

Hybrid threats in high latitudes: Facing Russia on Svalbard



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ISBN 978–952–7591–28–4 (web)

ISBN 978–952–7591–29–1 (print)

ISSN 2670–2053 (web)

ISSN 2814–7227 (print)

December 2025

Cover photo: Thomas Nilsen / Barents Observer

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Summary

This paper outlines how Russia conducts hybrid threat activities in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard while maintaining a consistent strategy, dating to the Second World War, of asserting special rights and aiming to bi-lateralize issues with Norway. Since 2014 Russia has escalated its use of grey-zone provocations, history-based propaganda, and paramilitary and religious symbolism on Svalbard to intimidate Norway and test responses. Moscow's activities on Svalbard are designed to influence both Russian and Norwegian audiences, reinforcing domestic support for the Kremlin's strategic narratives while undermining Norway's authority and unity. A key objective is to weaken Norway's adherence to Western sanctions, which – if achieved – could threaten broader European security. Russia's hybrid threat activities are conducted below the threshold of open conflict, aiming to create ambiguity and strategic paralysis for Norway and NATO. To counter this, the paper recommends a twofold strategy of deterring Russian hybrid threats while building resilience in Norway. This includes investment in enhanced institutional defences, public awareness campaigns, strengthened international cooperation and support for independent editorial-led media to resist information manipulation.

1 Introduction

Small states in geographical proximity to a great power are typically subjected to pressure to adapt.¹ This applies to the Russia–Norway relationship on Svalbard, an Arctic Norwegian archipelago of strategic importance to Moscow in the western part of the Barents Sea. The Svalbard Treaty of 1920 grants Norway sovereignty, making it an undisputed part of the Kingdom. At the same time, the Treaty provides citizens of all signatory states with equal rights to utilize certain natural resources and engage in economic activities as specified in the Treaty.² Coalmining has been the dominant industry and the backbone of human presence, albeit with decreasing revenues in recent decades. In addition to Norwegian activities, only one major company from another country – the Russian state mining company Trust Arktikugol – engages in commercial operations and maintains a permanent settlement, Barentsburg. Russia is also represented here by a Consulate General.

Throughout the Cold War and until today, the Russian presence remains of symbolic rather than economic value, reflecting Moscow's assessment of the archipelago's strategic significance. This assessment is grounded in Svalbard's geographical proximity to the Russian Northern Fleet's operational area in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, and

the military capabilities on the Kola Peninsula and the archipelagos of Franz Josef Land and Novaya Zemlya. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine since 2014, resulting in growing Russia–West tension and new geopolitical constellations in northern Europe, means the Cold War scenario of Russia seizing Svalbard has gained new relevance.³ Traditionally, Russia's strategic interest in Svalbard and adjacent waters has been interpreted as defensive, aiming to protect military assets on the Kola Peninsula by denying access to NATO forces throughout the Barents Sea and its airspace, as these areas are critical to Russia's second-strike capabilities. In the last two decades, however, Russia has voiced ambitions to bolster its global power and topple what Moscow terms 'the US-led unipolar world order', portraying itself as in a long-term confrontation with the West. This assertive security posture includes a significantly strengthened Russian military presence in the Arctic through the restoration of Soviet-era bases and the building of potent new ones across the region.⁴ As this paper shows, Russian Arctic militarization has been accompanied by an increasingly articulate position on Svalbard, including a growing number of hybrid threats applied to exert pressure on Norway. This is aligned with the

- 1 Hans Mouritzen, 'Grænser for handlefrihed: Skandinaviske stater i asymmetrisk bilateralt diplomati', *Internasjonal politikk*, Volume 80, Issue 1, (2022): 6–27, <https://doi.org/10.23865/intpol.v80.3078>.
- 2 'Traktat mellem Norge, Amerikas Forente Stater, Danmark, Frankrike, Italia, Japan, Nederlandene, Storbritannia og Irland og de britiske oversjøiske besiddelser og Sverige angående Spitsbergen [Svalbardtraktaten]', *lovdata.no*, <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1920-02-09> (accessed 10 May 2025). The Soviet Union acceded to the Treaty in 1935. For the negotiations of the Treaty and the pre-war period see Sven G. Holtsmark, 'A Soviet Grab for the High North? USSR, Svalbard, and Northern Norway, 1920–1953', *Forsvarsstudier*, 7 (Institutt for forsvarsstudier, 1993), <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/193124>.
- 3 Minna Ålander, 'A Region in the Making: The Nordic-Baltic Alignment' (International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia, 2025), <https://icds.ee/en/a-region-in-the-making-the-nordic-baltic-alignment/>.
- 4 Pavel K. Baev, 'Threat Assessments and Strategic Objectives in Russia's Arctic Policy', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 32, Issue 1, (2019): 25–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2019.1552662>.



Figure 1. Map of Arctic Ocean region north of mainland Europe. Source: Peter Hermes Furian/Shutterstock.com

findings of recent studies indicating that Russia increasingly perceives Svalbard as a key area of contention in Europe, spurring Moscow to apply various measures to assert its influence.⁵

Russia's goal on Svalbard and how to interpret developments in Russian statements and acts are discussed at the end of this paper. The analysis starts with the fact that a long-term objective of Moscow has been to gain the strategic upper hand in the western Barents Sea by maximizing Russian influence and presence while limiting NATO's role in the region.⁶ Moreover, this paper is based

on the observation that posing openly as an aggressor in the Arctic has not thus far been in Russia's interest because this could unleash an uncontrolled escalation and a military conflict with NATO's superior power. The paper argues that the growing number of hybrid threats Russia has applied on Svalbard since 2014 must be seen in the context of Moscow's intensified confrontation with the West and increased willingness to take risks, as well as in the context of Russian hybrid threat activities implemented in the northernmost parts of the Nordics in the last decade.⁷

5 Karen-Anna Eggen, 'Designing around NATO's deterrence: Russia's Nordic information confrontation strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 47, Issue 3, (2024): 410–434, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2024.2332328>.

6 Whitney P. Lackenbauer, T. Bouffard and A. Lajeunesse, 'Russian Information Operations: The Kremlin's Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objective', *Journal of Peace and War Studies*, 4th edition (October 2022): 161–186; Stian Bones and Kari Aga Myklebost, 'Russland på Svalbard: sikkerhetspolitikk, bilateralisering og subversjon', *Stormaktskonkurranse og innovasjon – mellom tradisjonelle og irregulære maktmidler i Arktis*, ed. Njord Wegge (Cappelen Damm Forskning, 2025), 91–110.

7 Karen-Anna Eggen, *Russia's Contemporary Grand Strategy: The Use of Information and Other Unconventional Means Toward the Nordic Region*, Doctoral dissertation (University of Oslo, 2025); Runar Spansvoll, 'Studying Moscow's Coercive Campaign Against Norway', *The RUSI Journal*, Volume 168, Issue 3, (2023): 74–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2023.2220756>; Gunhild H. Gjörv, 'Security and geopolitics in the Arctic: The increase of hybrid threat activities in the Norwegian High North' (Helsinki Hybrid CoE Working Paper No. 30, 2024); Mathieu Landriault and Julie Renaud, 'Russian information campaigns and NATO in the Arctic', *Nordic Review of International Studies*, Volume 3 (2024): 88–96, <https://nrjs.journal.fi/article/view/145438>; Kari Aga Myklebost, 'Russian active measures in Eastern Finnmark, Norway', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 13 August 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/opinions/russian-active-measures-in-eastern-finnmark-norway/151169> (accessed 5 July 2025).

Conceptualizing Russian hybrid threats on Svalbard

A growing number of research publications reveal the diversity of Russia's contemporary hybrid threat toolbox, ranging from loud information campaigns for disseminating the Kremlin's strategic narratives to various grey-zone acts intended to manipulate and challenge a target state below the threshold of military conflict.⁸ Recent research concludes that hybrid threat activities constitute a core part of Russia's grand strategy as a strategy for the weak; the hybrid threats' toolbox offers cost-effective methods for manipulating target states without risking an uncontrolled escalation.⁹

Hybrid threats aim to undermine government authority and limit the room for decision making. They include tactics to provoke reactions that can be harmful to the target state's own resilience and interests.¹⁰ The spread of conspiracy theories, coupled with covert sabotage, is also applied to intimidate by demonstrating the target state's vulnerability while maintaining plausible or even implausible

deniability. It may occasionally be expedient to operate within the grey zone between secrecy and exposure, in which the hand behind an action is sufficiently visible to convey a message of threat but still be unattributable.¹¹

Such behaviour actively exploits a prolonged peace-war spectrum, operating with a hidden hostile agenda while officially claiming to have peaceful and law-abiding intentions. Such subversive tactics include "active measures", a subset of hybrid threats rooted in Soviet strategic doctrine that cover manipulative and ambiguous acts designed to exploit vulnerabilities and generate insecurity. Their aim is to create a blurred understanding of the situation or to provoke a reaction that can be used to discredit the targeted party.¹² Accusations may take the form of claims that a state is acting contrary to legal norms, demonstrating poor judgement, or contributing to heightened tension between states. Active measures are offensive in nature, yet they can be portrayed as legitimate or be denied if necessary.

8 See e.g. Anneli Ahonen et al., *Russia's Information Influence Operations in the Nordic-Baltic Region* (NATO StratCom COE, Riga, November 2024), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-information-influence-operations-in-the-nordic-baltic-region/314>; Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russian Political Warfare: Essays on Kremlin Propaganda in Europe and the Neighbourhood, 2020–2023* (Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, Vol. 271, Ibidem Verlag, 2023); Andreas Østhagen, 'The Arctic after Russia's invasion of Ukraine: The increased risk of conflict and hybrid threats' (Helsinki Hybrid CoE Paper No. 18, 2023).

9 Eggen, *Russia's Contemporary Grand Strategy*.

10 R. Jungwirth et al., *Hybrid threats: a comprehensive resilience ecosystem* (Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023), doi:10.2760/37899, JRC129019; Matthew R. Redhead, *Old Wine, New Bottles? The Challenge of State Threats* (SOC ACE Research Paper 32. University of Birmingham, 2025), 14: 41–43.

11 Martin Kragh, Erik Andermo and Liliia Makashova, 'Conspiracy theories in Russian security thinking', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 45, Issue 3, (2022): 334–368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1717954>; Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, 'Grey is the new black: covert action and implausible deniability', *International Affairs*, Volume 94, Issue 3, May (2018): 477–494, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy067>.

12 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (Profile Books Ltd, 2020).

This paper demonstrates that Russia's approach on Svalbard is a case in point: since the Second World War the Soviet Union, and later Russia, has consistently applied a combination of subversive tools below the threshold of military conflict, aiming to make Norway adapt to Russian strategic goals. Russia creates tension by instrumentalizing certain aspects of Svalbard's legal arrangements, including the fact that the archipelago is not part of the Schengen area, and that the Svalbard Treaty allows free entry for citizens of signatory states. The same applies to interpretations of the Treaty's applicability in the waters around Svalbard and on the continental shelf, as well as clauses in the Treaty on not using the archipelago for warlike purposes and on research activities.

Moreover, accusing Norway of acting against the spirit of the Treaty is a longstanding Russian strategy which has become more pronounced in recent years, not least concerning the waters around Svalbard and the shelf. Whereas the Svalbard Treaty of 1920 refers only to territorial waters, international law adopted since the 1970s allows coastal states to establish extended regulations and ensure sovereign rights to resources both on the shelf and in the surrounding waters. Regarding Svalbard, Norway maintains that maritime areas beyond territorial waters are not subject to the Treaty's provisions,

asserting that according to international law it holds exclusive sovereign rights in the 200-mile Fisheries Protections Zone (FPZ) around Svalbard. As for the continental shelf, Norway developed a position during the 1960s arguing in favour of exclusive rights, based on the definition of the area surrounding Svalbard as part of mainland Norway's continental shelf. In recent years, and in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Oslo has taken the view that parts of Norway's continental shelf are derived from its sovereignty over Svalbard.¹³ The Soviet Union, and later Russia, has persistently disputed Norway's position, arguing that Norway cannot unilaterally introduce regulations at sea or on the shelf but must consult with Russia and other signatory states.¹⁴

The paper proceeds with a short discussion of the Soviet Union's interests in and strategic thinking on Svalbard since the Second World War, providing a backdrop for understanding current Russian behaviour. It then addresses the present, scrutinizing Russian hybrid threat activities on Svalbard in the new era of growing tension since 2014. The paper concludes with a summary of developments in Russia's spectrum of hybrid threats on Svalbard, offering recommendations for countering the Russian approach.

13 Tore Henriksen, 'The Dispute of the Geographical Application of the Svalbard Treaty: Into a New Phase, An Essay in Honor of Ted L McDorman, *Ocean Development & International Law*, Volume 55, (2024): 466–476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2024.2414811>.

