

Tilting at Windmills?

A Study of Polarizing Dynamics and Malign Influence in the Energy-Debate in Local Elections in Norway



About UTSYN

UTSYN – Centre for Security and Resilience was established in 2018 as an interdisciplinary response to an insufficient and polarized public discourse on security, defense, and foreign affairs in Norway and beyond. The center is engaged in partnerships across sectors, regions and geographical divides, between local and central governments, private and public sector, and military and civilian environments. UTSYN is a knowledge producer with a specific focus on hybrid threats and its implications in local and vulnerable communities in the Nordic context and beyond. UTSYN is a non-partisan and politically independent organization. Our approach is comprehensive and spans across different ideological stances. UTSYN engages an expert network of 45 well-regarded Norwegian and international non-residential fellows covering diverse topics like hybrid warfare, Nordic security, religion, and conflict, as well as experts with area expertise in a range of key geographical contexts (Russia, Central Asia, Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, Nordic countries).

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Table of contents

Summary	1
<i>Terminology</i>	2
<i>The Nordic and the Arctic (preliminary map)</i>	3
<i>1. Introduction</i>	4
<i>2. The Study</i>	5
2.1 The Windmill Debate.....	6
2.2 Analytical Concepts and Research Questions.....	7
2.3 Data Samples and Methodology	8
<i>3. The State of Research on Russian Influence Operations in Norway</i>	10
3.1 Russian Influence Operations in the Nordic Countries.....	11
3.2 Friend or Foe? Norway's Relationship to Russia	13
<i>4. Key Findings</i>	15
4.1 Wind-Power Debate: A Heated, Polarizing Topic.....	16
4.2 Limited Traces of Mis/Disinformation	17
4.3 Broader Narratives in Arguments Against Wind-Power	19
4.4 Antagonism towards “Oslo”	21
4.5 Protection of Sámi Culture and Livelihood	22
<i>5. Analysis</i>	23
5.1 Vulnerabilities: Exacerbating Division Lines and Eroding Institutional Trust.....	23
5.2 Mechanisms for Resilience: Local Ownership and Transparency.....	24
5.3 Local Polarizing Dynamics.....	25
5.4 Absence of Russia.....	27
<i>6. Concluding Remarks</i>	28
<i>7. References</i>	30
<i>8. Appendix</i>	35
8.1 Monitoring Facebook groups. Selection criteria	35
8.2 Conversation guide	36
<i>Appendix 2 (see attachment)</i>	38
<i>Appendix 3 (see attachment)</i>	38

Summary

The study examines political polarization and potential malign influence in the wind power debate during Norway's local elections in September 2023. It explores the extent of polarization, the presence of misinformation or disinformation, and the vulnerabilities or resilience mechanisms within these debates.

The wind power debate emerged as one of the top three most commented topics on social media, characterized by highly polarized and predominantly negative comments. Despite the heated nature of the debate, the study found no clear signs of external malign interference. Instances of misinformation were identified, primarily involving exaggerated claims about the negative effects of wind power.

The arguments against wind power often reflected a broader distrust in the political leadership, perceived exploitation by distant forces, and accusations of co-opted democratic actors. These narratives align with themes promoted by the Kremlin, indicating a potential vulnerability to external influence. However, the study found that the complex mix of arguments and the crossing of traditional political lines in the wind power debate limit the potential for significant polarization along conventional partisan divides, making it a less likely target for successful external manipulation.

One of the most symbolically salient issues in Norway's wind power conflicts revolves around the rights of the indigenous Sámi people. The Supreme Court's Fosen judgment, viewed as a victory by Sámi activists, has intensified this conflict, highlighting the tension between indigenous rights and green energy development. The study also found that Russia has paid attention to this conflict, frequently referencing Norway's treatment of the Sámi to support its narrative on Western double standards, underscoring the geopolitical potential of this issue.

In conclusion, the study suggests that in spite of the symbolic and strategic significance of the energy debate, various contextual features of the windmill debate may offer a certain level of resilience, limiting the effect that influence operations by external actors may yield.

Terminology

Disinformation refers to false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

Misinformation denotes incorrect or misleading information presented as fact, but not deliberately deceptive (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

Hybrid threats refers to a state or non-state actor use of manipulative, unwanted interference to their own advantage, through a variety of tools: spread of disinformation/misinformation, creation of strong (but incorrect or only partially correct) historical narratives, election interference, cyber-attacks, economic leverage and other means to exploit the vulnerabilities in society (Cullen *et al.*, 2021).

Influence operations refer to deployment of resources for cognitive ends that foster or change a targeted audience's behavior without coercion (Hollis, 2018).

Witting/unwitting proliferator refers to an actor who is aware or unaware that the content being spread is misleading or incorrect (U.S. State Department, Global Engagement Center, 2020).

Malign actor refers to actors who engage in influence operations or the spread of disinformation.

Polarization refers to processes where groups in society become adversaries, and where there is a sharp psychological division between "us and them" (RAN, 2016).

Resilience refers to the societal dimension of resilience i.e as a society with strong social bonds, social institutions, and societal trust.¹

Social cohesion refers here to the level of connectedness and solidarity among groups within a society. It encompasses two main dimensions: the sense of belonging within a community and the relationships among its members (Kalenkoski and Hamrick, 2014).

Vulnerability refers to «the conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards» (UNDRR, n.d.).

¹ <https://www.nato.int/structur/pdd/2022/220411-ResilienceContentGuidelines.pdf> Worth noting in this context is the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE)' model for analyzing resilience: The comprehensive resilience ecosystem CORE: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CORE_comprehensive_resilience_ecosystem.pdf

The Nordic and the Arctic (preliminary map)



1. Introduction

European countries are bracing for a new reality defined by a dramatic increase in the amount and sophistication of hybrid measures targeting their populations. A key tool among hybrid measures is the use of influence operations to alter attitudes and behavior (Major and Mölling, 2015; Lanoszka, 2016). Influence operations may take many forms and are carried out by a range of diverse actors—both foreign and domestic, state and non-state. They exploit existing vulnerabilities, disrupt societal order, and foster distrust between people and their governments (Filipec, 2020). Influence operations affect how narratives are shaped, undermine information spaces or distort public discourse, representing a considerable threat to democratic societies. The concept of cognitive warfare originated during the Cold War era when it evolved as a strategic alternative to open conflict between superpowers (Morelle *et al.*, 2023). Proxy conflicts, discreetly supported by intelligence agencies became instrumental in shaping global dynamics. Since the 2000s, there has been a notable uptick in destabilization efforts, notably by Russia, through tactics such as election interference, propaganda dissemination, and cyberattacks (Lanoszka, 2016). With the extensive use of digital media, social media, and messaging apps, NATO has recognized the need to map and counter threats from cognitive warfare in the digital domain (Miklaucic, 2011). As member states, the US and Norway thus share responsibilities and interests in shaping the environment and confronting the threat of cognitive warfare.

This study investigates the exposure of Norwegian local democracy to cognitive measures. It looks at the consequences of polarization for democratic and political culture, examining to what extent polarization increases cognitive vulnerability to foreign influence in the Norwegian context. We inquire whether polarized discourses are marked by misinformation or disinformation and examine to what degree polarization is promoted in ways that undermine trust in local and national authorities. Our aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the contexts in which malign influence may occur in a liberal, deeply rooted democracy like Norway, and add nuanced insights into democratic vulnerabilities and resilience to influence operations.

Local elections were held in Norway in the fall of 2023 amidst increasing international instability impacting defense and energy policies, with considerable budgetary effects. The context was one in which international developments directly impacted topics being debated at the local level, notably questions related to current or future renewable energy projects in local communities.

