

ARE REFUGEES WELCOME TO THE ARCTIC? THE ARCTIC AND THE INTERNATIONAL TRANSIT MIGRANT FLOW

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INTRODUCTION

According to the UNHCR (2016), we are now witnessing the highest numbers of displacement on record. One third out of 65 million displaced people around the world in 2015 were refugees. Given the escalation of global forced displacement of people and increasing number of refugees, the role of migration flows has turned into a powerful external factor influencing various regions of the world with different pace and force. In the era of globalisation the Arctic could not stay away from this trend (Naguib 2016, Hohmann and Laruelle 2016). Both by migration policies and by actions exercised to process unexpectedly arrived migrants and refugees the Arctic states position themselves in international debates on current exodus.

Although it is unclear yet whether international migrants and refugees transiting through the Arctic will become a factor influencing regional sustainability in the long run, some Arctic areas have already functioned as a temporary transit passage for the Middle East refugees and migrants seeking sanctuary in Europe. For example, 5.500 migrants and refugees entered Norway from Russia via the remote Arctic border-crossing point in 2015. Although this occurrence has already turned into a history page, its content, reasons and consequences are worth thorough documentation. By looking at the 'Norwegian' branch of the Arctic migrant route - the northernmost land route to the European Economic Area - this contribution aims at revealing challenges that Arctic communities had to deal with due to the influx of transiting migrants.

METHODS

The research design implied carrying out three steps, each of which required a particular method. To understand the event canvas of migrants and refugees on the Arctic migrant route, the author used mass media analysis. Given the absence of comprehensive academic reflection on the issue and the multi-lingual representation of that route in the media, both Russian, Norwegian and English sources were studied in order to reconstruct nuanced chronicals. The newspapers under scrutiny included both local, regional, national and international periodicals and totaled to over 60 publications. One of research outputs is a map presented in Fig.1 that illustrates the multilevel composition of migrants and refugees transiting via Russia to Norway in 2015.

To embrace the variety of local debates, the author interviewed seven borderlanders in October 2016 and June 2017. The interviewees were people residing at the Russian-Norwegian borderland at the time when the Arctic route was exploited. While professional duties of interviewees differ greatly (and include local politics, culture and healthcare), their social role within border communities is similar – they are opinion leaders. Comparing and contrasting their assessment of welcoming cultures on either side of the border allowed portraying key patterns of interactions with transiting migrants and refugees exercised in each municipality.

The key sources for making familiar with local attitudes towards migrants and refugees on the Arctic route were popular social networks – vkontakte and Facebook. The author investigated three public groups, two with mixed participants – both Russians and Norwegians – and one with Russian participants only. Such parameters as frequency of opinion exchange, as well as topics under discussion and the range of expressions gave ground to identify three main narratives present among Pechenga Rayon residents.

CONCLUSIONS

As media analysis proved, the ethnic composition of migrants and refugees who used the Arctic migrant route to enter Norway has been changing over time. The first waves mostly consisted of Syrians, but gradually people from “other zones of war and poverty” joined “the caravan to Europe” (Hudson 2015, p. 23). As Fig. 1 shows, Arctic migrants and refugees originated from over 20 countries including Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, Pakistan, etc. The main donors of asylum seekers were Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran.