14 For a thorough discussion of the positions and legal perspectives see Andreas Østhagen, 'The myths of Svalbard geopolitics: An Arctic case study', *Marine Policy*, Volume 167, (2024): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106183>; Cecilie J. Stensrud and Andreas Østhagen, 'Hybrid Warfare at Sea? Russia, Svalbard and the Arctic', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, Volume 7, Issue 1, (2024): 111–130, DOI: 10.31374/sjms.233.

2 The Soviet Union on Svalbard

Soviet presence, interests and strategic thinking

Historically, a combination of legal, historical, economic and military-strategic considerations shaped the Soviet Union's approach to Svalbard. From the outset the Soviet Union perceived Svalbard as critical to its northern maritime strategy. The archipelago provided not only economic resources such as coal from the two settlements of Barentsburg and Pyramiden but also symbolized historic ties through the hunting traditions and Arctic explorations of the Pomors, Russian seafarers from the White Sea coast. During the Second World War the vulnerability of Arctic shipping routes, particularly the convoys supplying Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, underscored Svalbard's strategic value.¹⁵ This perspective culminated dramatically during the 'Svalbard case' of 1944–1947.¹⁶ Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs Viacheslav Molotov's unexpected demand to Norway's Foreign Minister Trygve Lie in 1944 proposed that Bear Island, part of the Svalbard archipelago, be ceded to the Soviet Union, and that the Svalbard Treaty be replaced by a Soviet–Norwegian condominium arrangement. Molotov justified this on the grounds of strategic necessity, citing the need to secure northern maritime routes and bolster Soviet security in the High North. He further emphasized the historical claims, referring to Bear Island as "in practice a Russian

island", highlighting the dependence of the Soviet Northern Fleet and Arctic settlements on Svalbard coal.¹⁷

Although the Svalbard case ended in 1947 with the Soviet Union's acceptance of the existing Treaty framework, the episode revealed enduring Soviet ambitions. Subsequent Soviet documents continued to stress Svalbard's strategic role, particularly as NATO's integrated command structure emerged in the early 1950s. The Soviet response to Norway's NATO membership was hostile, seeing Svalbard's inclusion within the alliance's area of responsibility as a threat. Soviet notes to Norway warned that such a policy was incompatible with neighbourly relations and laid the blame for any deterioration in relations squarely at Norway's feet.¹⁸

Disputes over maritime jurisdiction further deepened the divide. The Soviet Union firmly rejected Norway's establishment in the 1970s of the FPZ and claim to rights over the continental shelf surrounding Svalbard. Moscow argued that Norway was illegitimately expanding its authority and consistently pushed for joint Soviet–Norwegian management of resources – a clear bid for bi-lateralization. This approach was emblematic of the Soviet strategy to secure a say in the governance of Svalbard's adjacent maritime areas, thereby maintaining its foothold in the western Barents Sea.¹⁹

15 Evan Mawdsley, *The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019).

16 See chapters in *Russland kommer nærmere. Norge og Russland 1814–1917*, ed. Jens Petter Nielsen (Oslo: Pax forlag, 2014); *Naboer i frykt og forventning. Norge og Russland 1917–2014*, ed. Sven G. Holtmark (Oslo: Pax forlag, 2015).

17 Sven G. Holtmark, 'Høyt spill. Svalbard-spørsmålet 1944–47', *Forsvarsstudier*, 1 (Institutt for forsvarsstudier, 2004), <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/99765>.

18 Holtmark, 'A Soviet Grab'.

19 Stian Bones and Vidar Bjørnsen, 'Grenser gråsoner og fisk', in *Naboer i frykt og forventning. Norge og Russland 1917–2014*, ed. Sven G. Holtmark (Oslo: Pax forlag, 2015), 476–492.

Overall, Soviet strategic thinking concerning Svalbard intertwined military-strategic imperatives with economic interests and historical claims, all converging on a consistent objective: to assert a special status for the Soviet Union within the existing international framework, thereby undermining Norway's exclusive authority in matters related to the exercise of sovereignty and gradually steering the situation towards a form of joint administration – what might be termed a “consent regime”.

Soviet active measures on Svalbard

Beyond overt diplomacy and official protests, the Soviet Union engaged throughout the Cold War in subversive activities to challenge Norwegian authority on Svalbard. The Soviet goal was clear: to limit Norway's ability to exercise sovereign governance while reinforcing the perception of a privileged Soviet position in the archipelago.²⁰

A central instrument in this strategy was to bi-lateralize disputes and governance issues. By framing Svalbard-related concerns as bilateral matters, Moscow sought to elevate its standing vis-à-vis Norway and to sideline multilateral engagement, thereby weakening Norway's reliance on international support mechanisms. This was evident in the repeated Soviet insistence that the Soviet Union and Norway shared unique responsibilities on Svalbard due to their geographical proximity and historical presence.²¹

Soviet actors systematically disregarded Norwegian regulations that challenged this

claimed special position. For example, Soviet mining settlements largely ignored Norwegian legal frameworks governing internal affairs, such as the application of the Road Traffic Act in the 1960s or environmental protection regulations introduced in the 1970s. Helicopter flights and landings in protected areas often occurred without notification to the Governor of Svalbard, in contravention of Norwegian regulations. Similarly, Soviet fishing vessels operated at sea with minimal regard for Norwegian reporting requirements in the FPZ, even while Soviet authorities acknowledged other regulatory measures.²²

Subversive Soviet conduct thus operated at multiple levels. It simultaneously aimed to undermine Norwegian governance and provoke reactions that could be used to discredit Norway, reinforce perceptions of a Soviet special position and generate ambiguity that complicated Norwegian policy responses. By keeping actions below the threshold of open conflict, the Soviet Union sought to erode Norwegian sovereignty incrementally, without provoking international escalation.

In sum, Cold War Soviet active measures on Svalbard reflected a calculated blend of legal contestation, practical defiance of Norwegian regulations, and covert manoeuvres designed to constrain Norway's freedom of action. This enduring strategy of pressure reinforced the Soviet claim to a privileged status on Svalbard, shaping the dynamics of the archipelago beyond the Cold War era.

20 Bones and Myklebost, 'Russland på Svalbard'.

21 Sven G. Holtsmark, 'Norge og Sovjetunionen – bilateralisering og fellesstyre', in *NATO 50 år. Norsk sikkerhetspolitikk med NATO gjennom 50 år*, ed. Chris Prebensen and Nils Skarland (Oslo: Den norske Atlanterhavskomite, 1999), 39–61.

22 Thor Bjørn Arlov, 'I fremste linje. Sysselmannen og suvereniteten', in *Svalbardtraktaten 100 år. Et jubileumsskrift*, ed. Irene Vanja Dahl and Øystein Jensen (Fagbokforlaget, 2020), 51–80; Jørgen H. Jørgensen, *Russisk svalbardpolitikk. Svalbard sett fra den andre siden* (Tapir Akademisk forlag, 2012).

3 Contemporary Russian hybrid threat activities on Svalbard

Russia's military aggression in Ukraine since 2014 has further triggered Moscow's asymmetric security approaches. The Russian leadership needs enemy perceptions and external threats to bolster state patriotic sentiment and domestic support for the war in Ukraine. In recent years the Kremlin has therefore increasingly voiced revanchist and neo-imperialist ambitions, as well as anti-Western rhetoric. These developments are key to explaining the growing number of Russian hybrid threat activities concerning Svalbard in the last decade, which are aimed not only at Norway but also at the domestic Russian audience.

Ambiguity and surprise: Provoking reaction, targeting sanctions

A conspicuous manifestation of Russia's evolving approach to Svalbard occurred with the surprise visit in April 2015 of then Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin to the archipelago. Rogozin was subject to Schengen entry restrictions due to his involvement in destabilization activities in Eastern Ukraine, and the visit challenged the Norwegian authorities and the application of Western sanctions by exploiting the provision in the Svalbard Treaty allowing free entry to the archipelago for citizens of signatories. Rogozin

loudly publicized his arrival in the media, framing the visit with assertive narratives highlighting Russia's enduring presence on Svalbard. Shortly afterwards Rogozin proceeded to the Russian Barneo Ice Camp near the North Pole, where he was filmed in the company of prominent polar explorer Artur Chilingarov and Russian Orthodox Bishop Iakov of Naryan-Mar and Mezen, who ceremonially blessed the camp with holy water. Media coverage showed Russian flags and Soviet victory banners from the Second World War on the site.²³

The Norwegian government, caught off guard by the visit, responded by summoning the Russian ambassador to formally protest, characterizing the event as provocative and diplomatically transgressive. In turn the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) invoked the Svalbard Treaty's provision on non-discriminatory access, framing the Norwegian response as a treaty violation. The incident spurred Norway to formulate a legal framework for denying or expelling individuals from Svalbard. The regulation was met with a new wave of criticism from Moscow, which accused Norway of implementing a policy of "deportation".²⁴

Rogozin's high-profile and well-publicized visit and subsequent Russian acts towards

23 'Rogozin o vizite na Shpitsbergen', *vesti.ru*, 19 April 2015, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1741800> (accessed 4 May 2025); Thomas Nilsen, 'Strong Norwegian reaction to Rogozin's Svalbard Tour', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 18 April 2015, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/politics/strong-norwegian-reaction-to-rogozins-svalbard-tour/256803> (accessed 4 May 2025); 'Norway in Arctic dispute with Russia over Rogozin visit', *bbc.com*, 20 April 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32380101> (accessed 4 May 2025).

24 'Kommentarii ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID', MID official website, 20 April 2015, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1507554/ (accessed 4 May 2025); Atle Staalesen, 'No politics behind Rogozin's Svalbard visit – MFA', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 20 April 2015, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/politics/no-politics-behind-rogozins-svalbard-visit-mfa/250796> (accessed 4 May 2025); 'Kommentarii Departamenta informatsii i pechati MID', MID official website, 10 August 2015, https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/kommentarii/1512761/ (accessed 4 May 2025).

Norway followed an already established pattern of accusing Norway of not adhering to the Svalbard Treaty. Moreover, the incident served to test the robustness of Norway's alignment with the Western sanction regime established in 2014. This dimension was again highlighted in 2017 when the MID used the Rogozin incident to inflame relations with Norway: this time two members of a Norwegian parliamentary delegation scheduled to visit Moscow were denied Russian visas – an action framed by the MID as retaliation for Norway's new Svalbard entry regulations, even if there was no logical connection between the visits.²⁵

While the Rogozin episode garnered considerable attention, it was not unparalleled. In 2016 Longyearbyen Airport received another unannounced visit, this time from Chechen paramilitary personnel and equipment en route to exercises at the Barneo Camp. The formal reason for the stopover was to reload luggage and passengers, as well as refuelling, as the direct distance from Murmansk to the camp was too far for the An-74 aircraft used for the mission. The party arriving at Longyearbyen Airport was headed by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's aide on law enforcement issues, and the paramilitaries were accompanied by the FSB's Alfa group.²⁶ This was the first public

appearance of the Kadyrovtsy, the Chechnya-based Russian-controlled units, as part of the Russian National Guard following the Kremlin's establishment of Rosgvardiya earlier the same year.²⁷ Although the visit was brief and legally sanctioned – given that the aircraft was civilian and possessed the requisite permits for transit to the Russian camp – its opaque nature still raised concerns. The Barneo Camp had evolved by 2016 into a site accommodating both paramilitary exercises and high-end Arctic tourism.²⁸

In response to the incident, the Norwegian authorities introduced stricter requirements for the advance declaration of passengers and cargo on flights to Svalbard. These measures, intended to enhance oversight and reduce the potential for unsanctioned activity, were criticized by the tourism branch of the Russian Geographical Society running the Barneo Camp, who framed the regulations as unreasonable.²⁹ Together, the Rogozin and Chechen paramilitary incidents introduced a stronger element of ambiguity for Norwegian policymakers, underscoring the challenges posed by what seemed to be the increasingly unpredictable and multifaceted Russian presence and behaviour on Svalbard. The paramilitary dimension seemed particularly worrying given the parallel Russian

25 'Brifing ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID', MID official website, 3 February 2017, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1541515/ (accessed 4 May 2025).

26 Trude Pettersen, 'Chechen special forces instructors landed on Svalbard', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 13 April 2016, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/chechen-special-forces-instructors-landed-on-svalbard/102091> (accessed 4 May 2025).

27 For the role of the Kadyrovtsy within Russia's National Guard see Cerwin Moore et al. 'The Kadyrovtsy: A Private Army in Chechnya and Beyond', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Non-State Actors in East-West Relations*, ed Peter Marton et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2024), 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05750-2_28-1.

28 Trude Pettersen, 'Ice camp Barneo-2016 in the pipeline', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 29 March 2016, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/ice-camp-barneo2016-in-the-pipeline/140562> (accessed 4 May 2025).