The run-up to the elections took place during a period when a range of factors are converging to increase Norway's exposure to both external interference and internal polarization. In contrast to previous global disruptive events such as the global financial crisis in 2008 or the Covid 19 pandemic, the government chose to restrict the use of oil revenues to ease the implications of international developments at the national or local level. Inflationary pressure

has thus tightened public budgets, obliging stricter resource discipline. Simultaneously, the deteriorating security situation in Europe coincides with a period in which Norway is facing significant and costly economic transformation, heavily reliant on decisive political action and broad popular support. The economy is transitioning from black to green, demographic decline challenges settlement patterns, the wave of aging population has arrived, and the digital transformation is having major societal implications for both government and society at large. Following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the concerted Western sanctions against Moscow, Norway - given her extensive coastline and substantial oil and gas reserves - has emerged as the EU's principal energy supplier. This prominence is exposing Norway to a range of hybrid threats, possibly also within the information domain.

Increased exposure coincides with intensified domestic debates on the further exploitation of the nation's vast energy resources, rendering Norway vulnerable to malign foreign influences. Foremost among the heated debates on renewable energy, we find the question of establishment of windmill parks. Wind power development in Norway has faced considerable resistance, despite the need for renewable electricity, as municipalities once considered ideal for these projects have increasingly turned them down due to strong popular opposition. Local resistance is rooted in a variety of considerations, such as lack of local ownership and decision-making power, concerns about preservation of natural landscapes or fears of reduced revenues from tourism, influencing the potentials for local livelihood. Against the backdrop of external dynamics increasing pressure on energy-supply, the highly contentious issue of windmill parks became a central issue in regional politics and a significant topic in the 2023 municipal elections. The election period of 2023 therefore was a suitable opportunity for a study of the polarizing dynamics of local energy debates and their vulnerabilities and exposure to foreign malign influence.

The report starts by presenting the case study, its topic and design (chapter 2), and then situates the study in the nascent literature on digital influence operations (chapter 3). Findings from the digital data and interviews are presented (chapter 4), before the findings are analyzed (chapter 5). The report ends with some concluding observations.

2. The Study

This study examines the participatory democratic debates in social media platforms in three different municipalities in Norway in the run up to, and the aftermath of, the local elections in the fall of 2023. A large portion of political debates in Norway take place on social media platforms, i.e. in media spaces outside editorial oversight. Surveys underscore that a vast majority of Norwegians (88%) are users of social media, and that political debates on specific topics are conducted and shaped mostly on social media platforms such as Facebook and X².

² <https://www.ssb.no/teknologi-og-innovasjon/informasjons-og-kommunikasjonsteknologi-ikt/statistikk/bruk-av-ikt-i-husholdningene/artikler/ni-av-ti-nordmenn-bruker-sosiale-medier>

Social media is therefore considered to be an appropriate platform to examine a certain segment of the political debate the context of Norwegian elections.

Social media platforms are sources of knowledge, engagement, and public debate, but they are also tools for external and internal malign influence. Research underscores that this type of external or internal influence often occurs slowly and with low intensity over time. Rather than influencing people's opinions on current news topics, such influence affects the overall atmosphere, how individuals and groups interpret events and news, and it affects the level of trust between people and authorities (Bergh, 2020). Unlimited access and the anonymity offered by the digital sphere expose social media platforms to negative influences of various kinds, both internal and external. This study set out to examine selected platforms in search of malign influences.

2.1 The Windmill Debate

The municipalities selected for this study are located in three different regions (south, middle and north), but share the feature that they are all affected by controversial windmill projects. The study includes a special focus on the municipalities in the north due to the northern region's strategic importance to NATO as well as Russia, and because political decisions on energy in this part of Norway have implications on multiple levels compared to the south. Additionally, the issue of development of renewable energy in the north has sparked protests from Sámi activists, who are fighting to protect their rights and traditional lands, making it a national issue with international repercussions. The debate in the north has therefore prompted external reactions, including responses from Russia commenting on conflicts between the state of Norway and the Sámi population on several occasions.

Norwegian onshore and offshore wind power is a subject of intense debate, rich with symbolic significance and a topic of local, national, and international importance. Wind power has emerged as a deeply contested issue within debates on climate change and resource management, as it embodies narratives of both national history and identity linked to energy. The debates intersect with issues such as exploitation and redistribution of wealth from natural energy resources, national self-determination, collective ownership of energy resources, green transition, and the welfare state's fundamental questions of burden sharing (Karam and Shokrgozar, 2023). Thus, the wind power debate strongly resonates with the historical and recurrent political divide between the center and periphery in Norway. The surge in windmill projects in Norway from 2013 also coincides with a new security situation surrounding Russia in Europe. In pair with the deteriorating relations with Russia, arguments relating to energy security and geopolitical importance have been added to the debate.

Opposition to wind power is a well-established grievance in the Norwegian context, having shaped local debates for many years (Inderberg, Theisen and Flâm, 2020). The topic was one of the most polarizing issues in the municipal elections of 2019, and quantitative data reviews

suggest that it remains among the most highly polarized topics in both national and local political debates. A long-standing, divisive discourse has allowed descriptions and arguments to solidify among various opinion segments. Stakeholders in the industry and political actors who support wind power commonly allege that some of their opponents continue to spread misinformation about exaggerated negative effects of wind power. Consequently, the debate on wind power is rife with elements of misinformation and/or exposed to external influence.

As Norway integrates its energy market with the European continent, the expansion of windmills faces considerable popular resistance (Eikeland *et al.*, 2023). Wind power is viewed as less profitable compared to other energy sources in Norway, and it raises significant concerns about impact for the natural environment, an issue of great national pride and concern. Wind power also goes to the core of indigenous rights of the Sámi population, the indigenous population dwelling mostly in the North, pasturing in numerous areas slated for wind power (Korsnes *et al.*, 2023). Finally, the wind power debate fuels tension between the centre and the periphery, a historical division line in Norway, echoing the nation's long history of local self-governance (Inderberg, Theisen and Flåm, 2020). All of these contestations are mirrored in the growing fissure within the climate movement on the topic of windmills; while wind energy is generally seen as a key part of the solution to climate change, activists and political actors protest against its impact on nature, landscapes, wildlife, the Sámi population and local communities. Consequently, the Norwegian wind power debate encompasses a technical field overseen by experts and a politically salient and emotionally charged issue with deep cultural reverberations. Moreover, Norway's strategic role in Europe's infrastructure of energy sufficiency and energy security increases the stakes in this debate beyond the local and national setting, making it potentially noteworthy for international players such as the Kremlin (Godzimirski, 2023). Norwegian energy is a policy-issue where Russia has strategic stakes, and where it is plausible to expect that Russia may have interests in thwarting or delaying progress. The topic selected for case study therefore represents an area where it is plausible that external actors may have an interest in exerting influence, increasing the risk of malign involvement.

2.2 Analytical Concepts and Research Questions

Norway is ranked at the top of democratic countries in the world, with an overall score of 9.81. In the areas of *electoral process and pluralism*, *political participation* and *political culture*, Norway is listed with 10.00 out of 10 (EIU *Democracy Index 2023*). In the Norwegian context, open and inclusive debate is considered a prerequisite for a functioning democracy and an essential safeguard against misinformation and other internal or external disruptions. Increasing uncertainty nevertheless surrounds the potential prevalence and impact of disinformation and malign influence in these open debates (PST, 2024).

Governments, security organizations and scholars have recognized the relevance of societal resilience to national security and crisis management. An emerging risk to security are hybrid threats, in which various tools are employed to achieve ambiguous strategic goals. These

threats can be both military and non-military, and range from cyber attacks, damage to critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns, political radicalization, to the manipulation of migration (Jungwirth *et al.*, 2023). State or non-state actors use hybrid threat activities to undermine public trust in democratic institutions and exacerbate distrust and hatred between specific societal groups. This may lead to increased political polarization, thus challenging the core values of democracy, and ultimately impairing or thwarting political decision-making processes. Disinformation campaigns are most effective when they exploit existing social divisions or vulnerabilities. Malign influence strategies thus direct their efforts toward vulnerable communities, such as for instance marginalized peripheries marked by economic decline and a pervasive sense of a slipping future. Social cohesion and resilience are thus key components to counter hybrid threats and relies heavily upon mutual trust between authorities and people.

Resilience, social cohesion, polarization and vulnerability constitute thus key analytical concepts for identifying and framing research question and hypotheses in this study.

