

REGIONALISATION IN NORTHERN EUROPE AND THE NORTHERN DIMENSION IN RUSSIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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The progress and sustainability of international cross-border region formation is a major concern for Russia, a country bordering sixteen states. In the early 2000s, the development of regions with Russian participation was at its height in northwestern Europe. Cross-border regions arise both naturally, stemming from various functional relations, and as a result of political decisions. In the latter case, political discourse is an important factor in successful region-building. The Northern Dimension (ND) programme, which was launched in 1997, embodied the principle of depoliticised cooperation — Europe’s ‘new regionalism’. This article aims to evaluate the role of the ND in the federal and regional political discourse of 1997–2016, to determine its place among other cross-border cooperation projects, and to follow changes in the understanding of its goals. The study relies on data from the Integrum agency, which has built up the most comprehensive digital archive of federal and regional printed and online media. The federal discourse on the ND reflected the whole set of relations between Russia and the EU. The idea about the crisis of the programme came from the discrepancy between the expectations aroused by political discourse and the actual results of cooperation. The study shows the ND-related discourse changed over the study period and stresses profound differences between federal and regional discourses.

Keywords:

supranational regions, Russia, EU, Northern Dimension, political discourse

Introduction

A key theme running through the works of Gennady M. Fedorov, his students and followers is the idea that the formation of international regions of different levels, i.e. regionalisation, is a manifestation of globalisation [1; 2]. The global

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space is a set of regions forming in response to the challenges of international competition calling for market consolidation, cross-border cooperation and new territorial structure of the economy. Another impetus for regionalisation is the need to align efforts to solve pressing cross-border problems, the scale of which is beyond the capabilities of a single state.

The analysis of regionalisation has become highly relevant for Russian social studies. Being the largest country in terms of territory, Russia has over 22 thousand kilometre land border; thus it also has the largest number of neighbouring states (16, recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Naturally, the Russian Federation participates in the activities of a number of regional organisations at the intergovernmental level. As Europe has seen a particularly active formation of cross-border regions, Russia's engagement in these processes is an essential part of its relations both with the EU as a whole and with its member states. In northwest Europe, the Russian Federation and its regions take part in several international organisations with overlapping areas and intersecting spheres: the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Arctic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), the Northern Dimension program (ND). Initially, both European capitals and Moscow saw regional projects with the participation of Russia as a depoliticised cooperation based on "common interests".

The European practice of regionalisation was based on "soft power" [3] and the well-known principle of border crossing facilitation at internal borders aligned with a considerable strengthening of the barrier functions of external borders. Such practice ran against the regionalisation involving third countries. Political geography interpreted this discrepancy as "reterritorialisation", i.e. differentiation of functions of political and socio-cultural borders at different spatial levels according to certain criteria, involving identity, division of neighbours into friends, partners and geopolitical rivals, selfish economic interests, and security [4; 5]. This view on regionalisation was opposed by "new regionalism" building on clear legal and institutional framework and co-development (multilateral and mutually beneficial cooperation).

The key principle of "new regionalism" is the multi-level governance (decentralisation of competencies), which implies the transfer of all possible powers from the central government to subnational and supranational authorities. Supposedly, the application of this principle significantly broadens the range of participants in cooperation including international financial and non-governmental organisations, partnerships, government agencies of member states, regional authorities and non-governmental organisations, et cetera. The agenda in the created system of actors is distributed in such a way that each of its elements corresponds to the competence of institutions of a certain level. While each of the actors performs a relatively narrow set of functions, together they can develop enough interaction potential to smooth out contradictions between countries preserving the spirit of cooperation even in a situation of political confrontation

[6]. The inability to agree on any issue does not become an obstacle to decisions on other agenda items distributed among many actors, which allows the relative autonomy of the regional organisation from “high politics” [7].

The Northern Dimension program, which has existed for more than two decades, was to become an innovative model of cooperation, the embodiment of the European “new regionalism”. This initiative holds a special place among regional cooperation programs between Russia and the EU countries. Academic literature considered the ND at certain stages a successful model that could be transferred to the entire range of EU-Russia relations. At the same time, program failures were repeatedly recognised as typical, i.e. determined by general issues in Russia-EU interactions.