29 Pettersen, 'Chechen special forces'.

investment in nearby Arctic military bases, including the grand opening of the upgraded Nagurskoye base in Franz Josef Land.³⁰

The Rogozin and Chechen paramilitary incidents exemplify situations initiated by Russian actors to provoke reactions from the Norwegian authorities that were subsequently used to criticize Norway for not adhering to the principles of the Svalbard Treaty. Moreover, the incidents had in common that they contained elements of both surprise and ambiguity. From the Norwegian perspective it was not immediately clear what the visits entailed, except that they demonstrated Russian power in ways stressful to Norway. While Rogozin's visit openly challenged Norway's alignment with the Western sanctions and their applicability to Svalbard, the Chechen incident happened without overstepping the wording of existing regulations. In both cases Norway was caught in situations where the authorities felt compelled to react, only to discover that Russia instrumentalized the reactions to question the sanctions and undermine Norway's status as a good-faith implementer of the Treaty.

The following year saw several Russian information campaigns, launched by the MID and amplified in Russian state-controlled media, that sought to limit Norway's decision making and initiative in Svalbard issues. In the spring

of 2017, as Norway invited members of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly to Svalbard to discuss climate change, maritime cooperation and trade opportunities in the High North, the MID published a statement labelling the meeting "an attempt to bring Svalbard under the wing of the [NATO] alliance", breaching the spirit of the Svalbard Treaty and escalating tension.³¹ The statement, which referred to the Svalbard Treaty's military clause and wrongly described the parliamentarians as military representatives, was followed by intensive coverage in the pro-Kremlin media advocating that Russian Pomor trappers were the first in the archipelago. Between the lines Norway's sovereignty was questioned by claiming historic Russian rights to Svalbard.³²

A few months later, accusations resurfaced in the Russian media that Norway was breaching the Svalbard Treaty and even escalating tension to the level of a potential military conflict, this time referring to Norway's plans to open blocks for oil drilling in the Barents Sea near Svalbard. The accusations were substantiated by a claim from Russia that the Svalbard archipelago has its own continental shelf where the Treaty applied. However, the Norwegian authorities pointed to the seabed as part of the Norwegian continental shelf, regulated by the 1958 Continental Shelf Convention, and

30 Trude Pettersen, 'Russia builds new airfield on Franz Josef Land', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 16 February 2015, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/russia-builds-new-airfield-on-franz-josef-land/263133> (accessed 4 May 2025); 'Russia's new Arctic Trefoil military base unveiled with virtual tour', *bbc.com*, 18 April 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39629819> (accessed 4 May 2025).

31 'Kommentarii Departamenta informatsii i pechati MID', MID official website, 19 April 2017, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1545645/ (accessed 5 May 2025).

32 Thomas Nilsen, 'Moscow says NATO meeting on Svalbard is a provocation', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 21 April 2017, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/moscow-says-nato-meeting-on-svalbard-is-a-provocation/113298> (accessed 5 May 2025); Atle Staalesen, "'Russian Svalbard protest totally without merit'", *thebarentsobserver.com*, 21 April 2017, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/114564> (accessed 5 May 2025).

delayed the question of opening blocks. The Russian side did not press the issue further.³³ Yet Russian escalatory threats related to Norway's policy in the waters around Svalbard and on the shelf were to increase in the following years. For now the accusations were followed by statements by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a Barents Euro-Arctic Council meeting in October 2017 that Norway was deliberately and illegitimately limiting Russian economic activities and encroaching on Russian rights in the archipelago.³⁴

Escalatory threats, deniability and the linking of regimes at sea

Recent studies conclude that Russia's information operations in the Arctic have two main goals: to underpin Russia's claim to be the major Arctic power; and to frame its military investment as defensive to protect it from alleged NATO aggression in the Arctic.³⁵ Russian information campaigns concerning Svalbard in recent years confirm these observations; simultaneously, they showcase Moscow's

more specific goal of influencing Norway's policymaking to serve Russian interests in the archipelago. As Norway was celebrating the centenary of the Svalbard Treaty in 2020, a large-scale Russian information campaign was leveraged. Foreign Minister Lavrov repeated the claim that Russian activities and presence on Svalbard, including in the FPZ, were wrongfully limited in discriminatory ways. Lavrov called for bilateral consultations in a letter to Norway's Foreign Minister. The arguments were immediately reiterated by various Russian state officials, including the Embassy in Oslo and the Consulate General in Barentsburg. They claimed that problems were mounting, and that the Russian presence in the archipelago went far back, arguing that the name "Holy Russian Islands" was used on older Russian maps. "Spitsbergen" (an obsolete name for Svalbard used in Russian) "is also our land. It is covered in the sweat and blood of our ancestors," the Consul General stated.³⁶ The accusations also returned to the issue of the Western sanctions imposed since 2014, alluding to the Rogozin case by claiming Norway was conducting a

33 Thomas Nilsen, 'Kommersant: Russia lists Norway's Svalbard policy as potential risk of war', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 4 October 2017, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/kommersant-russia-lists-norways-svalbard-policy-as-potential-risk-of-war/155149> (accessed 5 May 2025). See also Østhagen, 'The myths'.

34 'Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI', *MID official website*, 19 October 2017, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1555371/ (accessed 5 May 2025); Atle Staalesen, 'Lavrov attacks Norway, says relations on Svalbard should be better', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/lavrov-attacks-norway-says-relations-on-svalbard-should-be-better/115241> (accessed 5 May 2025).

35 Lackenbauer et al., 'Russian Information Operations'.

36 'O poslanii Ministra innostrannykh del Rossii', *MID official website*, 4 February 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/no/-/asset_publisher/f4MKo6byouc4/content/id/4019093 (accessed 6 May 2025); see also 'Brifing ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID', *MID official website*, 20 February 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4050747 (accessed 6 May 2025); 'O Shpitsbergene i vokrug ego', *MID official website*, 25 February 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/about/social_organizations/association/-/asset_publisher/w6CkLeKcy2bQ/content/id/4058415 (accessed 6 May 2025); 'Interviu pervogo zamestitelia Ministra', *MID official website*, 9 June 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/se/-/asset_publisher/Nr26tJlotl7z/content/id/4155745 (accessed 6 May 2025).

policy of deportation against Russian citizens on Svalbard. Officials' statements were followed by pro-Kremlin news outlets massively reinforcing the narrative that Norway was discriminating against Russia and arguing for a special position for Russia on Svalbard. Some reports concluded that Russia needed to protect its interests in the archipelago more actively, painting a picture of aggressive NATO expansion and claiming that Norway, even without its NATO allies, could single-handedly pose a threat to Russia in the region. Russian public consensus on this issue needed to be strengthened, the First Deputy Chairman of the Russian Duma Defence and Security Committee argued.³⁷

The 2020 information campaign included accusations against Norway of militarization and dual use of infrastructure, as well as of discriminatory practices regarding access to shelf resources. As outlined in the introduction, Moscow has a longstanding practice of contesting Norway's jurisdiction and authority in the waters surrounding Svalbard and on the continental shelf. This political line has manifested itself in various ways, often through actions and rhetoric that appear inconsistent or shifting. In some instances Russia has suggested

that the maritime zones around Svalbard are not subject to Norwegian jurisdiction under the general coastal state rights stipulated in international law, but that they should be considered international waters – for example, in cases where it has been claimed that only the flag state has jurisdiction to regulate fishing and hunting around Svalbard.³⁸ In other contexts Russia, and previously the Soviet Union, has repeatedly proposed exclusive Russian–Norwegian arrangements for the management of resources in the maritime zones off Svalbard and in the Barents Sea, grounding such proposals in historical precedent.³⁹ In yet other cases, Russia has argued that the rights stipulated in the Svalbard Treaty should also extend to the continental shelf. This flexible legal approach to Svalbard issues places Russia in a category apart from European states and institutions that have questioned Norway's governance of Svalbard.

Russia has increasingly targeted the shelf issue as prospects for resource extraction – oil, gas, and seabed minerals – have become more feasible.⁴⁰ One of the MID statements in 2020 contained escalatory threats, later reiterated by Lavrov, that Russia might mobilize a coalition

37 Atle Staalesen, 'Norway's celebration of Svalbard Treaty was followed by ardent and coordinated response from Moscow media', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 2 July 2020, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/democracy-and-media/norways-celebration-of-svalbard-treaty-was-followed-by-ardent-and-coordinated-response-from-moscow-media/117420> (accessed 6 May 2025).

38 Øystein Jensen, 'Delelinjen i Barentshavet, Svalbard', in *Naboer i frykt og forventning*, ed. Sven G. Holtsmark (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2015), 572–573.

39 Hallvard Tjelmeland & Stian Bones, 'Avvikling av en epoke', in *Naboer i frykt og forventning*, ed. Sven G. Holtsmark (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2015), 544; Anne-Kristine Jørgensen & Andreas Østhagen, 'Norges vern av suverene rettigheter rundt Svalbard: Russiske persepsjoner og reaksjoner', *Internasjonal Politikk*, Volume 78, Issue 2, 2020: 167–192, <https://doi.org/10.23865/intpol.v78.1838>.

40 For a thorough discussion of legal aspects and disputes concerning Svalbard and the adjacent waters and shelf see Østhagen, 'The myths'.

of states “to protect the Treaty” against Norway’s practices.⁴¹ In April 2020, following the Norwegian Coast Guard’s detention of the Russian trawler *Borei* for illegal fishing in the FPZ, threats of escalation reappeared in a formal note from the MID to the Embassy of Norway in Moscow. The note stated that “[t]he Norwegian side is well aware of our readiness to use national powers in relation to Russian fishing vessels”, declaring that Russia expected “a constructive approach” from Norway in resolving such incidents, including within the framework of the Joint Russian–Norwegian Fisheries Commission.⁴²

Moscow’s escalatory rhetoric is not entirely new in the waters around Svalbard.⁴³ In recent years, however, Russia has increasingly combined such rhetoric with the linking of various legal regimes at sea, at times reinforced by military signalling.⁴⁴ In 2021 the MID again protested against Norway’s plans to begin

exploration for oil and gas resources on the shelf outside Svalbard, accompanied by protests against Norway’s strengthened border control on Svalbard, claiming this violated the Treaty.⁴⁵ In parallel, Minister Lavrov repeatedly demanded exclusive consultations with Norway regarding economic and scientific activities in the archipelago.⁴⁶ Amidst these Russian statements, a Russian military vessel group of the Northern Fleet made a highly unusual move. During a tactical exercise in the northern Barents Sea, the warships suddenly left the operating area near Franz Josef Land and sailed to the waters around Svalbard, crossing to the western side of the archipelago and continuing along the coast almost north to Isfjorden before leaving the area. The move deviated strongly from previous sailing patterns in the Arctic, prompting the Norwegian Armed Forces to monitor the vessel group. No statement was issued to clarify what mission the vessels were on, while an implicit

41 ‘O Shpitsbergene i vokrug ego’, MID official website; ‘Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra’, MID official website, 21 April 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriiia_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK18hB2bUjd3/content/id/4103828 (accessed 6 May 2025).

42 ‘Brifing ofitsial’nogo predstavitelia MID’, MID official website, 17 April 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4101166 (accessed 6 May 2025); Atle Staalesen, ‘Moscow sends signal it might raise stakes in Svalbard waters’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/moscow-sends-signal-it-might-raise-stakes-in-svalbard-waters/117492> (accessed 6 May 2025).

43 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, *Fiskerikonflikter i Barentshavet – potensial for eskalering?* FFI/Rapport 2006/03167 (Oslo: FFI, 2006).

44 Østhagen, ‘The myths’ 7–8; Stensrud and Østhagen, ‘Hybrid Warfare at Sea?’.

45 ‘Brifing ofitsial’nogo predstavitelia MID’, MID official website, 12 March 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1417455/ (accessed 6 May 2025); Atle Staalesen, ‘Moscow protests Norwegian exploration in Svalbard waters’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/industry-and-energy/moscow-protests-norwegian-exploration-in-svalbard-waters/138441> (accessed 6 May 2025); ‘Brifing zamestitelia direktora DIP MID: O planakh Oslo’, MID official website, 30 September 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1778158/#10 (accessed 6 May 2025).

46 ‘Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI’, MID official website, 11 September 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1775320/ (accessed 6 May 2025); ‘O besede Ministra’, MID official website, 26 October 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1784483/ (accessed 6 May 2025).

message of Russian naval power in the waters around Svalbard was conveyed.⁴⁷ The military signalling, combined with political statements throughout 2021 demanding bilateral talks on the “removal of limitations on Russian activities and structures” on Svalbard, showcases how Russia combines subthreshold means to pressure Norway.