The study evolves around the following research questions:

How strong is the level of polarization in the windmill debate, and what are the main characteristics of this polarization? Which groups are associated with the various narratives shared on social media?

Can malign influences be identified in these debates? Are there specific vulnerabilities or mechanisms of resilience to malign influence in the debates?

The following working hypotheses form the basis for the study:

- Windmill discourses deepen existing cleavages and increase polarization between the center and periphery in Norway, leaving local communities more vulnerable to malign external influence.
- Polarized discourses on windmills are exploited by malign actors to weaken institutional trust and social cohesion in Norwegian communities.

2.3 Data Samples and Methodology

During a six months period in the run-up to the local elections in Norway, data from online electoral discussions across various local media outlets and social media platforms were collected and analyzed based on a mixed methods approach.

Eight different municipalities located in three different counties were selected for deeper monitoring of the discourses on windmill parks. The municipalities were selected based on two

criteria. Firstly, the municipality had an ongoing debate regarding wind power. To identify municipalities researchers screened local and national news outlets as well as protest groups on social media. Secondly, the municipalities needed to be significantly impacted by wind power projects at different stages of development. Additionally, the research includes municipalities in the northern county of Finnmark due to its location close to the Russian border as well as to the dimension of extensive rights and interests for the indigenous population, the Sámi population.

The following municipalities were selected:

- Northern county of Finnmark: Gamvik, Lebesby, Tana and Porsanger municipalities
- Mid-country county of Nordland: Nesna and Rana municipalities
- Southern county of Agder: Mandal and Lindesnes municipalities

At the outset, a survey and a big data review of current discourses on national and local wind power in the selected municipalities were carried out. The survey identified the most prevalent narratives, examined to what extent they overlapped with or differed from the most prominent narratives in local political discourse and compared the importance of wind power between the municipalities.

Additionally, aggregate social media data from these municipalities was collected. By leveraging big data analysis and GPT-4 technology, researchers were able to track trends in online discourse. These data collections serve as basis for the broader investigations relying on quantitative and qualitative methods.

The quantitative part of the study gathered online data through Facebook's official API, excluding private profiles and groups. The search targeted a subset of public Facebook pages from May 1st to October 1st, 2023, using keyword search lists for four specific topics. Searches were conducted on 17 media pages with a total of 14,020 posts and 91 political party pages with 5,218 posts. For comparison, parallel searches were conducted on three other emotionally charged topics in a Norwegian setting: Pride, nuclear power, and child welfare services.

The collected comments on wind power were classified by GPT-4 into four categories depending on their attitude towards wind power: irrelevant, positive, neutral, and negative. In order to ensure accuracy, a human reviewer validated 15% of the dataset. The final F-score for wind power classification was 68.4%.

A qualitative analysis of the data used an ideal-type analysis framework for social media data and relied on by Norway's independent fact checker, Faktisk.no, for labelling misinformation. The narratives within the wind power debate were compared to a review of Russian narratives from official and media sources throughout 2023. These Russian narratives are heavily influenced by the war in Ukraine, where energy concerns play a crucial role in the political stakes and are closely tied to Russia's pro-active information strategy.

A separate qualitative mapping of windmill protest groups was conducted between May 1st and October 1st, 2023. Researchers did a manual collection of qualitative data from public Facebook groups focusing on Norwegian energy and wind power discussions. The groups varied in focus, size, location, and demography. Three Facebook groups were national protest groups ranging from 100.000 to 600.000 members, with an explicit or implicit focus on Norwegian energy production. The other three groups were local with geographical links to the selected municipalities ranging from 2000 to 5000 members. The groups share an explicit resistance to wind power projects in their respective local regions. The researchers sampled posts that included a link to an article and the narratives expressed by members of the group in the comments section and in the posts themselves. The inclusion criteria for posts in the sample were defined as follows: a) That it is related to wind energy – land- or sea-based; b) A relatively large number of likes, comments or shares as compared to other posts in the group. Only including the posts that gain a relatively large amount of traction, and c) Posts that contain an article from a news source or a website.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the local elections were held, during a period of three months, from February to April 2024. A total of 32 one-on-one conversations were carried out with promoters and protesters from the selected municipalities. A majority of informants hail from Finnmark. One-third of the interviews were made with wind power supporters and two-third with opponents. Informants were selected based on their engagement with the issue, either in the capacity of being active participants on Facebook, political representatives in local municipal councils, municipal administrators or well-known activists. Two informants were employed by wind power plant companies. The selection of informants was made from relevant Facebook sites, local newspapers and media platforms, or based on suggestions from people with in-depth knowledge of the respective areas. As the Sámi issue has become an especially salient part of the conflicts surrounding wind power in Norway, interviews were conducted with Sámi protesters in Lebesby, Tana, and Hammerfest municipality.

Analysis of the digital data served to establish a preliminary baseline understanding of the material, which was subsequently adjusted or confirmed by qualitative review and interviews.

3. The State of Research on Russian Influence Operations in Norway

Influence operations have become an increasingly important field of study for security and defense communities around the world. Attempts to influence foreign audiences is a common tool of politics, in war and peace alike. Genghis Khan resorted to disinformation campaigns already in the 12th century (Gergő Vér, 2011). During the Cold War, influence operations and related measures were rife and received substantial attention by governments, researchers and intelligence services (Kux, 1985; Osgood, 2002). However, academic research in the field was limited, complicated by the classified nature of such activity and the opaque actors involved

(Osgood, 2002). Yet, the digital revolution has turbocharged the information domain, extending the potential scope, reach and effects of influence operations. The overall civilian nature of the digital realm leaves management of the domain mostly to civilian actors, forcing intelligence services to adopt novel approaches. Moreover, the digital infrastructure, largely developed and operated by global commercial giants beyond the regulatory control of states, complicates the task of oversight. Following the information campaigns associated with the US presidential election in 2016, the general public has become increasingly aware of the potent effects of influence operations in a digitalized world (Bateman *et al.*, 2021; Wanless, 2021).

Despite the growing importance of the field and increased academic attention dedicated to influence operations, knowledge is fragmented and uncertain concerning the potential effects these increasingly well-documented measures might cause among the targeted population. Most studies thus far have focused on the “sender” seeking to influence the “receiver” through multiple means (Bateman *et al.*, 2021). The result is a fair amount of case studies documenting instances of influence operations in various contexts. However, empirical research on the corresponding effects of influence operations is rare. Studies dedicated to the causal correlations between influence operations and changes in the targeted populations are even rarer. In fact, our understanding is rather poor of the workings of the wider information environment and how influence operations function in these systems (Wanless, 2021). As the tendency by states to resort to operations in the grey zone to achieve international objectives seems to be on the rise, there is an urgent need to increase our understanding of how influence operations affect and potentially change public debate and opinions in democracies.

This study therefore aims to add insights to the field by mapping a specific polarized political debate in a context of increased risk to malign interference, with the objective to discover whether or not there are traces of influence operations and assess how such influence operations could affect the debate.

3.1 Russian Influence Operations in the Nordic Countries

Russia has been pointed to as the largest threat against Norway by national intelligence services. Russia is also seen as the foreign state actor most likely to conduct influence operations against Norway (Etterretningstjenesten, 2024; PST, 2024). It is well-documented that non-military means such as information operations are at the core of Russian military thinking (Eggen, 2024a). The Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valerij Gerasimov wrote about cognitive warfare in an article published in 2013 (The Gerasimov doctrine). Gerasimov describes information as “another type of armed forces”.

Only a handful of studies look exclusively at the Norwegian context. One study from 2022 found that certain Norwegian academics, public intellectuals or social media profiles aligned themselves with Russian narratives on the annexation of Crimea (Myhre, Aasland and Holm-Hansen, 2022). Notwithstanding, the study did not conclude that the alignment was due to Russian influence operations, but rather that the profiles, for multiple reasons, found it

beneficial to take a stance similar to that of Russia (*ibid*). Additionally, The Norwegian Defense Research Establishment has published two reports investigating foreign influence on the Norwegian parliamentary elections in 2021 and 2023. The reports focus on influence operations in social media relying exclusively on quantitative methods. Both reports concluded that no significant indications of foreign influence operations could be identified (Grendahl Sivertsen *et al.*, 2022, 2023).