Approaches to the analysis of regionalisation in Human Geography

Conventionally, human geography applies a functional approach (the study of the intensity and structure of relations between various actors) to assess the course and results of regionalisation. This approach was successfully applied by Gennady M. Fedorov and researchers of his scientific school who used data on agreements between various partners, investment and foreign trade statistics to study cross-border regionalisation. They proposed a “taxonomy” of coherent (internally related) cross-border regions [1]. Many international researchers use a functional approach to identify “informal” regions, i.e. those not enshrined in any political or legal acts (see, for example, [8]).

However, that is not the only approach to regionalisation studies; there are two more. The first one is an institutional approach aimed at analysing the internal structure and “connectivity” of regional associations. The second is a geopolitical approach. Among other things, it studies the composition, configuration and dynamic borders of supranational regions depending on the interests of their partners and ratio between their political and economic potentials, shifts in the regime and functions of internal and external borders, the ratio between regionalisation and the intensity of cross-border cooperation. The geopolitical approach also aims at exploring the ways and means for forming cross-border regions.

Practice has shown that regionalisation processes do not develop only due to “objective” reasons. In other words, they are the result of the interactions of many actors guided by their economic or political interests influenced, inter alia, by a cultural, historical, linguistic and religious community. Regionalisation can be initiated from above by political decisions later provided with underpinning economic, cultural and other reasons. The interpretation of the controversial history of bilateral or multilateral relations emphasises the periods of successful interaction between partners.

An effective concept for studying regionalisation initiated “from above” is critical geopolitics that considers the creation of these meanings in social practice and political discourse. L. Fawcett, professor at Oxford University, once wrote:

“Regionness, like identity, is not given once and for all: it is built up and changes” [9, p. 26]. Territorial identities also affected by geopolitical discourse and social practice, play a key role in successful regional construction [10].

Geopolitical discourse is a discursive practice, in which international relations issues are associated with certain ethnocultural communities, points, ranges and other elements of the political space as well as historical events that took place there [11]. The concepts and meanings underpinning foreign policy actions are determined by the interaction between discourses initiated and developed by different political forces and social groups. Their influence on the results of such interaction differs and depends on the groups’ power relations, political and socio-cultural resources and social practice [12]. The virtual political space formed during the discourse becomes more important than the real one. The scientific literature has repeatedly shown that its mythologisation often causes bitter controversies between individual countries and regions [13–15].

The analysis of the discourse’s elements in statements, speeches and interviews of leaders, publications of experts, electronic and printed media, as well as fiction literature, films, advertisements, cartoons, including the language used in them, contributes to a better understanding of this process as well as linking it to political practice [16], public opinion and perceptions of different social groups reflected in social surveys [17]. Due to developing communications, foreign affairs and policymakers’ geopolitical worldview in general increasingly need the legitimization in public opinion, which is also the task for political discourse.

This work aims to evaluate the ND as a model of cross-border cooperation in federal and regional discourse. How important is this mode of cooperation for Russia and its northwest regions bordering Europe? What is the place of the ND among cross-border cooperation projects? How did the goals and objectives of the project change, and most importantly, how were they understood? The answers to these questions are essential for assessing the ND prospects and the possibility of its activation in the current situation.

Research Methodology

The work is based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Russian discourse on the ND of 1997–2016. The study is based on data from the Integrum agency, which has built up the most comprehensive digital archive of federal and regional printed and online media.

Federal media usually cover the most momentous developments. For a more detailed analysis, we selected five socio-political publications targeted at various groups of Russian society. The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (NG, Independent Gazette) positions itself as a “high-quality” “newspaper of independent opinions” providing considerable coverage of Russia’s relations with the outside world. The *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (RG, Russian Gazette) is an official media of the Russian government. The *Zavtra* (Tomorrow) represents the “national-patriotic” part of

the political spectrum. The *Sovietskaya Rossiya* (Soviet Russia) is known as an unofficial media of the Communist Party, while the *Novaya Gazeta* (New Gazette) criticises the domestic and foreign policy from the liberal and pro-European perspective.