The still unresolved break in January 2022 of a fibreoptic subsea cable connecting Svalbard with mainland Norway can be similarly interpreted. AIS data showed a Russian fishing vessel crossing the cable multiple times in the days when it was severed, but despite thorough investigations, Norwegian police could establish no conclusive evidence for the cause of the cable’s malfunctioning.⁴⁸ The incident is likely to represent a case of *implausible deniability* from the Russian side: the cable break and the presence of Russian vessels in the area sent a clear signal of power and intent to Norway;

yet deniability for Russia was preserved. Norway was thus placed in a situation of acute threat from Russia against vital infrastructure on Svalbard. Simultaneously, Moscow could easily frame potential Norwegian accusations against the Russian vessels as groundless and Russophobic.⁴⁹

The cable incident resonates with the growing threat Russian fishing and research vessels have posed in recent years in the Barents Sea and the Norwegian fjords, including on Svalbard, as movement patterns aligned with malign activities have increasingly been observed.⁵⁰ The Russian maritime doctrine update in 2022 compounded this. It asserts Russian strategic interests at sea, stating that civilian vessels can be used for military purposes. The new doctrine envisages the diversifying and stepping up of naval activities in the Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, and Novaya Zemlya archipelagos and on Wrangel Island, implying that Svalbard is part

47 Thomas Nilsen, ‘In a surprise direction, Northern Fleet grouping sails west of Svalbard on annual Arctic voyage’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/in-a-surprise-direction-northern-fleet-grouping-sails-west-of-svalbard-on-annual-arctic-voyage/160296> (accessed 6 May 2025).

48 Thomas Nilsen, ‘Disruption at one of two undersea cables to Svalbard’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 9 January 2022, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/disruption-at-one-of-two-undersea-cables-to-svalbard/119477> (accessed 9 May 2025); Benjamin Fredriksen et al., ‘Russiske trålere krysset kabler i Vesterålen og Svalbard før brudd’, *nrk.no*, 26 June 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/nordland/xl/russiske-tralere-krysset-kabler-i-vesteralen-og-svalbard-for-brudd-1.16007084> (accessed 9 May 2025).

49 Cormac and Aldrich, ‘Grey is the new black’.

50 Eskild Johansen, ‘Slik kartlegging kan benyttes til å forberede sabotasjeaksjoner’, *nrk.no*, 27 May 2023, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/vil-stoppe-russiske-forskningsfartoy-a-kartlegge-havbunnen-rundt-norske-olje--og-gassinstallasjoner-1.16420502> (accessed 9 May 2025); Inghild Eriksen et al., ‘Norsk forskningsskip forfulgt av russisk «spionskip» i 18 timer’, *nrk.no*, 30 October 2023, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/det-norske-forskningsskipet-kronprins-haakon-ble-forfulgt-av-russlands-spionskip-yantar-1.16610177> (accessed 9 May 2025); Beth Mørch Pettersen et al., ‘Den skjulte fiskerihavna’, *nrk.no*, 7 April 2024, <https://www.nrk.no/nordland/xl/en-av-norges-storste-fiskerihavner-er-drevet-av-russland-pa-svalbard-fa-kontroller-1.16810516> (accessed 9 May 2025); Elisabeth Braw, ‘Russia’s Newest Victims May Be Fish’, *foreignpolicy.com*, 18 June 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/06/18/russia-fishing-spies-norway/> (accessed 20 June 2025).

of the Russian Arctic.⁵¹ A key problem from Norway's perspective is that Russian fishing and research vessels enjoy rights to access Norwegian waters, including the Svalbard FPZ, both as part of fisheries cooperation between Russia and Norway and based on the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Moreover, the burden of proof regarding illegal activities by foreign vessels in Norwegian waters lies with Norway.⁵² As Norway has moved to mitigate the threat, gradually limiting access for Russian vessels and introducing more rigorous controls, Russian officials have protested and threatened to cancel the bilateral maritime agreement with Norway, vital for the sustainable management of fish stocks in the Barents Sea, as well as annulling the Barents Sea delimitation agreement with Norway and even withdrawing from UNCLOS. Experts observe that such statements from Russia do not reflect

actual intent but aim to create division among the NATO allies, hoping that certain member states will yield to Russia's claims.⁵³ Norway, which takes pride in 50 years of successful co-management with Russia in the Barents Sea, is susceptible to Russia's tactic of linking legal regimes at sea. Moreover, Svalbard's maritime zones are a sensitive issue for the Norwegian authorities because of Russia's consistent contestation of Norway's position since the 1970s, and because Russian threats voiced in the early 2000s to use military force to protect civilian vessels have resurfaced in recent years.⁵⁴

In the spring and early summer of 2022, Norway was subject to yet another instance of the linking of regimes at sea, combined with other subthreshold tools of influence. It started with an information campaign claiming that EU sanctions restricting Russian transport into the Schengen area were illegal and discriminated

51 'Utverzhdena Morskaiia doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii', MID official website, 31 July 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69084> (accessed 22 July 2025); Nilsen, 'High North – Low Tensions?'

52 Østhagen, 'The myths', 7–9; Østhagen, 'The Arctic after Russia's invasion', 13.

53 'O vstreche prevogo zamestitelia Ministra', MID official website, 24 October 2022, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1834817/ (accessed 10 May 2025); 'Kommentarii ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID', MID official website, 29 December 2022, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1846076/?lang=ru (accessed 10 May 2025); Spansvoll, 'Studying Moscow's Coercive Campaign'; Braw, 'Russia's Newest Victims'; Thomas Nilsen, 'Russia threatens to withdraw from fishery deal with Norway. Little to worry about, says expert', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/industry-and-energy/russia-threatens-to-withdraw-from-fishery-deal-with-norway-little-to-worry-about-says-expert/141922> (accessed 10 May 2025); Whitney P. Lackenbauer and Sergey Sukhankin, 'Will Russia Withdraw from UNCLOS in the Arctic? Situating the Threat', *NAADSN Quick Impact* (25 March 2024), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/24mar25-PWL-SS-Russia-UNCLOS-Arctic-NAADSN.pdf> (accessed 4 May 2024); Thomas Nilsen, 'Norway kicks out Norebo and Murman Seafood in fear of intelligence gathering', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 7 July 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/norway-kicks-out-norebo-and-murman-sea-food-in-fear-of-intelligence-gathering/432942> (accessed 7 July 2025); Ingvald Vik et al., 'Russiske selskap får havnenekt', *nrk.no*, 7 July 2025, <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/regjeringen-vil-sanksjonere-de-to-russiske-fiskeriselskapene-norebo-og-murman-seafood-1.17483881> (accessed 7 July 2025); 'Kommentarii Posla Rossii v Norvegii', *Russian Embassy in Norway* official website, 8 July 2025, https://norway.mid.ru/ru/embassy/press-centre/news/kommentarii_posla_rossii_v_norvegii_n_v_korchunova_na_zaprosy_gosteleradiokompanii_nrk_i_gazety_fisk/?fbclid=IwQ0xDSwLZxgtleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHnO20Rx6AW5tIRmNPdNjoprtq92zP-86gYPGgnJGNGUnTCqD42WCPcxg1JO0_aem_8AHVdIJLP5XDdEghzCdCGw (accessed 8 July 2025).

54 Ven Bruusgaard, 'Fiskerikonflikter'; Jørgensen, *Russisk svalbardpolitikk*.

against Russians in Barentsburg. The sanctions' implementation put an end to Arktikugol's own decision to transport goods to Barentsburg via mainland Norway, and unfounded stories of "Norway's blockade" creating a humanitarian crisis in Barentsburg were circulated as part of the information campaign.⁵⁵ Despite Norway proposing alternative transport arrangements, including direct shipping from Murmansk to Barentsburg, pressure was mounted by various Russian actors: parliamentarians in the Duma threatened to dissolve the delimitation agreement of 2010 defining the maritime border between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea; and state officials accused Norway of breaching the Svalbard Treaty. Simultaneously, the pro-Russian hacker group Killnet launched a large DDoS attack on several Norwegian official and media websites, featuring a manipulated photo of Norway's foreign minister and repeating accusations of discrimination against Russians.⁵⁶ When Norway's newly appointed ambassador

to Russia arrived in Moscow in the autumn of 2022, he was summoned by the MID, which accused Norway of endorsing anti-Russian policies destructive to Russia–Norway relations and called for bilateral dialogue.⁵⁷ Eventually, Norway succumbed to the pressure and made an exception for transports to Barentsburg, only to witness Arktikugol later sending a cargo ship directly from Murmansk, proving that Norway's exception to the sanctions was in fact unnecessary.⁵⁸

Finally, a probable instance of Russian covert lawfare in the waters around Svalbard has also been observed. It has been established that the ownership interests behind the Latvian company SIA North Star Ltd are of Russian origin, as are most of the company's vessels. This company brought a legal action against the Norwegian State following the decision of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries to deny it a licence to catch snow crab on the continental shelf off Svalbard.⁵⁹ In 2023 the

55 See e.g. Ksenia Loginova et al., 'Blokada Shpitsbergengrada', *izvestiia.ru*, 30 June 2022, <https://iz.ru/1357311/kseniia-loginova-nataliia-bykadorova/blokada-shpitsbergengrada-k-chemu-mozhet-privesti-slozhivshaiasia-situatsiia> (accessed 29 July 2025).

56 Thomas Nilsen, 'Pro-Russian hacker group says it attacked Norway', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 29 June 2022, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/prorussian-hacker-group-says-it-attacked-norway/160860> (accessed 9 June 2025); Karen-Anna Eggen and Siri Strand, '«Arktisk blokade»: en russisk informasjonsoperasjon mot Norge', *Internasjonal Politikk*, 83(2) (2025): 367–392, <https://doi.org/10.23865/intpol.v83.7127>.

57 'O vstreche Pervogo zamestitelia Ministra', *MID* official website, 24 October 2022, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1834817/ (accessed 9 June 2025).

58 Thomas Nilsen, 'Norwegian transporters bring goods to Russian coal-miners', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 6 July 2022, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctinorwegian-transporters-bring-goods-to-russian-coalminers/119850> (accessed 9 June 2025); 'Sukhogruz "Barents" otpravilsia iz Murmanska v Barentsburg', *khbini.ru*, 29.01.2025, https://www.khibiny.ru/murmanskaia-oblast'/news/item-sukhogruz-barents-otpravilsia-iz-murmanska-na-shpitsbergen-393799/?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fdzen.ru%2Fnews%2Fstory%2F319f25be-7fd3-51c3-8438-7f2b9a7517ad (accessed 29 July 2025).

59 ICSID, 'Norway's counter-memorial and memorial on jurisdiction', *ICSID* official website, 29.10.2021, https://icsid.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/parties_publications/C8394/Respondent%27s%20documents/2022-02-21%20Counter-Memorial%20-%20redacted.pdf (accessed 1 October 2025). See especially chapter 4.3.

Supreme Court of Norway ruled in favour of the Norwegian State.⁶⁰ Although it has not been proven that the ownership interests behind SIA North Star Ltd were acting on behalf of a Russian state entity, it cannot be ruled out that this constituted a case of lawfare with ties to a state actor.

Promoting historical presence, creating coercive potential

Since 2022 propagandistic acts designed to provoke Norway – reminiscent of the Rogozin and Chechen paramilitary incidents – have been observed regularly on Svalbard, making strategic use of the freedom of expression to forward symbols of Russian victory in Ukraine, Russian historical presence on Svalbard, and “Russian values”. Such tactics place the Norwegian authorities in an uncomfortable position: previous experience indicates that a restricting response to Russia will result in familiar accusations of discrimination and Russophobia, and may include accusations that Norway is violating key democratic principles such as freedom of speech. Yet the cases below show that a limited reaction from Norway has allowed Russia to establish coercive potential for future use. Moreover, the acts have contributed to the narrative that Russia is the dominant great

power on Svalbard, has vested interests in the archipelago and therefore is entitled to a special position.

The propaganda events started occurring after two new key figures were appointed to Barentsburg in 2022, Consul General Andrey Chemerilo and CEO of state mining company Arktikugol Ildar Neverov. Chemerilo has been identified as an affiliate of Russian military intelligence; Neverov entered Arktikugol after a period of political turbulence within the company that included employees being ordered not to voice opinions critical of the Kremlin.⁶¹ Neverov’s appointment was closely related to the inclusion of Arktikugol under the Ministry for Development of the Far East and Arctic, representing the company’s stronger integration into Moscow’s Arctic policies, as well as tighter political control of the Russian community on Svalbard.⁶² Together, Chemerilo and Neverov have introduced Moscow’s state-orchestrated memory policies to Svalbard, organizing annual Victory Day parades and Immortal Regiment marches in Barentsburg and Pyramiden promoting militaristic state patriotism and Moscow’s delusive narrative of a legitimate and heroic war of defence against Neo-Nazism in Ukraine.

60 Supreme Court of Norway, ‘The Svalbard Treaty does not give a Latvian shipping company the right to catch snow crab on the continental shelf outside Svalbard’, *Supreme Court of Norway* official website, 20.03.2023, <https://www.domstol.no/en/supremecourt/rulings/2023/supreme-court-civil-cases/HR-2023-491-P/> (accessed 1 October 2025).

61 Ida Louise Rostad et al., ‘Agenten på Svalbard’, *nrk.no*, 26 April 2023, https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/xl/skyggekrigen_-russlands-andrei-chemerilo-er-gru-agent-pa-svalbard-1.16379671 (accessed 3 March 2025); Thomas Nilsen, ‘Barentsburg: “Everyone was told to stop posting opinions about the war”’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/democracy-and-media/barentsburg-everyone-was-told-to-stop-posting-opinions-about-the-war/128194> (accessed 3 March 2025).