Most studies on Russian influence operations in the Norwegian context are conducted in a comparative framework, juxtaposing Norway with one or more of the Nordic countries. They mostly consist of literature reviews with general examples or quantitative studies of social media interference. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland are in many ways well suited for comparative studies. They all share a similar level of democracy, well-funded welfare states, large emphasis on free speech and shared values (Bergman and Strøm, 2011; Koivunen, Ojala and Holmén, 2021), facilitating comparative analysis for scholars focusing on societal and democratic currents in the various Nordic countries.

Scholars have examined the general Russian information confrontation strategy in the Nordic region (Eggen, 2024a, 2024b), the narratives spread by the Russian state-controlled media outlet Sputnik to the Nordic countries (Deverell, Wagnsson and Olsson, 2021), and Russia's information strategy in the Arctic (Østhagen, 2023; Wall and Wegge, 2023; Gjörv, 2024). One study investigated narratives by the Russian publication Sputnik about the four Nordic countries. The study found that each country had distinct overall narratives and sub-narratives proper to it, tailored to Russian interests concerning that country (Deverell, Wagnsson and Olsson, 2021). Sweden and Denmark were presented most negatively as examples of the decline of the liberal state and how the EU weakens its members. Finland and Norway on the contrary were presented more positively. In the Finnish context, Sputnik published stories on how Finland's future depended on close contact with Russia. With respect to Norway, the question asked revolved around Norway as friend or foe. Actions by the Norwegian government perceived to be anti-Russian were compared to the friendly attitudes of segments of the Norwegian population and Norwegian policy (Deverell, Wagnsson and Olsson, 2021). This correlates with multiple other scholars who have suggested that Russia resorts to diverging means and methods in an effort to influence different audiences (Karlsen, 2019; Wagnsson and Barzanje, 2021; Hoyle *et al.*, 2023; Eggen, 2024a).

These findings underscore that Russia's bilateral relationship to the different Nordic countries is not uniform. They also illustrate the weakness in existing research, which most crucially concerns the difference in the historic and contemporary relationship by each Nordic country with Russia (Deverell, Wagnsson and Olsson, 2021), and the need for case-specific studies in order to understand how different countries are targeted. Another weakness noted in the research literature on Norway is the tendency to merely reproduce notorious examples of Russian influence attempts in Norway, particularly in the High North. The cases presented are

often based on incidents or situations reported by media outlets or intelligence agencies, rather than on in-depth empirical studies.

After 2022, confrontational attitudes in the information domain towards the Nordic region intensified (Eggen, 2024a). Russia lost her most precious arenas of influence, like RT or Sputnik, and her diplomatic relations or bilateral or multilateral co-operation such as the Barents Cooperation, were severed. Seemingly, Russia is concentrating her efforts on “distorting narratives, eroding cohesion (on various levels), and creating fear and uncertainty” (Eggen, 2024a, p. 12). It is therefore paramount to improve our understanding of how influence operations are conducted and affecting the targeted audience.

3.2 Friend or Foe? Norway's Relationship to Russia

The bilateral relationship between Norway and Russia is distinctive compared with other NATO countries. While most NATO countries view Russia mainly as a potential threat, Norway has a tradition of emphasizing dialogue and cooperation through bilateral and multilateral initiatives and forums (Østhagen, 2021). The relationship with the Soviet Union and later Russia has always been at the core of Norwegian foreign policy, clearly illustrated by the effort of balancing being a NATO member on the one hand with being a neighbor to the Soviet Union/Russia on the other (Leland and Hoel, 2008; Hilde, 2019; Østhagen, 2021). This balancing approach has resulted in a strategy of *Deterrence and Détente* guiding Norway's relationship to the Soviet Union and later Russia (Hilde, 2019), with the aim of keeping Russia at arms' lengths while keeping calm and non-provocative.

A cornerstone in the collaboration between Norway and Russia is the *The Barents Cooperation Agreement* between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, established in 1993 in a watershed moment in North European history (Rafaelsen, 2013; Onsager and Stuvøy, 2022). The unique agreement largely entrusted Norwegian regions in the north with the management of the relations towards Russia (Neuman, 2002). The Barents Cooperation operates across multiple sectors and levels of government, comprising an important involvement by local actors in all border regions, referred to as the “people-to-people-collaboration” (Onsager and Stuvøy, 2022; Holm-Hansen and Aasland, 2024). This celebrated initiative consists of cooperation and contact across a variety of areas, ranging from culture to indigenous people, tourism, research and education. In eastern Finnmark and Kirkenes, notable relationships were formed, vast collaboration spurred, and people grew closer. The people-to-people cooperation continued to grow over the decades, largely untouched by the political turmoil in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Onsager and Stuvøy, 2022; Holm-Hansen and Aasland, 2024).

Following 2014, the bilateral relationship between Norway and Russia deteriorated. But rather than becoming marginal, the importance of the Barents Cooperation grew for the central government (Onsager and Stuvøy, 2022). In a parallel development, the involvement from the central authorities diminished (Holm-Hansen and Aasland, 2024), and responsibilities for

managing the bilateral relationship were placed almost exclusively at the local and regional levels in the north. This strengthened the idea of Arctic exceptionalism, further increasing emphasis on local collaboration to even out tensions at the national level (Onsager and Stuvøy, 2022). Bilateral cooperation with Russia became synonymous with a two-tiered approach; hard line at the national level, and soft line at the local level.

This distinction in approach increasingly reflects two different understandings between the South and certain segments in the North of the nature of Russia and how best to approach her. It was commonplace for local communities taking an active part in the people-to-people cooperation to argue that Russia remained a good neighbor with whom Norway should continue to cultivate close cooperation (Onsager and Stuvøy, 2022). Others, notably from the South, wanted to reduce ties, warning about dangerous developments in Russian society and increasing security threats against Norway.

During the same period, the Arctic came to prominence at the international stage. Global warming is projected to increase economic opportunities in the Arctic (Sliwa and Aliyev, 2020) and an increasing number of states are showing interest in the region. As the largest Arctic state, Russia has increased the emphasis on Arctic presence (Rumer, Sokolsky and Stronski, 2021; Eggen, 2024a), with an ambition to protect Russian interests in the Arctic by all means, clearly expressed in Russia's new maritime doctrine from 2022 (Eggen, 2024a). Geopolitical developments in the Arctic are making Russia increasingly insecure about its position in the region (Etterretningstjenesten, 2024).

Increased Russian interest in Arctic developments has led commentators to argue that Russia is stepping up the use of hybrid threats especially in this region (Carr, 2019; Kertysova and Gricius, 2023; Østhagen, 2023; Wall and Wegge, 2023). Since 2014, there have been multiple instances of documented Russian covert activities in the Norwegian Arctic: Russian citizens have been arrested for flying drones close to strategic targets, a Russian illegalist infiltrated UiT- The Norwegian Arctic University and GPS signals have been jammed in Finnmark (Wall and Wegge, 2023). The Norwegian secret police (PST) has publicly warned that Russia is increasingly resorting to hybrid measures in the High North, such as hacking into the phones of Ukrainian refugees crossing the border in the High North, using fishing vessels to gather intelligence and monitor pro-Ukrainian protestors (Johnsen, 2024). Russia further emphasizes shared World War Two history, taking advantage of conflicts between local and national interests to position Russia as an actor with higher levels of sensitivity towards the needs of the population in the High North compared to Norwegian authorities in Oslo (Johnsen, 2024).

The combination of high geopolitical value and close ties across the border make Arctic communities in Norway especially vulnerable to Russian influence operations (Østhagen, 2023). It has also been documented that the European Arctic is targeted more intensely than the Arctic territories of their American counterparts (Kertysova and Gricius, 2023). Particular vulnerabilities have been identified as discord around sensitive Arctic-specific issues such as

economic activity linked to climate change and indigenous peoples' rights, or the possibility of re-engaging with Russian scientists and organizations in the region (Østhagen, 2023, p. 14).

