity. In the Barents region project, this role was played above all by the Pomor trade. According to the central region building story line, it was finally possible to return to the natural state of interaction and contact between east and west in northern Europe after seventy years of communism in Russia. Social scientists were brought in to talk and write the region back to life. Human geographers in particular soon assumed a key position. Reports and articles were written on how the building of infrastructure would encourage integration in all possible areas of society, cultural, social economic. Whether the geographers intended to make predictions or not, non-technical discourses on the development of the High North assimilated the models and treated them as hard facts. Visionary politicians and unification romantics in the south and north, along with geographers who were not embarrassed by such unusual interest in their models, set the agenda. With roads and industrial parks the region would be built. Optimism was high. But so was the scepticism critics brought to bear, those who feared Norway would wake to a splitting headache the day after the party.

The sense of euphoria surrounding the High North and its prospects in the 2000s is, as we see it, not in the same sense an example of region building, at least not on a par with the transnational nature of the Barents region project. There was a determination then to get the public in all member countries to feel a sense of ownership of one and the same area. High North policy is more exclusively a Norwegian project to achieve important domestic- and foreign policy goals, as can be seen in the problems finding an adequate non-Norwegian name for the phenomenon.⁹ True, one seeks to encourage international interest in the High North, but the project's identity-building profile is not in the same league as the Barents regional collaboration. What they do share, however, is the element of brand creation and

management. Allegorically put, old political bottles are being filled with new political wine. And, above all, the bottles have to glow with the radiance of a new aura. When the High North white paper was issued in the spring of 2005, experts and politicians defined it as a turning point in Norwegian foreign relations. Never before had the opportunities and challenges associated with the High North been presented in a single document, went the claim. What no one seemed to remember was the 1998 white paper on relations with neighbouring countries (*nærområdepolitikken*) produced by then Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik's first Government. While there were scattered references to relations with western countries, it was essentially a review of what we call today High North policy, that is, relations with Russia in the Barents Sea area. Current High North policy looks towards the west, too – at least on paper – which underlines the similarity with 1990s neighbourhood policy and High North policy of the 2000s. Oil and gas represent a new sub-area of foreign relations, but the 2005 white paper did not make much out of them. So, to a large extent, it was the same subject matter in new wrappings. Neighbourhood policy was out, High North policy was in.

One noticeable similarity between enthusiasm for the Barents project and euphoria for the High North project is the storyline they share of the urgency of the situation: 'we're running out of time'. In the early 1990s, according to those urging the establishment of business relations with northwest Russia, Norway was being left behind by everyone else. 'The Swedes are investing, the Finns are investing; even the Germans are investing, the Portuguese are investing – And us Norwegians, we're sitting on the fence with our hands in our pockets' (Hønneland 2005; Hønneland and Jensen 2008). Not everyone resisted the temptation to cry 'Wolf! Wolf!' By the mid-2000s, Norway, ostensibly, was being overtaken by the major powers in the Barents Sea. Exxon and Halliburton were hard at work developing the Shtokman field, some professed. In both cases the warnings originated with northern Norwegian actors, whose patience was often sorely tried by the tardiness of an Oslo milieu unable or unwilling to take stock of the situation and grasp the opportunities to be had in the High North. If someone in the heat of the euphoric moment uttered anything but 'hooray!', they and their arguments were soon stripped of legitimacy. If southern Norwegians tried pouring cold water onto hot northern blood, they were ill informed. And if the offenders were themselves northerners, they were virtually traitors. (See for instance historians Einar-Arne Drivenes and Harald Dag Jølle pointing to elements of megalomania in the High North rhetoric in *Nordlys* 4 June 2005. See *Nordlys* 23 June 2005 and 29 June 2005 to see the responses they got for speaking against the dominant discourse). We shall not go so far as to question whether there was any substance at all in the wave of enthusiasm for the Barents project or euphoria for the High North project. The opening of the border between Russia and Norway in the north in the early 1990s is a fact. And the Barents Sea was being opened for oil and gas exploration a decade later. Admittedly, the Germans and Portuguese were investing in Murmansk, and the US looked for some time as if it would be the main beneficiary of LNG gas from the Shtokman field if and when it started producing. Whether the Portuguese landed deals in Murmansk before us, or Shtokman gas ends up in the US is not our main concern at the moment. The intriguing thing for us here is that the discourses assumed this particular form, and in both cases unfolded in ways that were so similar. Is the story being told a familiar one – about hope, urgency and an arrogant capital city?

