

Russia's Arctic Population Falling

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

The civilian population in Russia's Arctic regions has been declining. A recent article in the *Independent Barents Observer*, an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English, now blocked in Russia, reports that small outlying towns in the Kola Peninsula municipalities apparently experienced losses with civilian migration to the cities. According to five-year-old figures published by Rosstat, five of the six largest Russian cities north of the Arctic Circle are: Arkhangelsk (350,000), Murmansk (304,000), Norilsk (175,000), Vorotka (71,000), and Salekhard (42,000). For comparison, Tromsø,

Norway had 62,000 inhabitants at the time the data was collected. Of the Russian cities mentioned, Arkhangelsk and Murmansk contain significant military infrastructure. The article also suggests that COVID-19 has evidently been one factor in the drop in civilian population in Russian towns in the Arctic. Despite this, the intentions and trends for expanding mineral and energy extraction along the Northern Sea Route and military buildup suggest that the population decrease may be reversed in the coming years.

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Source: Atle Staalesen, “Russian North sees sharp decline in population. Only military towns grow”, *The Independent Barents Observer* (an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English now blocked in Russia), 3 May 2021.
<https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/05/russian-north-sees-sharp-decline-population-only-military-towns-grow>

Over the past decade, the forces that protect the Kola Peninsula and the wide-stretched Russian Arctic coast have become a top priority of country's armed forces, and big investments are being made in regional towns, bases and military infrastructure. That is reflected in the demographic situation in the Kola Peninsula. New data from the Russian statistics service Rosstat shows that the military towns are the clear population winners in the region.

While the total population of the Murmansk region during 2020 dropped by more than 1.1 percent from 741,511 on 1st of January 2020 to 732,864 a year later, the military towns experienced solid growth. The demographic increase was biggest in Severomorsk, the headquarters city of the Northern Fleet. In the course of the year, the local population increased by more than 1,250 people. A total of 65,080 people now live in the closed military municipality of Severomorsk, ...

The towns of Snezhnegorsk and Pechenga had increasing populations. Other military towns like Gadzhievo and Polyarny ... had a minor drop in the number of people. The situation follows a trend evident over several years, including in 2018 and 2016.

Meanwhile, practically all other parts of the Kola Peninsula in 2020 experienced a significant demographic shrink. The city of Murmansk in 2020 dropped from about 288 thousand to less than 283 thousand.

The larger municipality of Pechenga, located along the borders with Finland and Norway ... dropped by 800 people to a total of 36,090. That includes the town of Nikel that in 2020 was abandoned by mining and metallurgy company Nornickel. The population of Nikel shrunk by more than 260 people to a total of 10,763.

The Russian North has experienced a drop in population over many years. And the extraordinary strong decline in 2020 can partly be explained by the coronavirus. Officially, the virus killed about 75,200 Russians across the country in 2020. But population figures from Rosstat indicate that the number of deaths might actually have been far higher. According to Russian national data, the country's population on the 1st of January 2021 totaled 146,238 million on 1 January 2021. That is a decline of more than 510,000 people from 1 January 2020.