In the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, much has changed in terms of public opinion and policies towards Russia. The Barents cooperation has been declared dead and buried by the Norwegian deputy foreign minister, Eivind Vad Petersson (Sveen, 2024). The warm relations between Norwegian and Russian citizens have resulted in conflicts within the different communities in the Norwegian High North (NTB, 2022). The vast majority of Norwegians are in favor of sanctions against Russia (93 per cent) and believe that the invasion has destroyed the relationship for generations to come (75 per cent). However, a large majority believe that it is important for Norway to keep a good relationship with Russia (85 per cent) and think it is important to distinguish between the Russian government and the Russian people (92 per cent) (Aasland and Myhre, 2023). The population in Eastern Finnmark finds it even more important than the rest of the population to have a good relationship to Russia (92 per cent). This implies that a certain positivity towards Russia remains in the population, also in Eastern Finnmark, despite overwhelmingly critical views on the Russian regime.

The economic reverberations of the Russian invasion Ukraine has made Norway one of the most important energy suppliers to the EU (Delivorias and deMartini, 2023). The development exposes Norway in new ways, and Norwegian pipelines to Europe have been identified as key targets for Russian sabotage (Wall and Wegge, 2023). Reports have also confirmed that Russia has tried to meddle with the domestic energy discourses in other states, including through social media (United States House of Representatives and Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, 2018).

As Europe's reliable energy provider, Norway's strategic importance has increased, and with it the exposure to Russian influence activity. In light of the special historical relationship between Norway and Russia and the perceived vulnerability of communities in the High North, it is not implausible for Russian influence operations to target the domestic Norwegian energy discourse, especially in the High North.

This review of the state of research on influence operations in Norway indicates that few studies go beyond the notorious examples provided by journalism or intelligence communities. Moreover, empirical research based on country specific data will contribute positively to a field largely dominated by large datasets.

4. Key Findings

The following section provides an overview of the findings resulting from analysis of the data collected and the interviews. Five key observations emerged: the prominence of wind power in political discourse, a limited trace of dis/misinformation, the connection of arguments against wind power with broader narratives, a pervasive rural distrust of the center and finally, in the north, heavy reliance on indigenous interests.

4.1 Wind-Power Debate: A Heated, Polarizing Topic

The review of quantitative data from the public Facebook pages of political parties and media outlets indicates that discussions related to wind power were heated and popular as they ranked among the top three most commented on topics in the period. Wind power alone accounted for 48% of all comments on political party sites and 23% on media sites. Compared to previous years, activity on this topic surged in 2023, peaking in late summer/early fall before the municipal elections in September. Social media activity concerning wind power during the five months studied was at or above average levels compared to the period from 2020 to 2023.

The quantitative data suggests that the debate on wind power was considerably more commented on compared to other subjects of controversy (Pride, nuclear power, child welfare services) in the Norwegian public domain, examined for comparison. The online debate on wind power was also the most skewed and extreme of the four topics. Skewness was also heavily leaning towards negative attitudes in the wind power debate. By comparison, the nuclear power debate had a similar extremity but was much less skewed. The debate on Pride had a medium level of extremity and was mostly not skewed, while the child welfare services had an overall low level of both.

The wind power debate was dominated by comments branded as negative. Of 1365 comments in the collected data, 1117 were classified as negative, and 248 as positive. While most political party comments from the far right and the far left were negative, the only party site with exclusively positive comments belonged to the ruling Labor party in the southern municipality.

Political parties to the very left (The Red) and the very right (Progress party) have both adopted clear positions *against* wind power, albeit for different reasons and based on different rationales. The data suggests that for both political parties, activity and engagement on their own home pages run very high, supporting their unambiguous position on the subject. However, the data shows (surprisingly) much less engagement from these parties when local media writes about the subject of wind power. This may suggest that the wind power debate is used by both political parties to mobilize their own ranks at their respective fringes, rather than to participate in democratic exchanges of views in the local media. In turn, this dynamic may contribute to explaining the disproportionate amount of negative comments linked to this topic in the data assembled.

Interviews with stakeholders in the Norwegian windmill debates have given answers much in line with the findings from the digital data. They underscore that people experience the discussions as intense and polarized, though informants also report varying experiences regarding the level of civility and temperature. Some note that online debates have improved through moderation and internal corrections.

On the other hand, some informants who support wind power express that wind power opponents get a lot of attention and make a big fuss. An informant note e.g.:

A group of three or four starts a Facebook group and creates a lot of noise and unrest, which affects the municipal politicians much more than their numbers would suggest.

Some express that online debates have improved over the past two years due to more active moderation and internal corrections. Other informants comment that the debates do make an impact on local relations and the wellbeing of people. For instance, some informants have experienced unpleasant comments posted directly on their personal Facebook sites or sent via email or text messages/Messenger. This has, in some cases, also led to uncomfortable situations in public spaces where political representatives or employees in wind power companies have been confronted by protesters outside of work hours and workplaces, as illustrated in the following comment:

At times, we have stayed home on Saturday evenings. It becomes like that when we can't grab a bite to eat at a local spot in the center without people needing to comment. And especially after people have had a couple of drinks (statement from a local politician).

Both opponents and supporters recount unpleasant incidents. A Sámi activist from Finnmark, describes how she dreads visiting public spaces around the days when wind power is on the agenda in the municipality council.

4.2 Limited Traces of Mis/Disinformation

The review of quantitative data from Facebook pages showed, surprisingly, almost no traces of Russia, neither as an actor nor as a topic.

Analysis of the selected platforms found no clear signs of interference or participation by malign external actors, a finding that extends to Russian actors. Nothing in the material reviewed indicated that external malign actors attempted to infiltrate the domestic conversation linked to energy and wind-power in the selected samples. Only one sentence in the material was identified as a possible chat-bot, repeated on two different instances in identical form. The sentence was seemingly ignored by other participants in both instances.

The review did not find witting proliferators of Russian narratives. While important underlying narratives in the negative comments show notable resemblances with Russian narratives (see section 4.3), the underlying narratives expressed in the data are firmly rooted in local grievances and political traditions inherent in rural areas in Norway. These underlying narratives are indigenous to the local Norwegian communities. In the qualitative review of the data, the underlying views in the debate came across as expressions of narratives inherent in the local culture, rather than unwitting proliferations of Russian narratives. This finding is also supported by interviews with different participants in the public debate. The only trace of

Russia found in the interviews came from some participants from the North who were of the opinion that the fear of Russia was artificially amplified by the South.

Certain instances of misinformation were identified in the data, mostly statements suggesting grossly exaggerated negative effects of wind-power. Some of this misinformation has been corrected by the independent Norwegian fact-checker [Faktisk.no](https://www.faktisk.no/), an entity owned and run by independent media organizations.

The discussions and focus on platforms at the local level are mostly linked to local projects. Yet the uptick in discussion activity to a considerable degree follows and responds to events or developments at the national level. The linguistic expressions, references and parlance are strongly flavored by the local context. Consequently, the intensity, aggressiveness and expressions resorted to vary considerably between the three geographical cases. In general, the local flavor is strong in all three areas, in line with local culture and with distinct “dialect” or local habitus.

A notable commonality across the different platforms and geographical samples is a tendency by participants to discipline other peer participants who engage in arguments perceived to be out of line, either due to an aggressive or harassing tone or because it is perceived to derail discussions. Additionally, considerably more harassment and personal attacks were expected to be found in the data, e.g against the Sámi population given the clear and strongly mobilizing Sámi opposition to wind power, and in light of the Norwegian Supreme Court's deliberation on the Fosen peninsula wind power plants case in October 2021.³ The said mechanisms of internal, improvised measures of discipline may contribute to explain a relatively moderate tone on the platforms despite high tension and the large amount of negative comments identified in the data.