Mixing cold water with hot blood

During the slow simmer of the 1990s and early 2000s and ensuing euphoria over the High North, critical voices were few and far between. But there were some. And more have joined the fray since the end of the period under discussion by this article. What we mean by a 'critical voice' is not someone who criticises the Government for tardiness in the High North question, but someone who questions the measures and priorities in place. We are not thinking mainly about people who criticise failed projects, but rather the underlying project rationale. There are isolated instances in the Norwegian press of Government projects being hauled over the coals, one such being the nuclear waste action plan. Some ask whether the High North euphoria has any basis in fact and whether it is prudent to make such 'a song and dance' about it anyway. By the end of the period, voices are calling for a fundamental overhaul of the principles of Norway's relations with Russia in the High North. These critical voices are united in questioning perceptions of reality in current Norwegian High North policy and in the policy debates. The story line goes 'What have we let ourselves in for? Isn't it time for a reality check?'

Criticism of the rationality of the grand undertakings of 1990s High North policy was, as mentioned, not particularly vociferous. Commentators criticised the lack of tangible and significant results of Norwegian–Russian economic collaboration, but no one condemned the entire project. The nuclear waste action plan was slammed for having put too much money into Russian hands a bit too fast. Questions have been asked at irregular intervals since Norway started funding nuclear safety projects in northwest Russia in the early 1990s, but they have never really undermined the image of impending disaster created by Bellona (a Norwegian environmental organization). And public opinion appears to consider the Kola peninsula with some concern, a radioactive wasteland. So it's a good thing we're addressing the problems, after all.

Some experts, on the other hand, can't see what the fuss is all about. According to them, the scrapped submarines and the atomic waste in the Kola peninsula aren't endangering anyone or anything beyond those in the closest proximity. They attack environmentalists for playing on latent fears for anything remotely connected with radiation – natural radiation is everywhere, they say. Politicians are too willing to throw money at a problem simply to placate a concerned public opinion. They point to the prevailing discourse's tacit assumptions, the things that usually elude critical discussion. In this instance, the assumption is that nuclear waste in the Kola peninsula constitutes a risk to the life and health of Norwegians. The experts urge the Government to take a reality check and ask themselves what they are really up to. It is all well and good to protect a few fjord inlets in the Kola peninsula from pollution, but it is not a sensible idea to portray the discarded submarines as another Chernobyl waiting to go into critical meltdown:

Aftenposten has had several reports on how the scrapped Russian submarines and atomic waste are being handled in the High North. Based on an idea of the probable consequences to the fishing industry and population of our northern counties of a hazardous leak, our authorities have now budgeted about NOK 1 billion to help the Russians clear up the mess. It is difficult to find sound scientific justification for this type of aid. Indeed, there are no scientific grounds whatsoever for the idea that radioactive pollution of a given area of the northern waters would adversely affect health or environment in Norway. [...] In terms of the media, radioactivity tends to create the big headlines, but it is meaningless not to mention natural radioactivity in assessments of radioactivity. Studies of the environment show that if the radioactivity of 200 scrapped submarines was to leak into the Barents Sea, total radioactivity in the same sea would rise by a thousandth. In terms of health, the decisive thing is the amount of radiation people could be exposed to by eating fish or

other sea foods polluted by small levels of radioactivity from a 'leaking' submarine core. As analyses demonstrate, these doses will always be small and virtually insignificant in relation to the doses from natural radiation. As far as I am aware, the political decision to give Russia financial aid to clear up northern areas was not based on these analyses. What, then, is the explanation for these decisions? There may be many laudable reasons to help a neighbouring country address its environmental problems when the assumptions are based on verifiable scientific evidence. But the evidence in this case is unclear, not to say completely absent. (M.Sc. Rolf O. Lingjærde, *Aftenposten*, 10 November 2003).