62 ‘Arktikugol stal podvedomstvennoi organizatsiei Minvostokrazvitia’, *tass.ru*, 6 October 2022, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/15972007> (accessed 3 March 2025).

It is noteworthy that similar acts have been organized annually by the Russian Foreign Service in mainland Norway over the last decade.⁶³ The acts on Svalbard include marches with war-glorifying symbols such as a separatist flag from Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine. The celebration of days in the Russian military calendar on Svalbard also encompasses Russian Navy Day: in 2022 and again in 2023 a small military-inspired flotilla was organized in Grønfjorden outside Barentsburg, headed by the Consul General.⁶⁴ Symbolically, the first flotilla occurred as Putin was presenting Russia's

updated maritime doctrine during the grand Navy Day celebrations in St Peterburg.⁶⁵

Moreover, Russian state patriotism and narratives of historical presence on Svalbard have been boosted by investments in Soviet symbols in the Russian settlements, including a giant version of the USSR state emblem of the hammer and sickle and the hoisting of Soviet flags, promoted in Pyramiden as "the settlement's rebirth".⁶⁶ There is a prevailing perception in Russian media discourse that Russia possesses historic rights on Svalbard, and that Norway has appropriated authority beyond

63 For Kremlin memory policies in relations with Norway see Kari Aga Myklebost et al. (eds), *The Politics of World War II Memories in the North. Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* Special Issue, Volume 11, Issue 2 (2025), <https://www.ibidem.eu/en/Journals/Journal-of-Soviet-and-Post-Soviet-Politics-and-Society/Journal-of-Soviet-and-Post-Soviet-Politics-and-Society-E-Book-oxid-32.html>; Kari Aga Myklebost and Joakim Aa. Markussen, 'Norway under Russian pressure: Memory diplomacy as security policy', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 9 August 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/research-partner-contents/norway-under-russian-pressure-memory-diplomacy-as-security-policy/108341> (accessed 3 March 2025).

64 Thomas Nilsen, 'Russian officials raised Navy flags in Svalbard waters', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 15 October 2022, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/russian-officials-raised-navy-flags-in-svalbard-waters/118611> (accessed 3 March 2025); 'Samyi severnyi v mire Parad Pobedy', *Arktikugol* official website, 9 May 2023, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/samyi-severnyi-v-mire-parad-pobedy> (accessed 3 March 2025); 'O prazdnichnom meropriatii na Shpitsbergene priurochenomu k Dniu Pobedy', *MID* official website, 10 May 2023, <https://mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1868739/> (accessed 3 March 2025); Atle Staalesen, 'Russia stages military-style propaganda parade on Norway's Svalbard archipelago', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/russia-stages-militarystyle-propaganda-parade-on-norways-svalbard-archipelago/163025> (accessed 3 March 2025); Atle Staalesen, 'Russian separatist flag waved on Svalbard', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/russian-separatist-flag-waved-on-svalbard/163767> (accessed 3 March 2025); Thomas Nilsen, 'Russian diplomat staged Navy Parade at Norway's Svalbard archipelago', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 31 July 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/russian-diplomat-staged-navy-parade-at-norways-svalbard-archipelago/163378> (accessed 3 March 2025); "'Bessmertnyi polk" v Piramide', *Arktikugol* official website, 13 May 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/bessmertnyj-polk-v-piramide> (accessed 3 March 2025); '80-letie Pobedy v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine na Shpitsbergene', *Arktikugol* official website, 8 May 2025, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/-let-velikoi-pobedy-na-shpitsbergene> (accessed 3 March 2025); "'Bessmertnyi polk" na Shpitsbergene', *Arktikugol* official website, 9 May 2025, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/bessmertnyi-polk-na-shpitsbergene> (accessed 3 March 2025).

65 'Russia adopts updated maritime doctrine; lists U.S., NATO as primary threats', *rfe/rl.org*, 31 July 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-maritime-doctrine-threats-nato-us/31967675.html> (accessed 22 July 2025).

66 Thomas Nilsen, 'Moscow hoists Soviet flags at Svalbard', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 30 June 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/moscow-hoists-soviet-flags-at-svalbard/119353> (accessed 3 March 2025).

what is stipulated in the Treaty.⁶⁷ Arktikugol has meticulously underpinned this perception since 2022 with various Russian-language social media accounts with names such as “Spitsbergen: closer than it seems” and intensive circulation of photos, films, and online lectures and exhibitions highlighting the historic Russian presence.⁶⁸ The symbolic investments also include street signs in Barentsburg and Pyramiden with names of Russian and Soviet historical figures connected with Svalbard. The activity aims to build a public consensus on Svalbard in line with Moscow’s claims of a historic presence and privileged position for Russia. Such preparation of the information environment can be seen as part of a strategy to establish coercive potential for future concessions.⁶⁹

The repertoire of Russian symbols on Svalbard was significantly augmented in August 2023, when a seven-metre Russian Orthodox cross adorned with the war-glorifying

St George’s ribbon was raised in Pyramiden and blessed with holy water by Bishop Iakov of Naryan-Mar and Mezen, who had arrived in the archipelago by invitation of Arktikugol. The bishop, who is known for promoting the Kremlin’s geopolitical ambitions in the Arctic with senior Russian military and security leaders, has previously blessed the Northern Sea Route, the Barneo Camp, and the North Pole. He has also dedicated churches and Orthodox crosses at Russia’s military bases in Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land. During his 2023 Svalbard visit, the Russian settlements were sprinkled with holy water, a Russian Orthodox baptism was held in Coles Bay close to the abandoned Russian mining site of Grumant, and Orthodox icons and flags were paraded through Barentsburg and Pyramiden. The events were presented by Arktikugol as the development of the Russian presence on Svalbard and as a celebration of “the rebirth of Pyramiden”.⁷⁰

67 Arild Moe and Øystein Jensen, ‘Svalbard og havområdene – nye utenrikspolitiske utfordringer for Norge?’, *Internasjonal Politikk*, 78(4), (2020): 516, <https://doi.org/10.23865/intpol.v78.2388>.

68 See various posts on <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news>; <https://vk.com/trestarcticugol>; <https://t.me/arktikugol>; https://vk.com/arkhipelag_spitsbergen; https://t.me/spitsbergen_misc (all accessed 24 July 2025).

69 Eggen, *Russia’s Contemporary Grand Strategy*.

70 ‘O vstreche General’nogo konsula Rossii na Shpitsbergene s episkopom’, *MID* official website, 8 August 2023, <https://mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1900004/> (accessed 3 March 2025); ‘Episkop Narian-Marskii i Mezenskii Iakov posetil Barentsburg i Piramidu’, *Arktikugol* official website, 9 August 2023, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/episkop-narjanmarskij> (accessed 3 March 2025); ‘Russkii Grumant’, *Naryan-Mar patriarchate* official website, 4 October 2024, <https://www.orthodox-arctica.ru/info/news/734/> (accessed 3 March 2025); Thomas Nilsen, ‘Bishop Iakov, who backs Putin’s war, raised giant cross at Svalbard without Norway’s knowledge’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 12 August 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/bishop-iyakov-who-backs-putins-war-raised-giant-cross-at-svalbard-without-norways-knowledge/118362> (accessed 3 March 2025); ‘Trest prinial uchastie v konferentsii “Blagoslovennyi Sever”’, *Arktikugol* official website, 5 February 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/trest-prinial-uchastie-v-konferentsii-blagoslovennyi-sever> (accessed 3 March 2025). See also Atle Staalesen, ‘One month after huge Orthodox cross popped up in Svalbard, Russian bishop erects a similar holy landmark in Franz Josef Land’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 13 September 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/life-and-public/one-month-after-huge-orthodox-cross-popped-up-in-svalbard-russian-bishop-erects-a-similar-holy-landmark-in-franz-josef-land/150673> (accessed 3 March 2025). For Iakov’s Arctic project see e.g. ‘Episkop Iakov: Vozrozhdenie Russkoi Arktiki’, *redkiezemli.ru*, 29 January 2016, <https://rareearth.ru/ru/pub/20160129/01929.html> (accessed 3 March 2025).

The bishop revisited Svalbard in 2024 to establish a Russian Orthodox congregation in Barentsburg and assign a priest, thus enlarging the range of the Moscow Patriarchate in Norway. The Russian Orthodox Church is a key ally of the Kremlin, promoting Russia's aggression in Ukraine as a holy war, blessing weapons and soldiers, and working with the Russian secret services on intelligence gathering abroad.⁷¹ In Barentsburg Father Piotr Gramatik runs a Telegram channel disseminating ultra-conservative Orthodox TV shows from Russia, and he actively nurtures relations with the six congregations in mainland Norway.⁷²

During his 2024 visit to Svalbard, Bishop Iakov took the opportunity to further boost the narrative of the Russian historical presence, conducting a service at an older Orthodox cross outside Barentsburg allegedly marking the burial

site of Ivan Starostin, a legendary Pomor trapper on Svalbard and the "patriarch of Spitsbergen" in Russian tradition.⁷³ The bishop returned in 2025 as part of Arktikugol's inauguration of a direct passenger boat route from Murmansk to Barentsburg, which for the first time enabled Moscow's long-held ambition to circumvent Norway's entry regulations. With the new route, Russian citizens no longer have to travel by aeroplane via the airports in Oslo or Tromsø, a transfer requiring a Norwegian visa.⁷⁴ The bishop spent the sea voyage blessing the route with holy water, stating that he was on his way through "the Murman Sea" to "Russian Grumant" (the historic Russian names respectively for the Barents Sea and Svalbard) along a route "used by the Pomors since ancient times".⁷⁵ As the vessel was arriving in Barentsburg, Russian Minister for the Development of the Far East

71 Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* (Stanford University Press, 2019); Nicholas Chkhaidze, 'Moscow uses Russian Orthodox Church as Covert Foreign Policy Tool in Ukraine and the West', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* vol. 21, issue 55, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-uses-russian-orthodox-church-as-covert-foreign-policy-tool-in-ukraine-and-the-west/> (accessed 26 July 2025).

72 See various posts on the Pravoslavnyi Grumant Telegram channel and in particular <https://t.me/OrthodoxGrumant/548?single>, 24 July 2025 (accessed 24 July 2025).

73 'V domovoi tserkvi DK', *Arktikugol* official website, 17 June 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/v-domovoi-tserkvi-dk-v-den-pamiati-sviatykh-otsov-vpervye-za-dolgoe-vremia-sostoialas-bozhestvennaia-liturgiia>, (accessed 3 March 2025); 'Russkoe pravoslavnoe prisutstvie', *Arktikugol* official website, 22 October 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/russkoe-pravoslavnoe-prisutstvie> (accessed 3 March 2025); 'Na Shpitsbergene sovershena litia', *Arkticheskiivek.ru*, 22 October 2024, <https://acentury.ru/news/na-shpitsbergene-sovershena-litia/> (accessed 3 March 2025).

74 Thomas Nilsen, 'Barentsburg port welcomes historic new visa-free voyage directly from Murmansk', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 9 June 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/barentsburg-port-welcomes-historic-new-visa-free-voyage-directly-from-murmansk> (accessed 9 June 2025). See also Line N. Ylvisåker, 'Trusten får lov til å fly til Svalbard – men kun eget personell', *svalbardposten.no*, 12 September 2023, <https://www.svalbardposten.no/sysselimesteren/trusten-far-lov-til-a-fly-til-svalbard-men-kun-eget-personell/515364> (accessed 22 July 2025).

75 'NIS Professor Molchanov vyshlo vo vtoroi reis', *Arktikugol* official website, 14 June 2025, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/nis-professor-molchanov-vyshlo-vo-vtoroi-rejs> (accessed 15 June 2025); Thomas Nilsen, 'Putin's trouble-making bishop sails to Svalbard as Norway's King Harald V docks in Longyearbyen', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 16 June 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/putins-troublemaking-bishop-sails-to-svalbard-as-norways-king-harald-v-docks-in-longyearbyen/> (accessed 16 June 2025).

and Arctic Aleksey Chekunkov stated in the media, “The goals that we set for Arktikugol are being achieved”, linking Arktikugol’s activities directly to Moscow’s policies.⁷⁶ The voyages’ co-organizer is the Russian company Morskaya Praktika, whose owner is connected with the Northern Fleet’s military structures.⁷⁷

In Pyramiden Bishop Iakov led a stonelaying ceremony at the Orthodox cross, this time devoted to 22 June, the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow in the Russian military calendar, commemorating Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union in 1941.⁷⁸ Russian Orthodox faith resonates widely with the Russian public, and Bishop Iakov’s ceremonies on Svalbard embody symbols and narratives that Russia can leverage to exert pressure on Norway while creating enemy perceptions and stories of Russophobia in the domestic audience. The bishop’s 22 June act is representative of the intertwining of the Kremlin’s cult of the Great Patriotic War with Russian Orthodox faith, promoting a specific set of “Russian values” – patriotism, militarism and insistence on sacrifice for the Fatherland – to

the Russian public. Such ideologized militarism is used to bolster support for the war in Ukraine in the Russian population. The intertwining of the war cult and Russian Orthodox faith on Svalbard is also visible in the new local priest’s participation in Victory Day celebrations in Barentsburg.⁷⁹

It should be mentioned that the narrative of the heroic Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany is applied in Barentsburg and Pyramiden despite the fact that no Soviet soldiers fought on Svalbard during the Second World War. Inscribing Svalbard into the Kremlin cult of the Great Patriotic War requires creative skills and a twisting of historical realities. Efforts in this direction are found in Arktikugol CEO Neverov’s Victory Day speech in 2025 and in the repurposing of an existing monument in Pyramiden, originally dedicated to miners but since 2024 used to commemorate Red Army soldiers in the Second World War.⁸⁰ In Moscow Minister Chekunkov has awarded Ildar Neverov’s patriotic efforts to strengthen the Russian presence on Svalbard with a state medal.