As in the quantitative data from the Facebook pages, the qualitative review of protest groups on Facebook revealed only a few clearly false articles or flat-out disinformation. Only a limited number of articles were shared from Norwegian websites known for spreading dis- and misinformation or pro-Russian narratives, such as Steigan.no, Document.no, and iNyheter.no (formerly Resett.no). If misleading or false articles from these sites or other sources were shared, such as YouTube videos with conspiracy theories, they got limited interactions or were debunked by members of the groups. For instance, one member of a local group posted eight articles from the far-left publication Steigan.no during the project period. Seven of these posts gained either one or no likes at all, while one post gained five likes. No posts from alternative websites posted in this group had enough likes to make it to the dataset. The larger national

³ This landmark decision marked the first instance where affected Sámi parties triumphed in the Supreme Court, citing human rights in a development project within their traditional territories.
<https://www.nhri.no/en/2023/about-the-wind-farms-on-fosen-and-the-supreme-court-judgment/>

groups had more instances where such articles were shared and gained traction. However, these were few and far between.

In several groups, a small number of active users posted a significant portion of content. Some have achieved "influencer-like" status, with posts gaining substantial traction. For example, the user "Pekkja," with 13,000 followers, consistently posted anti-windmill content that resonated and was shared widely. This concentrated activity by a few influential users helped shape the overall tone and direction of the debate.

It should nevertheless be noted that researchers only looked at clear mis- or dis-information labelled by the fact checker Faktisk.no or at posts containing articles from outlets that are known to spread disinformation or Russian narratives. Research from Renewables Norway, a non-profit industry organization, underscore that the Norwegian windmill debate is characterized by a large amount of mis- and dis-information. They state that wrong or exaggerated information is spread on topics such as the role of international agreements, the threats posed on Norwegian nature or that there is no added value of windfarms to the municipalities (Fornybar Norge, 2024).

4.3 Broader Narratives in Arguments Against Wind-Power

A review of the data from the public Facebook pages suggests that comments in favor of wind-power can be classified into three main arguments: (1) The lesser evil: transitioning into green energy is urgent due to climate change (necessity). (2) Disproportionate: negative effects of mills blown out of proportion (safe and sustainable). (3) Moderation and adjustment: adverse effects can be reduced (conditioned on approach).

Comments against wind power may, in turn, be categorized into three different arguments. (1) Negative returns: no profit for Norwegians or municipalities, others will take it. (2) Loser's game: environmental pollution, un-aesthetic, unsustainable source of energy. (3) Us vs them: "they" benefit, while "we" are exploited.

In the negative comments, important commonalities converge around common grievances, reflecting broader underlying narratives that signal distrust. Notably three narratives are distinguishable across all three geographical regions:

Co-opted or stupid politicians. Politicians in powerful positions (mostly centralized power, government, and parliament) lack the ability to grasp, or the willingness to manage, energy policy in a comprehensive, strategically sound manner.

Powerful distant forces stand to gain from *our* energy sources, with locals and the natural environment as impotent victims. These "forces" may be international corporations, the EU, political/commercial oligarchs in the Norwegian capital, Germany, or international investors. They have the power to define and decide, and they are making profits at the expense of the

local or national population by exploiting natural resources, while the local population has nowhere to turn.

Key democratic actors are co-opted in the scheme of wind power. Key actors in society (the government, parliamentarians, researchers, media/the national broadcasting company NRK) are complicit in an undemocratic scheme to introduce and force wind power on local communities. They are mostly motivated by narrow self-interests at the expense of the precious nature and of democracy itself.

Comparing these findings to the manual review of windmill protest groups on Facebook, the same narratives, as well as an “anti-green shift” narrative, can be recognized. The anti-green shift narrative is, however, fragmented. Some users express resistance towards the changes needed to complete the green shift, e.g., building wind turbines or other infrastructure, as it damages ecosystems and causes environmental issues on the local level. One comment states, "Sea wind is hazardous and headless gambling where the bet is maritime life, fishery and seafood, and the Norwegian people's money. (Prime minister) Støre promised 'dear Ursula' on the 20th of May 2022 that 30GW would be available for export to Europe. How does Støre have the mandate for this?" Others are more focused on protecting the indigenous Sámi population's right to their traditional reindeer grazing lands in areas where windmills are proposed. Another group of participants completely dismiss the entire green shift as a hoax. Despite the different reasoning, the participants from the different camps often use similar arguments and support each other's examples.

Researchers also found that the other anti-windmill narratives often blend. For example, Norwegian and EU politicians are often criticized together in the same comment: "Both Norwegian and EU politicians are corrupt and are working against the interests of 'normal people' - we normal people have to stop them." Sometimes, all the narratives come together in one single comment: "I wonder how much the EU pays these minions (the Norwegian government) to promote the politics about The Green Shift???"

Interviews also highlight the complexity of the topic of windmills, where local individuals united in the wind power debates can have vastly different motives and political/ideological affiliations. Interviewees hold opposing viewpoints on climate change and green policy, local industry or business, etc. mirroring the different motivations and interests that come together in debates on nature preservation versus the development of renewable energy projects.

Two observations may be made in connection to the narratives. On the one hand, there is a striking similarity between the underlying narratives presented in the wind-power debate across the three geographical areas with those commonly promoted by the Kremlin, such as co-opted Western politicians, predator Western capitalism and hypocritical democratic actors exploiting naïve audiences for ulterior motives. Although the Russian narratives offer a caricatured image, the underlying narratives reflected in the wind-power debate share a common core in terms of

content. This suggests that the debate on wind-power may expose a vulnerability for exploitation by malign actors.

On the other hand, a qualitative review of the different positions suggests cross-cutting attitudes and positions. The arguments typically expressed against wind-power emphasize that global economic forces stand to gain, while local environment or indigenous rights will lose. The arguments typically expressed in favor of wind-power, emphasize global environmental gains, while emphasizing local economic advantages. The crossing argumentation makes it almost impossible to forge strong, united and clearly diverging fronts that can drive polarization on the wind-power issue and extend this divergence to other topics.

4.4 Antagonism towards “Oslo”

The local context of the debates amplifies the divisions between urban and rural areas, center and periphery, as one of the most enduring and profound divides in modern Norwegian society and politics. This is most evident among wind power opponents, but also supporters speak extensively about the lack of local ownership and control. People debating wind power across municipalities and regions express strong distrust towards central authorities, and many point out that the people and governing bodies in Oslo, who are spared from having wind turbines in their vicinity, do not understand the implications and negative consequences of wind power plants. Several informants express strong opinions about the decision-making processes and the government's disregard for local communities when making these decisions. As noted by a protester:

The establishment of wind power is perceived by many here as an abuse of power. They (the government) make decisions without consulting the local communities which have to live with the consequences.

A common viewpoint among protesters and opponents was thus a lack of trust in the government and administrative authorities regarding decision-making processes on wind power projects. Several expressed deep concern as to whether decisions are being made on the wrong basis, including under influence from non-democratic pressure groups such as foreign investors and other lobbyists.

Several informants from Finnmark expressed frustration over what was described as a unilateral decision by the government regarding the electrification of Melkøya outside Hammerfest. The decision was launched at the government's election campaign kickoff and was presented as a power and industrial boost for Finnmark.

We hadn't heard a word beforehand, even though we are from the same party, said an informant from Finnmark. The launch was met with much resistance, contributing to making green energy

and wind power parks one of the most important issues in the election campaign for several municipalities in Finnmark.⁴

4.5 Protection of Sámi Culture and Livelihood

One of the most symbolically salient questions in Norway regarding wind power conflicts revolves around the rights of the indigenous Sámi people. In the interviews, Sámi informants underscore that wind power plants pose a threat to their very existence and cultural identity. The main arguments evolve around the protection of livelihoods, culture, identity, and basic human rights. Several informants in Finnmark refer to the Fosen judgment by the Supreme court on the Fosen Peninsula wind farms, which gives significant precedence (Norwegian Supreme Court, 2021). Sámi informants describe the judgment as a victory that gives hope for similar protection in Finnmark. Informants with opposing views however express that the judgement could severely halt future prosperity for Finnmark, a county which is already facing a dramatic demographic decline and is thus in a desperate need to secure new industries and jobs. The significance of, and level of relentlessness in this conflict is also emphasized in statements by Sámi activists, such as in the following comment:

Grazing reindeer need large grazing areas in an Arctic climate, and people make statements about stone desert at Finnmarksvidda without having any clue. The truth is: We don't have a single square meter to lose.