Another type of intervention denies that the Russians are already producing oil and gas in the Barents Sea, something many in Norway appear to believe. At the same time, more and more voices are stressing the reliance of Norwegian optimism for the High North on how much oil and gas is found in the Russian Barents Sea – not least because of the disappointing results as regards the Norwegian Barents Sea shelf.

Professor Olav Orheim pours cold water on Kjell Magne Bondevik's aspirations. The Russians may not start work on the Shtokman field for a long time yet, he says. [...] The plans Russians have for Asia are ambitious, he points out, and they will probably want to consider Chinese, Japanese and Indian wishes before starting on the Shtokman project. (*Dagens Næringsliv*, 23 June 2005)

'[Consultancies in northern Norway] write glowing reports based on the discovery of significant oil deposits in the Barents Sea. According to studies done by the authorities themselves, there is little chance of finding much oil in the Barents Sea. [The consultancies] stoke up unrealistic expectations regarding exploration in the north and their attempts to convince the public are frankly disingenuous', says Bellona representative Guro Hauge. What upsets her in particular are the projects they [the consultancies] conduct [ostensibly showing] the likely benefits of oil in the north. She condemns those she alleges are only seeking to make a profit from people's hopes and expectations. '[They] have been the leading advocates of oil exploration in the north. I have no confidence in their ability to give an unbiased picture of the benefits likely to flow from an oil and gas industry. These people have a direct economic interest in creating expectations to the High North. (*Nordlys*, 29 March 2006)

It was only a year ago Jonas Gahr Støre was whipping up a frenzy in northern Norway with his 'Tromsø speech'. Today, the grand visions are gone, replaced by a sensible plan for the High North which few will find reason to celebrate. [...] The question is whether Støre hasn't fastened the High North project too firmly to the Shtokman mast. Støre, for example, prevailed upon former Statoil director Arve Johnsen to assess the feasibility of a 'Pomor zone' in the north. The Government will be moving to accelerate economic relations and collaboration, it says, and is proposing a dual economic and industrial zone linking areas in northern Norway and northwest Russia. With hindsight, the proposal will undeniably lose credibility if nothing comes of the planned gas field. So what do they intend to fill the economic zone with, that's the question. It would be a far more lucrative proposition if production started and Hydro and Statoil were partners. As it is, Shtokman is likely to stay on the back burner for a significant stretch. And according to some, the Kremlin and Gazprom appear to be more interested in Siberia. This is not good news for Norwegian manufacturers, subcontractors and others expecting the north to enjoy some of the fringe benefits. And it is a bellyflop for foreign minister Støre's plans for the High North. (*Dagens Næringsliv*, 1 December 2006)

In this last example we see then the start of what we can call a slight depression in the Norwegian debate on the High North. The Russian 'no' to a Shtokman partnership with Norway converted the febrile sense of elation over the ability of the almost unlimited potential of the High North to save the region and the nation into a sense of gloom. The turnaround was almost immediately evident as a sharp drop in the number of hits in the database and, in the wider media picture, a palpable change of heart. The penny, so to speak, had dropped at last. One saw now how far the Norwegian High North adventure depended on Norwegian participation on the Russian shelf. This sense of being locked out in the cold

lasted only a year or two, however. Spirits quickened when word spread that StatoilHydro¹⁰ – the outcome of a merger between the two companies – would be a partner all the same in this mammoth undertaking¹¹. Almost overnight, the old sense of optimism received a new lease of life; the grand visions for the High North were dusted down and shunted into service again in the Norwegian press (Jensen and Skedsmo: 2010).