Regional media usually pay little attention to international policy, focusing only on those aspects of foreign political and economic affairs that are directly related to local problems. The study of regional discourses relies on materials from the most popular regional printed media of the Northwestern Federal District selected based on the Medialogia ranking. The incompleteness of the electronic archives of many regional newspapers has prompted the need to supplement the collected database with materials from other regional media outlets, including regional news agencies.

The quantitative assessments rely on the Comparative Mention service of the Integrum base. The frequency of mentions was calculated for the entire array of federal mass media (201 titles), the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and 19 northwest regional media. Such calculation made it possible to establish the proportion of documents mentioning the studied object in the total number of documents in Integrum for each year. Each document was counted only once, regardless of the number of mentions of the search words. The analysis of the NG and the RG articles mentioning the Northern Dimension considered the number, context and tone of references to individual countries.

The Northern Dimension as an innovative model of cooperation

The ND initiative was put forward by the Prime Minister of Finland, Paavo Lipponen, in September 1997 and was to become “an integral part of relations between Russian and other neighbours of the EU in the region.” In June 2000, the European Council adopted the first “Action Plan for the Northern Dimension with external and cross-border policies of the European Union 2000—2003” which provided for joint measures to develop infrastructure, education and science, healthcare, cross-border cooperation and trade, to promote environmental protection, to ensure nuclear safety and to fight cross-border crime. However, reaching agreement on specific projects turned out to be an impossible task for both parties. Russia was dissatisfied with the form of interaction with the EU, as the country was an object rather than a subject of EU policy, and it had only limited authority in setting a common agenda [18—21]. Practically the only significant achievement of the initial phase of the program was the establishment of the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) in 2001. It is the most prominent of its currently existing institutions.

Adopted in 2003, the second Action Plan was aimed at specifying previously announced fields of cooperation. It identified five priority sectors: economy, human capital, environment, cross-border cooperation, security and justice, as well as priority actions and two special territories for cooperation, the Arctic

and the Kaliningrad region. However, most of the Russian proposals were not accepted, so the country did not actively participate in its implementation. In 2003, The Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS) was established aiming to support cooperation and, among other things, to combat the major communicable diseases.

In 2006, Finland, supported by Russia, initiated fundamental changes in the mode of the program. ND has evolved from the EU policy in Northern Europe to the joint policy of the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland. Russia expressed its willingness to co-finance the program making the cooperation equal. In 2009 and 2010, new Partnerships were established on Transport and Logistics, and Culture (respectively).

Nevertheless, the active institution-building and best European practices did not lead to a breakthrough in cooperation within the ND framework. Several studies attribute this to the lack of unified funding and governance mechanisms. Initially, the programme's implementation was to be supported by existing financial instruments (TACIS, PHARE, INTERREG, SAPARD, ENPI, et cetera.) [22]. It mainly relied on loans from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Nordic Investment Bank, and the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation.

The second most noted problem is the duplication of cooperation institutions in Northern Europe (CBSS, BEAC, the Arctic Council, NCM). The ND originally aimed at creating "added value" within these institutions that formally were the actors of the programme. However, in reality, the ND competed with them [21] turning into a kind of "umbrella" with projects already being implemented within other institutes [23]. As a result, the authorities of the northwest border regions chose to engage more actively in the work of those cooperation institutions that had a reliable source of funding in the form of neighbourhood programs.

The third problem of the ND was the strong focus on Russia, which caused frustration among the Baltic States and Poland [21]. They lobbied for an exclusively European instrument that would mainly support the initiatives of the new EU members. Such an instrument appeared in 2009 when the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was approved. It was viewed as a long-awaited opportunity to exclude Russia from resolving "intra-European issues" in the Baltic Sea Region [24]. Besides, to the dissatisfaction of Russia and Finland, the ND was increasingly perceived by the Baltic States as an external pillar of this strategy [25].

Due to the accumulated problems, the ND seemed to be in crisis [26]. After 2014, the situation has even worsened. Although EU sanctions against Russia have relatively little impact on regional and cross-border cooperation, due to the stand of the Baltic States, the regular meetings of the Northern Dimension ministers did not resume. This has considerably narrowed the possibilities for strategic planning and development prospects as well as for receiving international institutions' funding. Negotiations with partners were difficult. There were also

problems with coordinating actions between Russian participants. The Foreign Ministry's task was to provide a conducive political environment for cooperation. However, specific projects were to be proposed and implemented by experts from the relevant departments who often displayed reluctance.