76 Telegram channel Novosti Shpitsbergena, https://t.me/spitsbergen_misc/4822, 6 June 2025 (accessed 6 June 2025).

77 ‘Iz Murmanska na Shpitsbergen startuet morskoi tur’, *Arktikugol* official website, 23 May 2025, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/iz-murmanska-na-shpitsbergen-startuet-morskoi-tur> (accessed 7 June 2025); Atle Staalesen, ‘Under false flag: A Moscow company tried to buy a Norwegian former coast guard ship for Arctic sailing’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 5 June 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/under-false-flag-a-moscow-company-tried-to-buy-a-norwegian-former-coast-guard-ship-for-arctic-sailingsnbs/431069> (accessed 28 June 2025).

78 Thomas Nilsen, ‘At Svalbard, Putin’s Arctic spiritual emissary marked nazi-Germany’s invasion of the USSR’, *thebarentsobserver.com*, 28 June 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/at-svalbard-putins-arctic-spiritual-emissary-marked-nazigermanys-invasion-of-the-ussr/432315> (accessed 28 June 2025).

79 Telegram channel Pravoslavnyi Grumant, <https://t.me/OrthodoxGrumant/193?single>, 9 May 2025 (accessed 9 May 2025).

80 ‘General’nyi direktor tresta «Arktikugol» pozdravil zhitelei’, *Arktikugol* official website, 9 May 2025, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/pozdravlenie-generalnogo-direktora-tresta-arktikugol-zhiteli-rossiiskikh-poselkov-shpitsbergena--s-80-ei-godovshchinoi-velikoi-pobedy> (accessed 9 May 2025); ‘“Bessmertnyi polk” v Piramide’, *Arktikugol* official website, 13 May 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/bessmertnyj-polk-v-piramide> (accessed 3 March 2025).

Moreover, Neverov has been assigned a seat in the Government Commission on the Protection of Russian Presence at Spitsbergen headed by the same Minister.⁸¹

Testing Norway with grey-zone provocations

In addition to revitalizing Svalbard in the Russian-speaking world, the promotion of semi-military, war-glorifying, and Orthodox symbols asserting Russia's presence in the archipelago constitutes efforts to test Norwegian reactions. Whereas most events have been conducted without overstepping Norwegian regulations, some are designed to force a response. The Victory Day event in 2023 included low-flying helicopter flights along the parading vehicles, resulting in a fine from the Norwegian Civil Aviation Authority.⁸² In May 2025 helicopter windows were covered with photos of fallen Second World War Soviet soldiers framed as part of a flying Immortal Regiment between Barentsburg and Pyramiden,

potentially constituting a new violation of aviation regulations.⁸³ Most notably, however, the giant Orthodox cross in Pyramiden was deliberately placed outside the regulated zone for buildings, violating the Svalbard Environmental Act. Ensuing explanations from Arktikugol emphasized the historic legacy and presence of Orthodox crosses connected with Russian hunting traditions on Svalbard, arguing that the new cross was a tribute to Russian polar explorers and the Pomor trappers who discovered Svalbard, according to Russian archaeologists.⁸⁴ By thus framing the cross, Arktikugol aimed to achieve two goals simultaneously: to promote the narrative of the historic Russian presence; and to provoke a reaction from Norway that could be used in accusations of Russophobia.

Norway has consistently chosen a low-key response to the provocations, limiting itself to an administrative reproach for rule violations and not reacting to or commenting on the symbols. A case in point is the illegally erected cross in Pyramiden. Norway decided to grant

81 'Gosudarstvennaia nagrada', *Arktikugol* official website, 17 September 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/gosudarstvennaia-nagrada-za-ukreplenie-rossiiskogo-prisutstviia-na-shpitsbergene> (accessed 3 March 2025); Telegram channel Trest Arktikugol, <https://t.me/arktikugol/3205>, 31 July 2024 (accessed 3 March 2025).

82 Elizaveta Vereykina, 'We are not disputing this decision', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/we-are-not-disputing-this-decision-the-penalty-will-be-paid-russian-company-fined-for-a-helicopter-flight-on-svalbard/111336> (accessed 3 March 2025).

83 Thomas Nilsen, 'Militarized memory: Kremlin-orchestrated "Immortal Regiment" rally on Svalbard', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 10 May 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/militarized-memory-kremlinorchestrated-immortal-regiment-rally-on-svalbard/429583> (accessed 10 May 2025).

84 Thomas Nilsen, 'Svalbard Governor orders war-glorifying cross demolished', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 17 October 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/svalbard-governor-orders-war-glorifying-cross-demolished-russian-official-protests-on-behalf-of-the-entire-orthodox-world/126145> (accessed 3 March 2025); Thomas Nilsen, 'Arktikugol asks permission to relocate illegal orthodox cross at Svalbard', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 4 June 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/arktikugol-asks-permission-to-relocate-illegal-orthodox-cross-at-svalbard/119691> (accessed 3 March 2025). Historians and archaeologists outside Russia have found little evidence to support the view that Svalbard was discovered by the Pomors: see Thor B. Arlov, 'The Discovery and Early Exploitation of Svalbard: Some Historiographical Notes', *Acta Borealia*, Volume 22, Issue 1 (2005): 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08003830510020343>.

permission retrospectively after a dialogue with Arktikugol, which was ordered only to move the cross inside the area regulated for buildings, not to remove it completely. This diplomatic solution probably aimed to pre-empt Russian accusations of Norway infringing the principle of freedom of religion. However, with the cross still in place, its coercive potential can be developed. As mentioned above, the cross has already been used in various ceremonies, thus inflating its symbolic value. The most recent example is a liturgy performed in Pyramiden in August 2025 by Fr Gramatik, encompassing a visit to the cross to lay more stones. Participants included both inhabitants of Barentsburg and passengers arriving in Barentsburg on the new direct boat route from Murmansk.⁸⁵

Moreover, notwithstanding Norway's diplomatic responses to grey-zone provocations, senior Russian officials and legislators have increasingly voiced accusations of discrimination and Russophobia, as well as claims that Russian rights on Svalbard are threatened and need protection.⁸⁶ Arktikugol's campaign to revitalize the Russian presence on Svalbard has also been accompanied by growing accusations that Norway is militarizing the archipelago, sustaining dual-use installations, and "including the archipelago in NATO's military planning" in breach of the Treaty.⁸⁷ In an interview in the spring of 2025, Nikolai Patrushev, former FSB director and a close adviser to Putin in Arctic and military affairs, drew a parallel with alleged Western encroachment on Russia in the Barents and Baltic Seas.⁸⁸ Shortly afterwards

85 Telegram channel Trest Arktikugol, <https://t.me/arktikugol/5839?single>, 13.08.2025 (accessed 13 August 2025).

86 Atle Staalesen, 'Deputy Prime Minister sends warning to Oslo', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/deputy-prime-minister-sends-warning-to-oslo-russian-rights-at-svalbard-must-not-be-challenged/108978> (accessed 3 March 2025); 'O narusheniiakh prav rossiiskikh grazhdan i sootchestvennikov v zarubezhnykh stran', MID official webpage, 20 December 2024, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/1988380/#_Toc184317027 (accessed 3 March 2025); Denis Zagore and Thomas Nilsen, 'Halfwit lawmaker says Russia should take over Svalbard', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 15 January 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/halfwit-lawmaker-says-russia-should-take-over-svalbard/423172> (accessed 3 March 2025); Atle Staalesen, 'Extremist lawmaker wants to rename Svalbard', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 3 February 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/extremist-lawmaker-wants-to-rename-svalbard/424048> (accessed 3 March 2025).

87 'Brifing ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID', MID official website, 11 September 2024, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1969094/#102 (accessed 2 May 2025); 'Brifing ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID: O militaristskikh ustremleniiakh Norvegii na Shpitsbergene', MID official website, 18 December 2024, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1988088/#09 (accessed 2 May 2025); 'O militarizatsii Norvegii', MID official website, 14 March 2025, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/2003311/ (accessed 2 May 2025); Johannes Fjeld, 'Russland med ny Svalbard-melding', *dagbladet.no*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/russland-med-ny-svalbard-melding/83091392> (accessed 14 May 2025); 'Brifing ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID: Ob agressivnykh voennykh prigotovleniiakh Norvegii', MID official website, 27 May 2025, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/2020206/#7 (accessed 27 May 2025).

88 Igor Korochenko, 'Zashchitit' interesy Rossii na Baltike i v Arktike', *oborona.ru*, 13 March 2025, <https://oborona.ru/product/zhurnal-natsionalnaia-oborona/zashchitit-interesy-rossii-na-baltike-i-v-arktike-46770.shtml> (accessed 2 May 2025); 'Voennye ugrozy so storony evropeiskikh stran budut rasti, zaiavil Patrushev', *rianovosti.ru*, 13 March 2024, <https://ria.ru/20250313/patrushev-2004659766.html> (accessed 2 May 2025).

Norway's ambassador to Russia was summoned to the MID, which presented accusations that the SvalSat satellite station was being used to provide data to support Ukraine in the war against Russia.⁸⁹ Although Norway unequivocally refuted the claims, the accusations linger, contributing to Moscow's narrative of NATO aggression and Norway's militarization of the archipelago, and creating unrest and criticism of the government in Oslo.⁹⁰

In parallel with the growing accusations against Norway, Russian officials consistently emphasize that Russia adheres to the Svalbard Treaty and the principle of the Arctic as a zone of peace, while Minister Aleksey Chekunkov praises Arktikugol's desire to cooperate with the Norwegian authorities and its efforts to strengthen the Russian presence on Svalbard.⁹¹ In addition to this strategic doublespeak,

recent years have also seen outright conspiracy theories being launched on Svalbard, similar to those disseminated by the Russian security services in Ukraine and recently in Africa: as the Norwegian Parliament Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence was visiting Bear Island and Longyearbyen in the summer of 2023, the pro-Kremlin Telegram channel Mash published disinformation about an alleged agreement between Norway and the US to establish a laboratory on Bear Island for the production of military biological weapons, aimed at inflicting harm on the Russian population. The report falsely stated that the island was recognized as part of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century.⁹² The disinformation did not reach the international media, despite the fact that it was further circulated at an online conference organized by the Murmansk branch

89 Kåre M. Hansen, 'Russland vil vite hvordan satellittene brukes', *svalbardposten.no*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.svalbardposten.no/militaer-etterretning-russland-satellittdata/russland-vil-vite-hvordan-satellittene-brukes/567893> (accessed 2 May 2025); Kåre M. Hansen, 'Norge et uvennlig land', *svalbardposten.no*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.svalbardposten.no/nikolay-korchunov-norge-russland/norge-et-uvennlig-land/568003> (accessed 2 May 2025).

90 'Støre avviser Russlands Svalbard-anklager', *tv2.no*, 15 March 2025, <https://www.tv2.no/direkte/jpybz/siste-nytt/67d58860bb677e85c35dd960/store-avviser-russlands-svalbardanklager> (accessed 2 May 2025); Kåre M. Hansen, 'Full krangel om SvalSat', *svalbardposten.no*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.svalbardposten.no/bard-wormdal-militarisering-russland/full-krangel-om-svalsat/567763> (accessed 2 May 2025); see also various articles on *steigan.no*, <https://steigan.no/?s=SvalSat> (accessed 24 July 2025).