Closing remarks

By tracing similarities between the manner in which optimism of the 1990s for the Barents project petered out, leaving the stage for a more sober, peoples-to-peoples rhetoric, the most pressing question is whether the current euphoria over the High North project will also prove to be a flash in the pan. The fiasco discourse of the late 1990s shows how merciless retrospection can be towards the great prophets or seers. We can already sense what may turn out to be a repeat performance. Headlines like ‘Støre’s Bellyflop’ (*Dagens Næringsliv* 1 December 2006) mimic those of the late 1990s, such as ‘Oddrun’s Fiasco’ (Referring to Oddrun Pettersen, the first leader of the Barents Secretariat). Will potential future Russian Shtokman-wobbling douse High North euphoria as much as the press reports of corrupt business practices in Russia doused enthusiasm for the Barents project? Will ‘competence building in the north’ become the High North’s version of the peoples-to-peoples project? Or are we yet again facing a revitalised, euphoric-like High North discourse in Norway in the wake of the somewhat surprising Barents Sea Delimitation Agreement¹² between Norway and Russia on April 27th 2010? We would like to point to the growing tendency just at the moment to question the principles on which Norway bases relations with Russia, principles which have been in place since the end of the Cold War. An economically powerful Russia which is actively re-inventing its aspirations to great powerdom is quite different from the crippled bear we were dealing with after the collapse of the USSR. It’s a view which appears to be gaining traction among participants in the Norwegian High North debate¹³.

In this article we have given an overview of the main public debates in Norway which framed and defined the High North discursively and politically. Our discourse genealogy shows an almost total absence of High North as a discursive and politically coherent concept in the first half of the 2000s. In the press, the term is used very sparingly, and when it does appear, it carries the connotations and harks back to the categories of the 1990s, what we take as being a clear-cut case of interdiscursivity. These were the Fragments *from the 1990s*.

From 2004, use of ‘High North’ in the press multiplies by five, and we see a wide, intense discursive mobilisation through the narrative ‘it’s happening in the north’. This is *The great narrative of the High North*.

With the Russians’ first saying ‘no’ to Shtokman and critique of Norwegian environmental management in northwest Russia, public opinion reverts back in 2006 to a pre-High North climate, and optimism gives way to a discursive shift voicing downheartedness and elements of collective self-criticism portrayed in our third narrative, *Mixing cold water with hot blood*

As mentioned, we conceive that the type of discursive dynamics we have documented in this article constitute policy trends both in connection with the High North and other sectors where policy is subject to intense public debate and appraisal. Much in the same way that concrete policy steps constitutes the discourses about those very steps. Paying attention precisely to the point at which discourse and policy cross paths would appear to be highly

rewarding in the sense of gaining greater insight into the immensely complex connections at work in society. We believe that discourse analysis has enabled us to investigate and share how Norwegian public discourses on the High North are socially produced, framed and maintained but at the same time are always in flux and open to ‘new’ directions which should be possible to trace – at least in theory – by going back in time.

Epilogue

During 2010, and after our analysis was conducted, the maritime delimitation agreement between Norway and Russia was signed in Murmansk on November 15th by the Norwegian and Russian Foreign Ministers Jonas Gahr Støre and Sergey Lavrov. This marked an end to the most important outstanding issue between Norway and Russia.¹⁴ A couple of months earlier, the first non-Russian flag bulk carrier sailed the Northern Sea Route in transit (without visiting a Russian port) from Kirkenes, Northern Norway to China loaded with iron ore concentrate.¹⁵ Which discursive shifts and policy changes are likely to emerge from such events are unknown at this point (December 2010), but they are almost certainly significant in the context of this article, and would form an interesting topic for future research.