The issue triggers distrust on both sides; for supporters towards the government, the judiciary, and the UN; and for Sámi actors towards the government and the relevant administrative authorities, specifically in connection to process around Fosen wind farms and more generally to Norway's dark history of discrimination against the Sámi population (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Norway, 2023).

The conflict on indigenous rights versus green energy development is by no means settled. Rather, one can expect further escalations and mobilizations as new concessions are currently being processed in municipalities in Finnmark, and approved facilities are to be set in motion.

In this connection, an observation is worth noting. As a result of the absence of Russia in the data material, researchers conducted a qualitative screening of Russian official reports and Russian news platforms (Tass.ru, and Sputnik) with the aim of identifying Russian narratives related to Norway and how Norway is portrayed in Russian outlets and public papers. In these sources, recurrent attention was given to the conflict between Sámi groups and the state at the Fosen peninsula regarding wind power plants, as well as to Norway's historically weak legacy

⁴ Melkøya is located two kilometers off the coast of Hammerfest in Finnmark, and it is Europe's first export facility for liquified natural gas (LNG). Gas from the Snøhvit, Albatross, and Askeladd fields is piped ashore to Melkøya through a 143-kilometer-long pipeline. The product is then transported to markets abroad via specially built tankers. To power the facility, natural gas is used as the energy source for gas turbines on Melkøya, resulting in annual emissions of 900,000 tons of CO₂.

in securing the protection of the rights and culture of the Sámi people⁵. The Norwegian pattern of discrimination against the Sámi population was also mentioned in an op-ed published in May 2024 by the Russian ambassador to Norway in one of the largest national newspapers, *Aftenposten*, as a response to the paper's articles on Russian influence operations and covert activities in Northern Norway⁶. However, the ambassador's finger-wagging makes a limited impression given Russia's low credibility as a human rights advocate in the Norwegian public.

Nevertheless, criticism of Norwegian discrimination against its Sámi population aligns well with the Kremlin's narrative on Western double standards, a topic Russia continues to promote both nationally and internationally.⁷ The Russian take on this topic shows that Russia is paying attention and is well aware of the significance and potential of this issue in the local, national and international context.

5. Analysis

The following analysis examines the level and characteristics of polarization in the windmill debates as well as the specific vulnerabilities and mechanisms of resilience to malign influence within these debates. By scrutinizing the interactions and associations of different groups with the specific narratives identified in the data, the following chapter aims to uncover the underlying factors contributing to both susceptibility and resistance to malign influences.

5.1 Vulnerabilities: Exacerbating Division Lines and Eroding Institutional Trust

The findings show considerable tensions between the local or indigenous communities and the capital Oslo. They reflect one of the longest-standing and deepest tensions in Norwegian modern society and politics, namely the cleavage between urban and rural populations (center and periphery). The center-periphery cleavage tends to resurface when provoked by controversial political issues (e.g during the referendum on Norwegian membership to the EU in 1972 and 1994) or during periods of transition and instability. In Norway, the surge in

⁵In 2019, a commission of 11 experts was tasked by the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) to review the Norwegianisation Policy and Injustice against the Sámi and Kvens/Norwegian Finns. The report was delivered to the Parliament in June 2023. <https://www.stortinget.no/globalassets/pdf/sannhets--og-forsoningskommisjonen/rapport-til-stortinget-fra-sannhets--og-forsoningskommisjonen.pdf>

⁶<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/730XK4/grunnloese-paastander-om-ondsinnede-handlinger-fra-russland>

⁷In a study on possible foreign influence operations related to the 2023 local elections in Norway, the following case example was described: In August 2023, a case involving Norwegian reindeer drew significant political attention in Russia. Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, called it an assault on Sámi culture and urged action from animal rights activists. In December 2022 more than 40 Norwegian reindeer were found grazing in Russia, leading to a 47 million NOK compensation claim by Russian authorities. By August 2023, 40 reindeer were culled for veterinary reasons after being returned to Norway. This incident, while receiving limited media coverage in Norway, was heavily emphasized by Russian state media, framing Norway as ruthlessly avoiding compensation by killing the reindeer. Zakharova notably compared the event to the previous killing of the walrus Freya in Norway (Grendahl Sivertsen *et al.*, 2023)

windmill projects (2013 onward) coincided with a growing opposition from rural communities (Skjærseth *et al.*, 2023).

The center-periphery conflict reflected in the findings also correlates with the growing tendency of lower institutional trust among citizens in rural or more remote communities compared to citizens in urban centers. Importantly, opposition to wind power manifest more frequently in groups that already experience a certain degree of trust erosion, such as constituencies' voting on the far right or far left at the political spectrum (NTB, 2024). The windmill issue has thus become one of the markers of current political *and* rural/district countercultures as seen in the many online groups where the very name Oslo is shorthand for a distrusted political and economic elite with little or no regard for ordinary people in more remote areas.

In the context of wind farm protests and the studied discourses, the prevalence of distrustful narratives is noteworthy, spanning over issues such as license processes or potential or experienced harmful implications of windmill installations to more general outbursts of distrust. Whereas the narratives about corrupt politicians and elites are expressions of general frustrations, the green shift narrative is more tailored towards the specific windmill debate. The latter is also more local, attached to their specific context and concerns about implications from windmill farms e.g. to local ecosystems, hiking paths, local Sámi interests etc. At the same time, this is as noted above, the most fragmented narrative.

Indeed, the level of polarization, the geographical locations, the possibilities of beneficial investments, the strategic challenge or urgency of renewable energy for Norway, the EU as well as for Russia; surely there are states or interest groups that will benefit from influencing public opinions. On the other hand, researchers on political polarization argue that when individuals interact locally, it often leads to the cultivation of a stable, pluralistic patchwork of cross-cutting conflicts. Yet, online interactions facilitated by digital media, tend to drive conflicts to align along partisan lines, thereby reducing the counterbalancing effects of local diversity. Such alignment leads to polarization, even if individual interactions initially appear to foster convergence (Törnberg, 2022). With this in mind, the question is if local anchoring and the complexity created by crossing division lines identified in this case study, still may function as mechanisms for social resilience.

5.2 Mechanisms for Resilience: Local Ownership and Transparency

A notable finding in the data is a shared feature in the social media debates across all municipalities: they all reflect a strong local ownership both in content and form. Thematic focus primarily revolves around local issues, though national events may spark debate. Local references and local parlance, i.e very specific local dialects and use of words, permeate the language, resulting in rather distinct differences in tone and intensity between the three

geographical areas examined. The highly visible local habitus and flavor have several effects for the mode on the platforms.

Firstly, it results in a substantial level of transparency, reducing some of the risks commonly associated with anonymity and camouflage on social media platforms. Outsiders are very easily spotted by local participants, thereby to some degree extending a social control proper to rural communities onto the digital platforms.

Secondly, the local flavor in form and content cater to internal cohesion. Many of the participants appear to know each other in real life, and the platforms come across as places for local frenemies to debate, rather than digital platforms providing access to outsiders, foreigners, chat-bots or rogue actors. This local atmosphere may also explain the surprising level of “shepherding” by ordinary participants on the platforms, intervening to warn and discipline other participants who resort to harassment, or other comments seen to go beyond what is acceptable. Such derailers are commonly confronted by other participants and met with warnings “not to ruin our debate”. These interventions are reminiscent of influential communal traditions in rural areas in Norway. The strong local flavor and habitus provides local ownership which may explain this surprising active role taken on by ordinary participants on the digital platforms.

In sum, it may be suggested that the strong local cultural flavor and ownership reflected in the debates add a considerable level of transparency both in form and content, limiting the vulnerability commonly associated with anonymity or camouflage offered by digital platforms. Rather, this transparency offers a certain level of resilience to foreign interference and malign influence.

5.3 Local Polarizing Dynamics

Despite the high level of animosity and intensity reflected in the social media debates on wind-power and strong underlying narratives, the polarizing dynamics reflected in the Facebook data is relatively weak.