Nevertheless, the program kept working and producing concrete results. It was agreed that Russian funds allocated for the ND were to be spent on the territory of Russia. Almost all of the NDEP projects were implemented in the country. They aimed at protecting the Baltic Sea basin through the construction and reconstruction of wastewater treatment facilities and their elements in the largest cities of Northwest Russia: Syktyvkar, Murmansk, Vologda, Novgorod, Kaliningrad, and others. The largest projects were carried out in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region (South-Western Wastewater Treatment Plant, Flood Prevention Facility Complex, et cetera). Partnerships in Public Health and Social Well-Being and Culture were also quite successful. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the results of cooperation and the negative image of the ND developed by the media.

Federal discourse: national interests and European values.

The characteristics and structure of the federal media discourse on the ND largely stem from the most significant features of the policy. Since the ND is just one of the numerous manifestations of complex relations between Russia and the EU, it is mainly viewed in the general context of this relations and has a low mention rate (Fig.).

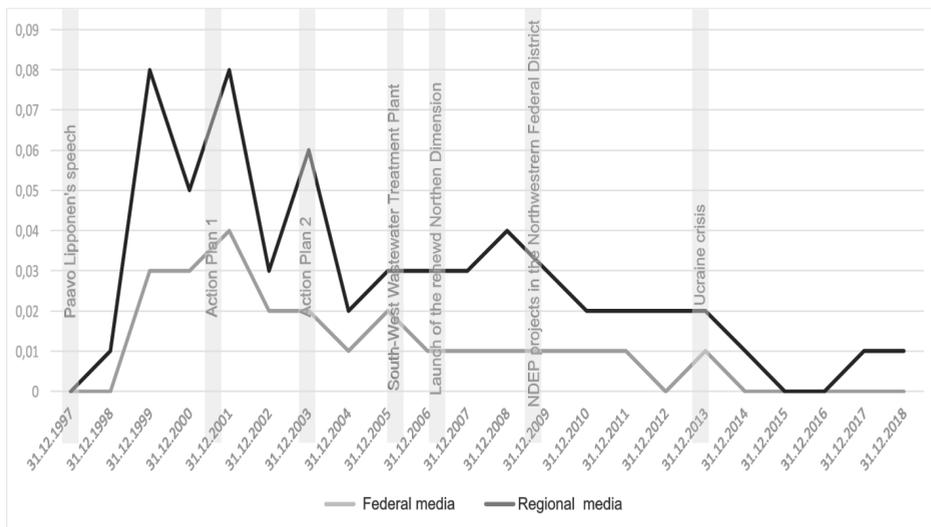


Fig. Relative mention rate of the ND policy in the federal and regional press, %

Another feature of this discourse is that it is relatively low politicised. Therefore, the traditional for Russia division of the discourse into communist, national-patriotic, liberal and official ones, in this case, is hardly relevant. Only a few articles by the Novaya Gazeta and the Sovetskaya Rossiya and none by nation-

al-patriotic the *Zavtra* mentioned the policy. These media tend to cover topics that are familiar to general readers. The project gained much more attention in the RG and the NG with 47 and 36 articles, respectively. The *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* presented information on the ND in the coverage of official functions or interviews with officials. Along with reports and interviews, the NG published expert articles, although, for the most part, the discourse coincided with the official one presented in the RG.

The changes in the mention rate of the ND in the federal press correlated with the project's major stages and events. At the first stage, 1997 through 2005, when the ND was the EU policy in Northern Europe, there were three key events: the launch of the project in 1997, the adoption of the first (2000) and second (2003) action plans. During this period, the interest to the ND was peaking.

The second stage (from 2005 to date) is associated with the launch of the "renewed" ND, which has become the joint policy of the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland in Northern Europe. At this stage, the only significant "marker" event was the signing of the Framework Document and the Political Declaration in 2006. Interest in the project was gradually declining (Fig.).