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Notes

- ¹ The phrase ‘High North’ was introduced as the English equivalent of the Norwegian term ‘nordområdene’ (the northern areas) in the mid 1980s, eventually becoming adopted by the Norwegian authorities in the beginning of the current century. The concept has no immediate corresponding counterpart in academic or political discourse outside Norway, and it is not self-explanatory to foreigners (Skagestad 2010).
- ² For a discussion on Norwegian and Russian official foreign policy discourses on the European Arctic, see Jensen and Skedsmo (2010).
- ³ For more on structuralist thoughts on the sign, the signifier, and the signified, see for instance Sanders (2004), Saussure (2006) and Stavrakakis (1991).
- ⁴ Jensen (2007) analyses Norwegian petroleum politics and debates.
- ⁵ The search term was Nordområde* (= High North)
- ⁶ For more on the relationship between Russia and the West and the corresponding discourses of the 1990’s which the following is compared with and contrasted against, see Hønneland (2003) and Hønneland (2005).
- ⁷ The Barents cooperation was formally established on 11 January 1993, when the Kirkenes declaration was signed. The Barents cooperation is organised on two levels. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) operates at government level and the Regional Council operates at regional level. The purpose of the Barents Cooperation is to strengthen east-west infrastructure, establish people-to-people contacts and thereby contribute to the economic, cultural and social development of the Region. The Barents Cooperation promotes people-to-people contacts and economic development and creates good conditions for interregional exchange in many different fields; e.g., culture, indigenous peoples, youth, education, trade, environment, transportation and health. The primary goal of BEAC is to promote sustainable economic and social development in the Barents Region and thus contribute to peaceful development in the northernmost part of Europe (Barentsinfo.org).
- ⁸ For a general account of the discursive construction of regions see Neumann (1994). For an analysis of the High North in particular, see Zachariassen (2008).
- ⁹ Arctic produces a different set of associations, and one has arrived at “High North” (“det høye nord”) as a passable convenience when the subject is discussed in languages other than Norwegian.
- ¹⁰ StatoilHydro ASA changed name to Statoil ASA on 2 November 2009. The name StatoilHydro was used temporarily for a period of two years after the merger between Statoil ASA and Norsk Hydro ASA’s oil and gas division (statoilhydro.com).

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- ¹¹ On October 25, 2007, StatoilHydro signed a frame agreement with Gazprom to become partner in phase 1 of the Shtokman development together with Total. The agreement gives Statoil a 24% equity interest in Shtokman Development AG where Gazprom (51%) and Total (25%) are the two other partners. Shtokman Development AG, established on February 21, 2008, is responsible for planning, financing and constructing the infrastructure necessary for the first phase of the Shtokman development and will own the infrastructure for 25 years from start of commercial production. This includes offshore installations, pipeline to shore and the onshore processing plants both for LNG and piped gas (statoil.com).
- ¹² For more on the agreement, see ee the Joint Statement on maritime delimitation and cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean which is available from:
http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/Folkerett/030427_english_4.pdf
- ¹³ See for instance Aftenposten, 26 February 2007, where Lars Rowe from the Fridtjof Nansen Institute criticises Norwegian foreign policy towards Russia and argues that the new Russia will not and should not be seen as a country with a still broken back. It is, according to Rowe, time for the Norwegian government to realise that Russia have both the will and means to tackle its own problems: It is long overdue that Norway stop throwing money at Russian problems.
- ¹⁴ The treaty marks the end of a long process that started in 1970. The breakthrough in the negotiations was made public during President Medvedev's visit to Norway on 27 April this year, when the Norwegian and Russian foreign ministers signed a joint statement announcing that the two countries' negotiating delegations had reached preliminary agreement on delimitation. The treaty must be approved by the Norwegian Storting and the Russian Duma before it can enter into force (<http://www.barentsobserver.com/norway-and-russia-sign-maritime-delimitation-agreement.4819173-16149.html>.)
- ¹⁵ The rapid ongoing climate change is bringing vast change to the Arctic, and previous ice-covered areas are becoming more accessible for shipping. September 2010 was the first time in modern history that the Northern Sea Route was totally ice-free, with only some few places with drift ice that could be seen from the bridges of the vessels that sailed the route. Sailing from Europe to Asia along the top of Russia's Arctic coast takes only two thirds of the time it takes to go through the Suez Canal to the south. (<http://www.barentsobserver.com/preparing-for-next-years-northern-sea-route-season.4832790-16175.html>).