91 'Posol RF v Norvegii: Shpitsbergen dolzhen ostavat'sia zonoj nizkoi napriazhennosti', *tass.ru*, 14 May 2025, https://tass.ru/politika/23944283?fbclid=IwY2xjawKT12dleHRuA2FlbQlXMAbicmlkETfxNURER0pmRXRPND-hoNXBaAR4QfiEI6L7FSmEusZZNdwieBf3XdNCDepEnw2k8jSGJeTu5L59_eb1Biq-XJQ_aem_4czyOzRAF-TuZNRG-PR3kQg (accessed 20 June 2025); 'Chekunkov: Arktikugol v techenie shesti let' *tass.ru*, 14 May 2025, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/23936711> (accessed 20 June 2025); 'Chekunkov soobshchil o planakh', *tass.ru*, 15 May 2025, <https://tass.ru/obshchestvo/23945185> (accessed 20 June 2025); 'Chekunkov otmetil konstruktivnyi dialog Rossi', *tass.ru*, 6 June 2025, https://tass.ru/politika/24156023?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=mobile&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fdzen.ru%2Fnews%2Fsearch (accessed 20 June 2025); 'Na Shpitsbergene namereny sozdat' nauchno-issledovatel'skuiu bazu', *tass.ru*, 18 June 2025, <https://tass.ru/obshchestvo/24262445> (accessed 20 June 2025).

92 Telegram channel Mash, <https://t.me/breakingmash/45026>, 16 June 2023 (accessed 5 June 2025); Nilsen, 'High North – Low Tensions?'

of the Russian Geographical Society later in the year.⁹³ Meanwhile, Russia closed off huge areas north and south of Bear Island to conduct a Northern Fleet military exercise, affecting both Norwegian fishing vessels and civilian air traffic, including the Governor of Svalbard's Norwegian helicopter rescue service.⁹⁴ No official Russian message to Norway was issued, but the acts signalled the Kremlin's power and presence.

Leveraging new partners, amplifying narratives of discrimination

In parallel with historically based grey-zone provocations, Moscow has increasingly challenged Norway's research policy framework on Svalbard by loudly inviting China, India, and BRICS+-affiliated or "friendly countries" such as Turkey and Thailand to cooperate on a new research and education centre to be established in Pyramiden.⁹⁵ Since 2018 Norway has underlined that while new international research initiatives in the archipelago are greatly

encouraged, such activities must be conducted in accordance with Norwegian research policy.⁹⁶ This implies that activities should occur under the umbrella of the Norwegian Polar Institute in Ny-Ålesund, where infrastructure is provided to ensure quality of science, open data, and economies of scale. To reduce the impact on fragile Arctic nature, research is to be limited to the natural sciences, with no educational activities beyond the Norwegian University Centre in Longyearbyen. Since 2023 Arktikugol has voiced ambitions, backed by senior Russian Arctic officials, to establish a new station for both research and education, including in social sciences, organized as a Russian-led consortium with partners from the BRICS+.⁹⁷ The intensity of the plans' circulation during 2023 and again in 2024 and 2025 by Russian state-controlled media, as well as by the Murmansk actors involved in the conspiracy theory on Bear Island, indicates a targeted effort to promote the project to Russian audiences while

93 'V Murmanske sostoialas' IV mezhdunarodnaia nauchno-prakticheskaia konferentsiia', *rgo.ru*, 29 October 2023, <https://www.rgo.ru/ru/article/v-murmanske-sostoialas'-iv-mezhdunarodnaia-nauchno-prakticheskaia-konferentsiia-bezopasnost> (accessed 30 October 2023).

94 Thomas Nilsen, 'Russian missiles jeopardize Norwegian Arctic SAR response', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 8 August 2023, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/russian-missiles-jeopardize-norwegian-arctic-sar-response/163581> (accessed 2 March 2025).

95 See e.g. 'Kitai i Indiiia zainteresovany v sozdanii nauchnoi stantsii na Shpitsbergene', *nezavisimaiagazeta.ru*, 26 May 2023, <https://www.ng.ru/news/767497.html> (accessed 2 March 2025); 'O vstreche General'nogo konsula Rossii', *MID official website*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/no/1901218/> (accessed 2 March 2025).

96 Departementene, 'Strategi for forskning og høyere utdanning på Svalbard' <https://www.uio.no/forskning/tverrfak/nordomradene/aktuelt/2018/strategi-for-forskning-og-hoyere-utdanning-pa-svalbard.pdf>, 2018 (accessed 1 July 2025); Research Council of Norway, 'Ny-Ålesund Research Station. Research Strategy applicable from 2019', 2019, [ny-alesund-research-station-research-strategy.pdf](https://www.research-council.no/ny-alesund-research-station-research-strategy.pdf) (accessed 1 July 2025); Regjeringen, 'Stortingsmelding 26 (2023–2024)', <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-26-20232024/id3041130/> (accessed 1 July 2025).

97 'Na Shpitsbergene planiruiut sozdat' analog mezhdunarodnoi "Snezhniki", *tass.ru*, 5 June 2023, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17926747> (accessed 2 July 2025); 'Nachalo sozdaniia nauchnogo tsentra stran BRIKS na Shpitsbergene', *interfax.ru*, 13 June 2024, <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/northwest/news/nachalo-sozdaniia-nauchnogo-tsentra-stran-briks-na-shpitsbergene-ozhidaetsia-v-2024g> (accessed 1 July 2025).

framing it to distress Norway.⁹⁸ The dominant claim in the Russian media is that the BRICS+ states have demonstrated strong interest in Russia's plans. While most reports emphasize that Russia abides by Norway's regulations and works to strengthen its presence on Svalbard legitimately, one outlet refers to research activities as a weapon against Western "unfriendly states".⁹⁹ Meanwhile, Norway is portrayed as actively limiting Russian activities by constantly imposing new regulations and sanctions. At a session organized by Arktikugol during the Eastern Economic Forum in 2024 entitled "Spitsbergen – an oasis for international cooperation", speakers reminded their audience of the equal rights to access on Svalbard, and

Arktikugol CEO Neverov claimed that paragraph 5 of the Treaty implied that all states acceding to the Treaty had the right to conduct research activities in the archipelago, implying that Norway's research policy framework for Svalbard was invalid.¹⁰⁰ In reality, article 5, paragraph 2 of the Svalbard Treaty stipulates that an agreement can be concluded concerning the conditions for scientific research. As there has never been any such agreement, it is incumbent on the Norwegian authorities to regulate research on Svalbard.

The ambitions to include education and social science research in the Russian-led centre, in combination with the loud invitations to China and others to join, can be read as attempts

98 A search on Yandex shows peaks in media reports during the announcement of the centre by Arktikugol in Moscow in November–December 2023 and again in February–March 2024, with reports massively repeating statements from senior government official Yuriy Trutnev after a meeting of the Government Commission on Protection of Russian Presence on Spitsbergen. New peaks appeared in June and September 2024 when the Ministry of Research and Higher Education joined in promoting the plans, and Arktikugol CEO Neverov spoke about the centre at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok. For the Murmansk actors see 'Strany BRIKS mogut sozdat' nauchnyi tsentr na Shpitsbergene', *interfax.ru*, 15 March 2024, <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/academia/news/strany-briks-mogut-sozdat-nauchnyi-tsentr-na-shpitsbergene-ucheniyi> (accessed 1 July 2025).

99 See e.g. 'Rossiia usilit svoë prisutstvie', *stoletie.ru*, 31 May 2023, https://www.stoletie.ru/lenta/rossiia_usilit_svoie_prisutstvie_na_shpitsbergene_803.htm (accessed 2 July 2025); "'Arktikugol' planiruet sozdat' mezhdunarodnyi nauchnyi tsentr', *tass.ru*, 5 December 2023, https://nauka.tass.ru/nauka/19462011?ysclid=mcma7kgh1849473375&utm_source=yandex.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=yandex.com&utm_referrer=yandex.com (accessed 2 July 2025); 'Chekunkov: Shpitsbergen dolzhen stat' obraztsovym proektom', *tass.ru*, 24 January 2024, <https://tass.ru/politika/19804483> (accessed 2 July 2025); 'V Pravitel'stve RF obsudili ukreplenie', *murman.tv*, 13 February 2024, <https://murman.tv/news-n-19460--v-pravitelstve-rf-obsudili-ukreplenie-rossiiskogo-prisutstviia-na-shpitsbergene> (accessed 2 July 2025); 'Norvegiia pytaetsia pomeshat' Rossii', *rossmir.ru*, 2 June 2024, <https://rossmir.ru/society/1781/?ysclid=mcman94u2v557165263> (accessed 2 July 2025); 'Minvostokrazvitiia planiruet sozdat' na Shpitsbergene tsentr', *portnews.ru*, 6 June 2025, https://portnews.ru/news/377861/?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=mobile&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fdzen.ru%2Fnews%2Fsearch (accessed 2 July 2025).

100 'Perspektivy razvitiia nauki i turizma na Shpitsbergene', *vostokgosplan.ru*, 6 September 2024, <https://vostokgosplan.ru/perspektivy-razvitiia-nauki-i-turizma-na-shpitsbergene-obsudili-v-khode-vief-2024/> (accessed 2 July 2025); Telegram channel Trest Arktikugol, <https://t.me/arktikugol/3486>, 6 September 2024 (accessed 2 July 2025); Telegram channel Novosti Shpitsbergena, https://t.me/spitsbergen_misc/3721, 11 September 2024 (accessed 2 July 2025).

to distress and provoke Norway, which is well aware of China's discontent with Norwegian regulations and is increasingly eyeing China as a menace.¹⁰¹ Behind the plans for a research centre with BRICS+ partners lies a looming threat to Norway of dual use and a lack of transparency in activities. However, while representatives from China, Turkey and Thailand have visited the Russian settlements, and Arktikugol continues to promote the plans, no deal for a centre has been announced.¹⁰² Meanwhile, Arktikugol has signed cooperation agreements with the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU) and others, which include plans for

courses in social sciences organized as summer and winter schools in Pyramiden. As part of the cooperation, Neverov meets Moscow students regularly, and Arktikugol is nurturing relations with the RGGU-affiliated "Voice of the Norwegian Fjords" Telegram channel, which between posts citing regular news from Norway disseminates hostile disinformation, including Russian grey-zone provocations, on Svalbard.¹⁰³

Concerning the establishment of a centre in Pyramiden, the realities on the ground indicate that the plans are unlikely to materialize any time soon. The settlement lacks basic infrastructure such as an energy supply, drinking water and communications for a permanent

101 'Strany BRIKS obsuzhdaiut sozdanie nauchnogo tsentra', *interfax.ru*, 13 June 2024, <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/academia/news/strany-briks-obsuzhdayut-sozdanie-nauchnogo-tsentra-na-shpitsbergene> (accessed 2 July 2025); Østhagen, 'The myths', 6; Arild Moe, 'Forskningspolitikk på Svalbard', in *Svalbardtraktaten 100 år*, ed. Irene Dahl & Øystein Jensen (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2020).

102 'Rossiia i Turtsiia namereny sotrudnicat', *bigasia.ru*, 31 July 2023, <https://bigasia.ru/turtsiia-i-rossiia-dogovorilis-o-sotrudnichestve-na-arkhipelage-shpitsbergen/> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Posol Tailanda v Norvegii posetila Rossiiskii nauchnyi tsentr', *krasnaiavesna.ru*, 18 August 2023, <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/b7f18d1e> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Scientists from the Polar Research Institute of China visited', *mmbi.ru*, 26 August 2024, <https://mmbi.info/en/news/scientists-from-the-polar-research-institute-of-china-visited-the-biostation-of-the-mmbi-ras-in-barentsburg/> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Russian Research Centre in Svalbard Consortium held a successful 19th meeting', *mmbi.ru*, 14 November 2024, <https://mmbi.info/en/news/russian-research-centre-in-svalbard-consortium-held-a-successful-19th-meeting/> (accessed 3 July 2025).