Discursive events and their changing context created two main storylines for the representation and interpretation of the ND. The main one was based on the wide interpretation of the goals and objectives of the policy initially presented as a project for full-scale EU-Russia cooperation. Within its framework, the ND was seen both as a part of the EU-Russia relations and an "innovative alternative" to them. The other storyline considered the ND as a particular mode of cooperation solving various subregional issues in Northern Europe and the bordering regions of Northwest Russia.

At the first stage, the main storyline dominated both in the official and in the media discourse. The federal media viewed the project's objectives from the perspective of its importance for Russia: the ND aimed at developing economic EU-Russia relations primarily in the fields of infrastructure, energy, and environment¹. They saw the obvious advantages of the new format in its result- and project-oriented approach allowing to consider the ND as an alternative to the established practice of geopolitics-dependant cooperation outside the discussion on Russia's compliance with "European values" and "standards" of democracy. Strengthening economic integration framework gave hope for the development of the political dimension of the ND².

The limited area of the program covering only Northern Europe and Northwest Russia was not inconsistent with the ND's interpretation as a channel for a broad dialogue with the EU. On the contrary, the emphasis was placed on the historical role of Northwest Russia. Once again it had to serve as a "window to

¹ Ten years were not in vain, 2003, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 195 (in Russ.).

² Winds of Change in Northern Europe, 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 5 (in Russ.).

Europe”³, while the country’s relations with the closest neighbours in Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States) were quite controversial⁴. The most mentioned in the ND context of the eleven northwest regions were Karelia and the Kaliningrad region (over 70 % of references to Russian territories involved in cooperation). The first region was seen as the “wicket gate to Europe” and the territory important for cooperation with Finland, the second as a potential “laboratory for cooperation” between Russia and the EU. St. Petersburg accounted for no more than 15 % of references. As a result, the ND was seen as a kind of “new Hanseatic League”. It was to play the “role of an instrument for the development of the entire Northwest”⁵ of the country, contributing to deeper integration of Russia with the European Union.

The neighbouring countries of Northern Europe also had a significant place in the structure of the ND discourse (40 % of references to foreign territories involved in cooperation). General appreciation of their role in the development of cooperation stemmed from several reasons. Firstly, it was a high standard of living and a specific social and economic structure of the countries largely perceived in Russia as an exemplary model. Secondly, they were assigned with the role of a source of innovation for Russia’s modernisation⁶. Thirdly, it was their image of a potential investor⁷ into and consumer of the goods produced in the Northwestern and Arctic regions of Russia. Finland was the most prominent figure in the discourse. It was the direct initiator of the project guiding Russia “into Europe”. The reasons behind the country’s “reliability” were successful non-political interactions in the Soviet period and its possible role of the “expert on Russia” in the EU.

However, from the outset, the program was not only highly appreciated but sharply criticised. It came under criticism for the eternal ambiguity of EU-Russia relations showing in the agenda of those years that included the bombing of Yugoslavia, support for Chechen separatism, and difficulties in maintaining the energy dialogue. Such an attitude formed the central idea of critical materials, the distrust in the declared goals and objectives of the ND. A cause for serious concern was the possibility of complete or partial loss of Russian sovereignty over certain northwest territories, as in the course of the program they could become oriented towards neighbouring EU countries. Some ND critics predicted weakening ties between the regions and the federal centre, which in the long run

³ Partnership with Finland opens us another “window to Europe”, 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no 86 (in Russ.).

⁴ Winds of Change in Northern Europe, 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 5 (in Russ.).

⁵ Baltic countries need Russia, 2003, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 157 (in Russ.).

⁶ Partnership with Finland opens us another “window to Europe”, 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 86 (in Russ.).

⁷ North Experience, 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 44 (in Russ.).

would jeopardise the country's territorial integrity⁸. Others believed it possible that there would be direct territorial claims made against Russia or that some northwest regions would see intensified separatism. For instance, the "Karelian question" became the topic of the very first article devoted to the ND in the NG⁹. Some also assumed that at first, the ND could contribute to the creation of a "fairly prosperous buffer zone" in border areas, which in the future could receive the status of "self-governing territories akin to the Åland Islands". In such a context, even a joint project with Finland on Karelian land registry was perceived as the preparation for its possible annexation¹⁰. In the case of Kaliningrad, the ND was also first mentioned when there were concerns expressed over the loss of Russian sovereignty over the territory¹¹.