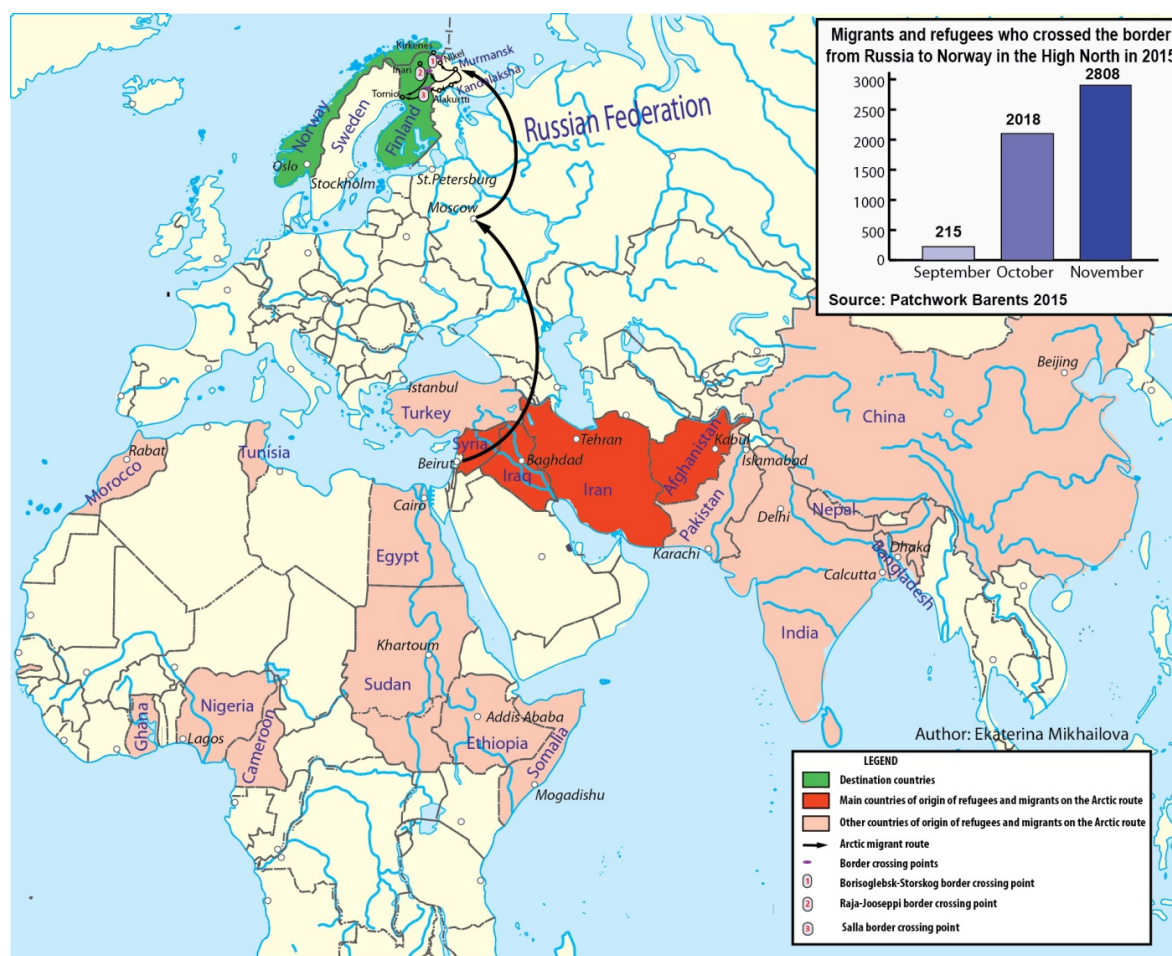


Figure 1. The Arctic passage seen as an international migrant route: trajectories of flows and an overview of countries involved in sending and receiving migrants and refugees transiting through the High North. The typical itinerary of Syrians crossing the border to Norway included a flight from Beirut to Moscow, a plane or a train ride from Moscow to Murmansk and then a lift towards the border. The final part of the long way – last 20 km – asylum seekers had to cover “on the wheels”, as the Borisoglebsk border-crossing point has a status of a multilateral international automobile checkpoint and nobody is allowed to cross this type of checkpoints on foot. At the beginning Middle East asylum seekers mostly were driven across the border in Russian cars. However, from August 2015 local police in Kirkenes started pressing charges against drivers who brought refugees and migrants across the border suspecting them in human trafficking (The Local 2015). Since then the only possible way to pass the final stretch became by bicycle (Jacobsen and Doyle 2015).

According to the interinterviews, although the northernmost branch of the Arctic route (the one that goes to Norway) functioned intensely only for three months (September-November 2015), the international transit migrant flow has almost resulted in a humanitarian crisis in both border municipalities. Besides, it also destabilized the Barents cooperation, as in 2015 the previously achieved reciprocal understanding and trust between Russia and Norway in the High North became questioned. One of tangible implications of the Arctic route that could be observed today is a newly erected fence on the Russian-Norwegian border. Such materialization of anti-migrant sentiment and fear of illegal border crossing is a testament to the discord in long-lasting friendly relationship between the two countries in the Barents region.

However, the most worrisome barrier is the “wall of misunderstanding” - a profound mismatch in perceiving the challenge of international migration and the Middle East refugees on the Russian and Norwegian sides of the border. Residents of the Norwegian border municipality perceived Arctic refugees and migrants as “people who need help” and “people who had a long journey”. Opinions of Russian borderlanders voiced in the Internet unfold skeptical (“*Refugees could be women, kids and elderly people, all others should defend their fatherland*”, “*Refugees are unlikely to be rude and to wear golden jewelry*”), frightened (“*I wouldn’t be surprised if there are many hitmen among them*”) and even envious attitude (“*Refugees are heading to generous Norwegian allowances and will live better than us*”) to the international crowd transiting through the Arctic. No wonder some of Russian border dwellers saw entrepreneurial possibilities in mass arrival of Middle East refugees and migrants and were earning money by providing different services to them – from selling bicycles to subletting flats.

To grasp the difference in local civic responses to the challenge of international migration on the Russian and Norwegian sides of the border, the author suggests looking at community’s (in)experience in refugee reception. Although there is no verified correlation between this experience and the way refugees and migrants are perceived and treated, one could assume that lower sympathy and assistance to Arctic migrants and refugees on the Russian side of the border was partially caused by recent mobilization of local population in helping Ukrainian refugees and lack of experience in receiving refugees from culturally different regions of the world.

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