103 'Trest Arktikugol i RGGU podpisali soglashenie', *Arktikugol* official website, 5 December 2023, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/trest-arktikutgol-i-rggu-podpisali-soglashenie-o-sotrudnichestve> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Proekt nauchnogo tsentra v Piramide', *Arktikugol* official website, 12 December 2023, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/proekt-nauchnogo-tsentra-v-piramide-predstavlen-v-rggu> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Trest i MGIMO podpisali memorandum', *Arktikugol* official website, 11 January 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/trest-i-mgimo-podpisali-memorandum-o-sotrudnichestve> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Lektsiia I. A. Neverova', *mgimo.ru*, 6 March 2024, https://mgimo.ru/about/news/departments/neverov-spitsbergen/?utm_source=yandex.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=yandex.com&utm_referrer=yandex.com (accessed 2 July 2025); 'Lektsiia v RGGU', *Arktikugol* official website, 3 April 2024, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/lektsiia-v-rggu> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Trest Arktikugol i Tambovskii universitet dogovorilis', *goarctic.ru*, 11 November 2024, <https://goarctic.ru/society/trest-arktikutgol-i-tambovskiy-universitet-dogovorilis-o-sovmestnykh-nauchno-issledovatel'skikh-rabota/> (accessed 3 July 2025); 'Vstrecha General'nogo direktora', *Arktikugol* official website, 3 January 2025, <https://www.arcticugol.ru/news/vstrecha-generalnogo-direktora-tresta-arktikutgolia-neverova-so-studentami-rggu> (accessed 3 July 2025); Telegram channel Golos norvezhskikh fiordov, <https://t.me/norgerussisk> (accessed 2 October 2025).

presence.¹⁰⁴ The Norwegian authorities have not commented on the Russian project but continue to develop their Svalbard research policy framework.¹⁰⁵

In the summer of 2025, as Norway was preparing for the celebrations of the centenary of the Svalbard Treaty, yet another information campaign was launched by Arktikugol in tandem with the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and Arctic, targeting Norway's adherence to Western sanctions and support for Ukraine and again seeking to place Norway in a delicate position. The campaign started with a high-profile visit by the Russian ambassador to Norway, Nikolai Korchunov, to Longyearbyen in June, during which he met the Governor of Svalbard and expressed deep discontent with Norway's "anti-Russian sanctions" and research regulations, while reiterating familiar statements on the Arctic as a zone of peace and Russia as law-abiding and seeking constructive dialogue with Norway. In interviews with the Russian

press, Korchunov repeated Moscow's argument concerning paragraph 5 of the Svalbard Treaty and elaborated on the claim that Norway was contributing to NATO encroachment on Russia, stating that Norway's implementation of EU sanctions contradicted the Svalbard Treaty and illegally discriminated against Russian activities in the archipelago.¹⁰⁶

Korchunov's visit occurred in parallel with the establishment of the direct boat route from Murmansk to Barentsburg. A few days later, the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and Arctic announced with Arktikugol the opening in Barentsburg of a delivery point for Wildberries, Russia's largest online retailer, often compared with Amazon. The news was immediately circulated by several Russian outlets, including Kremlin-loyal Tsargrad TV.¹⁰⁷ According to the announcement, orders would be shipped from Russia to Barentsburg, where residents would have access to all the products Wildberries offered. The delivery point in Barentsburg

104 Arild Moe & Anne-Kristin Jørgensen, 'Russia's policy of presence in Svalbard', *Polar Record*, Volume 61, Issue e11, (2025): 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003224742500004X>.

105 Tobias Bjørkhaug, 'Regjeringa etablerer Svalbard forskningskontor', *svalbardposten.no*, 31 May 2025, <https://www.svalbardposten.no/regjeringa-etablerer-svalbard-forskningskontor/536303> (accessed 3 July 2025).

106 'Posol RF v Norvegii obsudil s gubernatorom Shpitsbergena vlianie sanktsii', *tass.ru*, 23 June 2025, <https://tass.ru/politika/24329709> (accessed 4 July 2024); 'Nikolai Korchunov: Norvegiia khorosho zarabotala', *ria.ru*, 30 June 2025, https://ria.ru/20250630/korchunov-2025829378.html?fbclid=IwQ0xDSwLQm_hleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHnqpzYZrGLp87yCHQmeLocFbU3ccuNHqTQ4HCmQgQoQKDjjZdCrX6zs2wDm_aem_oRaTyfsC5vMDagfzYC6C1Q (accessed 5 July 2025); 'Posol RF v Norvegii rasskazal ob uvelichenii voennogo prisutsviia NATO', *izvestiia.ru*, 3 July 2025, https://iz.ru/1914626/2025-07-03/posol-rf-v-norvegii-rasskazal-ob-uvelichenii-voennogo-prisutstvia-nato?fbclid=IwY2xjawLYiXdleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHnqpzYZrGLp87yCHQmeLocFbU3ccuNHqTQ4HCmQgQoQKDjjZdCrX6zs2wDm_aem_oRaTyfsC5vMDagfzYC6C1Q (accessed 5 July 2025).

107 Telegram channel Minvostok, <https://t.me/minvostok/4713?single>, 8 July 2025 (accessed 9 July 2025); Telegram channel Trest Arktikugol, <https://t.me/arktikugol/5605>, 8 July 2025 (accessed 9 July 2025); 'Wildberries otkroet PVZ na arhipelage Shpitsbergen', *tass.ru*, 8 July 2025, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/24457763> (accessed 9 July 2025); 'Wildberries otkryla samyi severnyi v mire punkt vydachi zakazov', *tsargrad.tv*, 8 July 2025, https://tsargrad.tv/news/wildberries-otkryla-samyi-severnyi-v-mire-punkt-vydachi-zakazov_1308924?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fdzen.ru%2F-news%2Finstory%2F8f8b3198-67eb-5228-817a-6e7508f6ea51 (accessed 9 July 2025).

would even serve Pyramiden, using Arktikugol's helicopter.

The announcement about Wildberries and Korchunov's claims in the media challenge Norway on multiple levels: whereas transport by ship directly from Russia to Barentsburg does not itself violate Norwegian regulations, the import of goods must comply with sanctions and other Norwegian regulations, and it will be for Norway to conduct controls and enforce rules. Moreover, the focus of the 2022 information campaign from Moscow on transports to Barentsburg was on framing Norway's policy as a dangerous and hostile "blockade" of Russians on Svalbard. Similar accusations could be repeated if the Norwegian authorities decide to stop Wildberries imports to Barentsburg. Another complicating factor is that the scandal-ridden and Kremlin-aligned company is sanctioned by Ukraine and Poland, but not by the EU, which affords Oslo fewer

multilateral grounds on which to rely in a potential dispute with Moscow.¹⁰⁸ The transport of goods by helicopter from Barentsburg to Pyramiden adds yet another contentious element, whereby Norway may have to defend its regulations and risk accusations of discrimination. To add to the pressure, several new boat trips from Murmansk to Barentsburg have been announced for August and September, notwithstanding the fact that there is marginal commercial interest in the route.¹⁰⁹

As the announcement about Wildberries was being made by the Ministry in Moscow and Arktikugol, the first instances of jamming and spoofing in Svalbard airspace were recorded. Similar incidents have become frequent in mainland Norway's border region with Russia in recent years, posing a severe threat to civilian aviation, which is difficult to attribute and mitigate.¹¹⁰

108 Kenneth Rapoza, 'EU stops short of sanctioning Russian e-commerce giant Wildberries', *eureporter.co*, 21 December 2022, <https://www.eureporter.co/world/russia/2022/12/29/eu-stops-short-of-sanctioning-russian-e-commerce-giant-wildberries/> (accessed 4 July 2025).

109 'Shpitsbergen', *seappractice.com*, n.d., <https://sea-practice.com/arctic-travel#spitsbergen> (accessed 10 July 2025); Denis Zagore, 'Turizm vmesto uglia: iz Murmanska na Sval'bard otpravilsia priamoi reis s turistami', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 4 June 2025, <https://ru.thebarentsobserver.com/turizm-vmesto-ugla-iz-murmanska-na-sval'bard-otpravilsia-priamoi-reis-s-turistami/431006> (accessed 3 July 2025).

110 Thomas Nilsen, 'Someone is messing with GPS signals in Svalbard airspace', *thebarentsobserver.com*, 19 July 2025, <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/someone-is-messing-with-gps-signals-in-svalbard-airspace/433658> (accessed 29 July 2025).

4 Conclusions and recommendations

This paper demonstrates the evolving spectrum of Russian hybrid threat activities on Svalbard over the last decade, which is also marked by enduring efforts to bi-lateralize issues with Norway and assert a special position for Russia on Svalbard. Its empirical findings indicate that Moscow uses Svalbard as an arena for testing the responses of Norway, and NATO more broadly, as well as their capacity to monitor and detect hybrid threats. A key characteristic of Russian hybrid threat activities in Svalbard is employing strategic communication and information campaigns to amplify pressure. Various grey-zone provocations are accompanied by a consistent media framing of Russia as a law-abiding and constructive player in Arctic affairs that is working to preserve the region as a zone of peace; Norway is portrayed as discriminatory, anti-Russian, and conducting policies that breach “the spirit of the Svalbard Treaty”. Moscow’s behaviour on Svalbard is thus characterized by a certain level of performance, emulating peace while simultaneously working covertly to create tension.

The paper illustrates how Russian information campaigns related to Svalbard target both domestic Russian and Norwegian audiences, highlighting the close interrelationship between these two dimensions. While building a public consensus on a claimed Russian privileged presence and special rights on Svalbard and reinforcing enemy perceptions of “unfriendly states” are key for Russian audiences, provoking reactions is one of the main goals when targeting Norway. A core element of Russian hybrid threat activities on Svalbard is to exploit

the freedom of expression in Norway to create unrest and prompt public criticism of the Norwegian authorities. Such tactics also have a domestic Russian aspect that entails the preparation of the information environment in Russia by reinforcing strategic narratives and establishing items and symbols on Svalbard with potential for future coercive use.

Moscow’s information operations, combined with other hybrid threat activities, thus serve several purposes and have a potential impact on hard power and national security in Norway. They seek to undermine Norway’s domestic cohesion and create unrest in its population, as well as to weaken its standing as a good-faith implementer of the Treaty. Most importantly, since 2014 Russian hybrid threat activities on Svalbard have targeted Norway’s adherence to the Western sanction regime. Should Moscow succeed in seriously weakening support for the sanctions in Norway, this would pose a threat to both Norwegian and broader European security.

This study documents how Russian strategic behaviour on Svalbard, as towards Europe in general, is increasingly tuned to great power rivalry, challenging “unfriendly” states and strengthening relations with “friendly” ones. At an overarching level, Moscow can use hybrid threat activities to shape the situational perception so that uncertainty and ambiguity – and potentially internal conflict and paralysis of action – become dominant features for Norway and NATO concerning Svalbard. This may increase Russia’s relative power in a given situation while reducing Norway’s and NATO’s autonomy. Given Moscow’s declared strategic

objective of altering “the unipolar world order”, the growing number of Russian hybrid threat activities on Svalbard indicates that a scenario in which Russia uses the archipelago to test NATO cohesion cannot be excluded.

To deter the Russian approach and narrow the scope of the grey zone, robust and actor-specific countermeasures are necessary.¹¹¹ The hostile and norm-defiant characteristics of Russian strategic and political culture under the current regime as observed on Svalbard and elsewhere must be considered. Mirror-imaging – assumptions that Russia acts like Norway in its Svalbard policy – must be avoided. This entails the recognition that contemporary Russia does not share the generally recognized normative framework concerning state conduct as exemplified in international law, based on good faith and a mutual desire for compliance between states.

Starting with this realization, two overarching strategies to counter Russian hybrid threats in Svalbard should be implemented:

- Measures to deter Russian hybrid threats
- Measures to increase resilience in Norway.

To counter Russian hybrid threats in Svalbard, a strategy of deterrence aimed at shifting the cost-benefit calculus of Russian hybrid threat actors is required. This demands knowledge of the actors’ values, interests and worldview. Active responses should replace diplomatic deliberations and include an unequivocal message to Russia that Norway is unwilling to give in to manipulation and threats and is

prepared to push back. As deterring hybrid threats is more effective with an actor-specific approach, it is important that the Norwegian authorities, in close cooperation with Norway’s allies, identify Russian narratives and acts with subversive potential and design a tailored response with a tangible impact. This is likely to shift Russia’s cost-benefit calculus concerning Svalbard in the longer perspective, as it will change the situation from Norway continually adapting to Russian hybrid threat operations to one where Norway is actively shaping its messaging to Russia to deter further hostile acts.

Such a deterrence strategy should be worked out in cooperation with state partners like the other Nordic and Baltic states, which have similar but not necessarily identical experiences to Norway’s concerning Russian hybrid threats. Moreover, to deter Russia’s long-term strategy of bi-lateralizing Svalbard issues, Norway can initiate the development of arenas and mechanisms for multilateral dispute settlements in accordance with international law. This seems particularly relevant for issues concerning resource extraction in the waters around Svalbard and on the shelf.

Enhanced international collaboration is also key to building resilience in Norway to Russian hybrid threats targeting Svalbard. A key measure is institutional capacity building across government bodies and societal institutions in Norway to detect and actively counter Russian information operations and compete in the cognitive domain. Norway can draw here on neighbouring Nordic and Baltic countries’

¹¹¹ Viktorija Rusinaite, ‘Turning strategy into praxis: Lessons in hybrid threat deterrence’, (Helsinki Hybrid CoE Paper No. 25, August 2025), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/turning-strategy-into-praxis-lessons-in-hybrid-threat-deterrence/>.

experiences and lessons learned when working to establish a whole-of-society approach.

Public awareness campaigns in Norway as a strategy to enhance resilience and preparedness in the population are another key measure. Finally, Moscow's information operations greatly depend on state censorship and information control: the profound divide between Norway's liberal and transparent public sphere and the Russian state-controlled and heavily censored information environment constitutes a key

factor in explaining why freedom of expression in Norway can be instrumentalized by Moscow and tuned to challenge Norway. A powerful measure to counter Russian hybrid threats is therefore increased support for the independent media, including the Russian-language media in exile and cross-border cooperation with independent Russian journalists, to safeguard the integrity of information environments and counteract instrumentalization by authoritarian regimes.

Acknowledgements

The work on this paper has been supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence's research funding scheme. The paper was developed under the auspices of the Norwegian Centre for Geopolitics, project number 345131.

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