Another line of criticism hinged on the lack of tangible results — at first, newspapers explained it by the divergence of interests in most of the programme's components between the key participants and by the resistance of the Baltic States and Poland preparing for EU accession. They stated that there was no progress made even on the energy issue, the most urgent for all participants. The development of oil and gas fields was held up by the lack of European investors, while some EU members did not support projects for the development of transport infrastructure (primarily the North European gas pipeline)¹².

By the beginning of 2002, in the lead-up to the adoption of the second Action Plan, the causes of the ND failures were seen not in individual technical issues but the very foundation of EU-Russia relations. Firstly, the program became increasingly dependent on political claims. Some of them verged on interference in Russia's domestic affairs. Thus, the Chechen factor was "not only leverage over Moscow in negotiations on the economic future of the Kaliningrad region, but also became an obstacle to the implementation of the ND."¹³ At the same time, it showed growing resemblance to other institutions of EU-Russia that «looked like roses but felt like thorns". Therefore, the program "was closing down, with its scope narrowing down to solving local environmental problems".¹⁴

⁸ Aberdeen is seen better, 1999, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 4 (in Russ.).

⁹ Ladoga — land of discord, 1998, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 19 (in Russ.).

¹⁰ On the scale of the Northern Dimension, 1999, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 77 (in Russ.).

¹¹ See for example: Kaliningrad integrate into the EU, 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 29 (in Russ.); Euronakat to Kaliningrad, 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 12 (in Russ.).

¹² Where will the Gazprom pipe lie? 1999, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 249 (in Russ.).

¹³ Does Denmark play with flint? 2002, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 205 (in Russ.).

¹⁴ They softly lay us, but sleep hard, 2002, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 213 (in Russ.).

Secondly, experts voiced concerns that “the initiative has produced much weaker results than expected”.¹⁵ Due to the lack of specific organisational and financial mechanisms for the implementation of the plans «there was no real progress within the framework of the ND, and this term was more of a political slogan than a guide to action».¹⁶

At the second stage, the ND was increasingly represented as one of the elements of subregional cooperation in Northern Europe, primarily in the Barents Region and in the Baltic Sea region. This trend is most noticeable in the RG with almost half of the articles of the period devoted to individual issues such as partnership’s organisation and funding as well as the implementation of the most successful projects¹⁷. The discourse was being “regionalised”. A large number of articles looked at the construction of treatment facilities in the cities of the Baltic Sea basin (St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Pskov and Vologda)¹⁸ and “nuclear” projects in the Barents Sea basin. This new representation of the program as a subregional one explains the general decrease in the number of articles focusing fully or partially on the ND. The NG saw the renewed policy as obviously successful. However, it was noted that although the transformation of the policy into a regional expression of the four Common Spaces gave the ND a new status, it did not provide for a strategic perspective or specific agenda. Uncertain objectives of the Common Spaces’ roadmaps have made them a sort of inventory of possible areas of cooperation.¹⁹

Another important issue was the “value factor” in EU-Russia relations.²⁰ «Shared values» were one of the key topics of the dialogue between Moscow and Brussels, which was not the case for the bilateral dialogues between Russia and individual EU countries. Most authors recognised that Russia’s views of citizens’ rights and liberties were the source of disappointment for Europe. The ND was one of the few cooperation institutions with no value discussions held. However,

¹⁵ Northern dimension will help us, 2003, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 27 (in Russ.).

¹⁶ Russia’s interests in the North of Europe: what are they? 2001, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 5 (in Russ.).

¹⁷ Heat comes from the North, 2011, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 123 (in Russ.); Friendship in the endless North, 2011, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 280 (in Russ.); Fresh wind from the Baltic, 2013, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 75 (in Russ.); Baltic emotions, 2013, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 122 (in Russ.).

¹⁸ See, for example: Grant into the water, 2008, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 158 (in Russ.); Step out of the vicious circle, 2014, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 74 (in Russ.); They inherited before us — we clean, 2015, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 246 (in Russ.).

¹⁹ Without strategic vision, 2006, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 270 (in Russ.).

²⁰ The media has paid little attention to specific “Nordic values”, unlike the scientific community that has been discussing the issue extensively (for details, see [27])

this does not mean that the question of values did not affect it. As a result, neither the status of the ND nor the equality of its participants allowed for discussing any significant issues bypassing the issue of values²¹.

Due to the “discussion on values”, negative connotations in the discourse affected a much wider range of countries than in the previous period. Sweden and Lithuania were considered primarily as the initiators of the Eastern Partnership project, which was regarded as hostile to Russia²². It was Sweden that most often raised the issue of Russia’s compliance with “European values”. The attitude to Norway was also mostly negative as in the discourse it has turned from a “stronghold of northern values” into a “stronghold of the United States in the Arctic”.²³

At the same time, attitude to Finland remained positive as it was seen as a partner seeking to maintain pragmatic cooperation with Russia even in the context of geopolitical turbulence. The RG authors believed that it was Finland that having put its negative past with the USSR behind it could manage to persuade European countries that depoliticised cooperation with Russia was beneficial.²⁴

Viewing the ND in the general context of Russia’s relations with the EU, Finland and other individual European countries made the major difference between federal and regional discourse.

Regional discourse on the Northern Dimension

The northwest regional media paid much attention to the ND, unlike the other foreign affairs matters. Naturally, the number of articles on the ND in regional media was 2–4 times higher than that in the federal ones (see Fig.). Northwest was a platform for cooperation; both regional authorities and non-profit organisations here were the ND actors and major lobbyists for cross-border cooperation development. Most regional media saw international financial support for acute local problems to be the major motive for it. They also saw Russia and its regions as aid recipients rather than full participants in cooperation. Such an attitude did not involve the strategic vision of the ND or understanding of the role of the region in subregional cooperation.

The early 2000-s saw the change in attitude to the ND. Media of Karelia (the Karelia-Petrozavodsk), Saint-Petersburg and the Leningrad region (the Delovoy Peterburg (Business Petersburg), the Kaliningrad region (the Kaliningradskoe nezavisimoe informatsionnoe agentstvo (Kaliningrad independent information

²¹ Russia is trying to keep in the “value” field, 2008, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 77 (in Russ.).

²² See, for example: Buffet menu, 2009, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 129 (in Russ.); Swedish season in the EU, 2009, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 132 (in Russ.).

²³ See for example: North discord 2011, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent Gazette], no. 215 (in Russ.).

²⁴ See for example: Forest, shipyards and technology parks 2009, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [Russian Gazette], no. 99 (in Russ.).

agency) and the AIF v Kaliningrade (AIF in Kaliningrad)) discussed the goals and objectives of the project following the views of local authorities. Saint-Petersburg media traditionally considered the city to be the “window to Europe”, and welcomed the regional authorities’ idea of it being the Russian “capital of the Northern Dimension”.²⁵ Kaliningrad media fitted the ND’s goals and objectives into the framework of the idea of creating “the laboratory for Russia-EU cooperation”.

Karelian media promoted similar ideas. Following V. Shliamin, the local minister of economic affairs, they discussed the need for regional cross-border cooperation. As neighbouring Finland was the initiator for the ND, Karelia hoped for special treatment and for turning the practice of cooperation with it into a model for other Russian border regions and the EU. The transport infrastructure development proposed in the first action plan raised hopes for the expansion of the transit potential of the republic, as well as for integrating new mineral deposits into the economy. Finally, according to local experts, by becoming a part of the emerging “belt of good neighbourliness”, Karelia could benefit from joint spatial planning without renouncing the changes in the existing state border regime²⁶.

However, not all local experts shared this position dominating the regional discourse. Following the federal media, some local articles voiced concerns for Finland’s possible territorial claims²⁷, while others expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of practical focus of the program²⁸ and the inequality of partners²⁹.

Since 2005 there have been no analytical publications on the ND in the regional media. The program was mentioned in the local context in articles on regional environmental issues or the reconstruction of urban water supplies. The main focus was on cross-border cooperation programs, which, unlike the ND, received reliable financing tools and comprised of multiple projects with specific outputs.

²⁵ The ND initiative has been the subject of much debate in St. Petersburg’s academic community, which, however, had no apparent effect on discourse in the media in question (for details, see [27–29]).

²⁶ See for example: Shlyamin, V. 1999, Window to Europe through Karelia, *Petrozavodsk*, no. 39 (in Russ.); Shlyamin, V. 1998, To the concept of social economic development of the Republic of Karelia for 1998–2001, *Petrozavodsk*, no. 48 (in Russ.); Gnetnev, K.V. 2001, Spatial thinking. Cross-Border Cooperation: A Political Aspect, *Petrozavodsk*, no. 11 (in Russ.).

²⁷ Farutin, A. 2003, What bitter experience teaches us... *Petrozavodsk*, no. 4 (in Russ.); Farutin, A. 2003, The borders are unbreakable. The Karelian question haunts, *Petrozavodsk*, no. 10 (in Russ.); Backman, J. 2003, Reasons for creating a “buffer zone”, *Petrozavodsk*, no. 79 (in Russ.); Farutin, A. 2003, Partnership experience in three degrees. What will we share with the Finns — the “common pie” of resources or the skin of an unkilld bear? *Petrozavodsk*, no. 11 (in Russ.).

²⁸ Mosunov, A. 1999, Euroregion “Karelia”: questions remain, *Petrozavodsk*, no. 69 (in Russ.).

²⁹ Matchmakers for the Northwest, 2001, *Petrozavodsk*, no. 67 (in Russ.).

Conclusion

Many works on critical geopolitics note the influence of discourse on political decisions. The cross-border regions created “from above” in Northwest Europe with the participation of Russia proved to be resistant to geopolitical crises and have existed for almost 30 years. Various international programs have resulted in the formation of partnership networks with mutually beneficial cooperation established between them. Thus, the cross-border regions that have arisen as a result of political decisions are gradually becoming “functional”. At the same time, the experience of the ND shows that the boundaries of such regions are mobile, vague and depend on the general political climate and the interest of member countries in the activities of a regional organisation.

Determining the influence of the discourse on political decisions on the ND program in its early years was not easy due to its multidimensional nature. It was not always clear which or whose discourse was dominating. To date, the ND has almost completely disappeared from the federal media more interested in much larger issues: the “eastward shift”, relations between Russia and the EU, Russia and the West in general.

The ND discourse reflects the complex functional and institutional nature of the program. It has always been part of a complex set of relations between Russia and the EU. For this reason, the ND and the EU relations’ discourses have much in common, including their evolution from “romanticism” to pragmatism, from association to sectoral cooperation, from the motives of Europeanization to sovereignty and “turning to the East».

At the same time, throughout its existence, the ND was an “alternative channel of communication” between Russia and the EU which had to lead to a breakthrough in relations and provided the basis for full-scale cooperation. Due to such a perception, the expectations of the ND soared, leading to disappointment with its mediocre results. This discrepancy between the expectations formed by the discourse and the results of cooperation can be a reason behind the common belief that the project is in crisis.

However, if there is a crisis of format, its nature is also discursive in many respects. Since 2006, the ND has officially become the regional expression of the four Common Spaces. Such an approach could at least partially explain the difference between interaction within the framework of the ND partnerships and cooperation in four regional councils, as well as the basis for uniting partnerships. Nowadays, national institutions framing the ND policy by setting guidelines for other levels are concerned with general issues of EU-Russia relations, security, energy, et cetera. However, it is the contacts at regional and local levels, as well as between individual participants in cooperation, that play a key role in strengthening trust between the parties, trust that is based on rational choice, common socio-cultural background and personal relations [27]. Trust, in turn, is essential for sustainable cooperation.

The crisis in the-Russia relations has not only buried the idea of four Common Spaces, but it has also frozen cooperation in the highest governing bodies of the ND. As a result, national and supranational actors suffer from strategic uncertainty, and the program turns into a set of weakly connected institutions.

This is not to say that the ND has no future. However, it depends on the general prospects of EU-Russia relations. The program is valuable now as together with other regional cooperation programs it creates a “safety net”, which, on the one hand, does not allow interstate relations to fall below a critical level, and on the other hand, serves as a platform for informal dialogue maintaining a positive interaction potential, a pillar for future political rapprochement.

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