One plausible explanation relates to the nature of wind-power debate itself and the most important arguments. Preservationist arguments (in favor of measures protecting the climate, natural environment and indigenous populations) are present on both sides, among groups both against and in favor of wind-power. Arguments in favor of industrial development are equally present on both sides. The same goes for arguments emphasizing local self-government and self-determination.

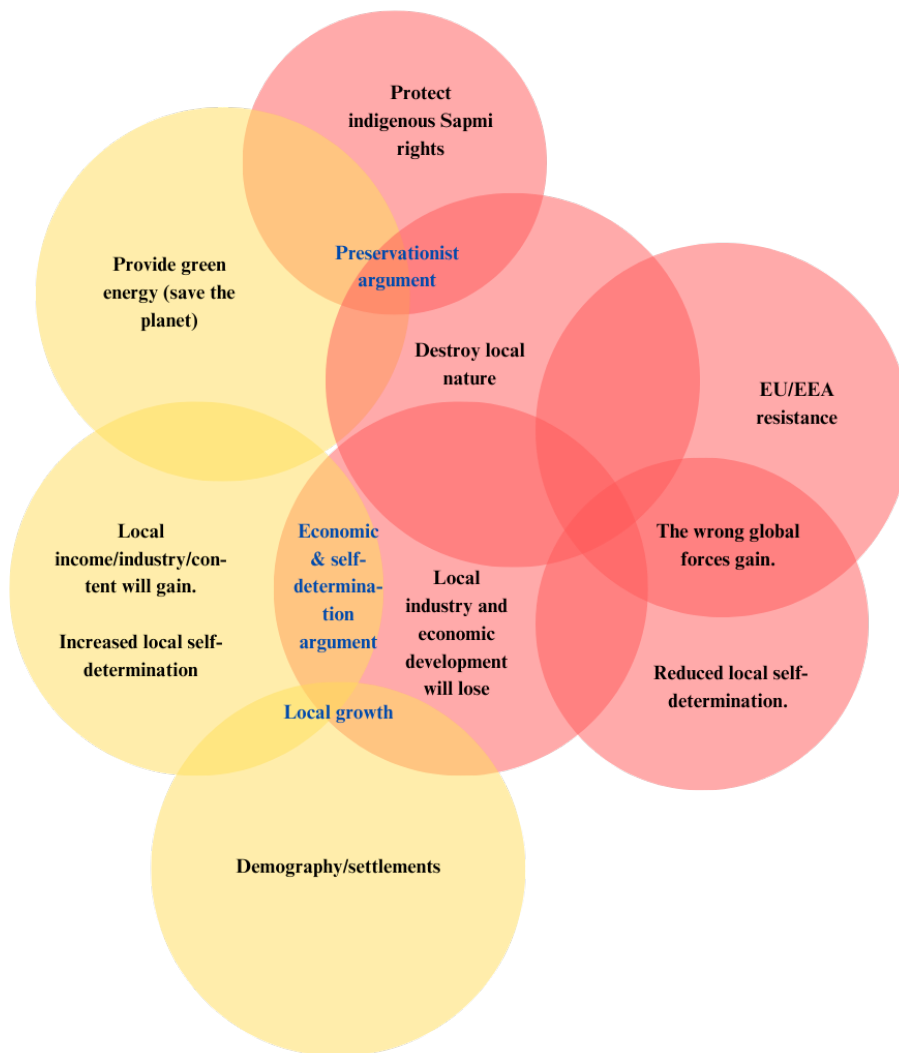


Fig 1: Crossing division lines in the observed windmill debates. Yellow represents pro-windmill narratives while red represents the anti-windmill narratives.

The main arguments in the windmill debate cut across ordinary conflict lines, creating a supporter-opposition pattern that does not fit easily with common political divisions. These various cut-crossing arguments may therefore impede a dynamic whereby traditional political allies and foes end up in common a political pattern, where other topics and related issues may reinforce the polarizing dynamics. The wind-power debate rather seems to bring traditional foes together as supporters or opposers to wind-power development locally. A notable impediment to polarization therefore seems to reside in the very arguments relied on in the wind-power debate.

The wind-power debate may consequently have a rather low potential to cause major polarization along traditional political lines of division, suggesting that digital influence campaigns on this subject are unlikely to yield a successful outcome if polarization between

traditional political foes is the intended goal. On the other hand, the subject of wind power brings together fringe parties from each side of the political spectrum and may expose a potential reshuffling of political divisions along non-traditional lines of division, pitting more radical agendas and narratives against more moderate approaches.

Despite the temperature and level of negative engagement in the discourses, the assessment is that the risk for such development is relatively small. However, public trust in the institutions and actors responsible for wind power development is crucial to prevent or end conflicts, and is ultimately hinging on political leadership to address and mitigate concerns raised by the affected communities.

5.4 Absence of Russia

As noted in the findings, researchers found no clear signs of interference or participation by malign external actors, a finding that extends to Russian actors. Nevertheless, the similarities identified in local narratives with narratives pushed by the Kremlin do represent a vulnerability. It may expose local communities to Russian narrative amplification, as it makes such amplification an easy task for a malign Russian actor. A related vulnerability to these open democratic platforms is *accusations* of such amplification. In this context, it is noteworthy that the data on social media platforms showed a surprising *absence* of references to Russia, Russian interests or Russian modus by participants, notably in debates where such arguments would fit in quite natural ways and therefore be expected to be used. In the material, it is almost as if Russia does not exist. This may be seen as an indication of an increasing taboo surrounding Russia, her roles and interests in democratic debates concerning specific controversial political issues in Norway.

The similarities in underlying local narratives reflected in negative comments with those presented by the Kremlin constitute a clear advantage for Russia. Absence of active Russian interference in such participatory democratic platforms may therefore, in addition to capacities and priorities, also be explained by the lack of need for such interference: underlying narratives conducive to the Kremlin already exist, and even permeate the debates on wind-power examined in this study. Rather, a possible exposure of Russian interference would probably risk causing damage to these indigenous narratives, reducing Russia's future room for maneuver.

In the context, Norway's geostrategic location and the extensive use of intelligence operations especially in the High North may be an additional explanation to the absence of Russian interference in the studied discourses. Indeed, Russian actors are well-acquainted with local conflicts and dynamics especially in the north, giving them an advantage in understanding the local context (PST, 2024). This contrasts with their approach in Central European countries, where numerous digital influence operations have been exposed (Vinocur, Haeck and Wax, 2024).

With Sweden and Finland joining NATO, the eastern boundary of NATO has shifted. This change likely influences Russian strategy and focus going forward, as they need to consider the new geopolitical realities and adjust their influence operations accordingly.

To sum up; the wind-power debate across the regions reveals the presence of narratives similar to those promoted by the Kremlin, suggesting potential for exploitation. However, the qualitative review discloses a complex mix of attitudes and overlap of arguments against wind-power focusing on local environment and the loss of indigenous rights, and those in favor of highlighting the global environment and local economic benefits. The crossing argumentation and the overlap of arguments prevent the formation of polarized, united fronts, thus limiting the potential for external interference.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study is founded on analyses of threat actors, their objectives and measures for influence as described in security policy assessment and research literature. As noted in chapter 3, the study on foreign influence operations is still an emerging field. Although significant progress has been made in recent years, methodological challenges and analytical blind spots remain (Wanless, 2021). In this regard, and as this study was designed to test approaches and methodological tools for documenting the impact of influence operations, some reflections from the conduct of the research will be shared in the following final remarks.

Overall, we assert that Russia possesses a comprehensive understanding of political and social developments in Norway, with the Kremlin closely monitoring and mapping political and social processes and dynamics, as well as the conduct of a broad range of sectors in public and civil society. While Russia's capacity and willingness to inflict harm on other nations is considerable, the capacity of the Kremlin is not without limitations. Priorities thus have to be made. However, the Kremlin likely benefits from being perceived as a formidable adversary. Our security discourse should reflect a nuanced understanding of this dynamic.

A question which lingers is whether we have a sufficiently precise understanding of Russia's interests, goals, and priorities in her relationship to Norway, compared to other Nordic countries or the Baltic states. As noted in the literature review, it is evident that significant distinctions exist in the Russian approach. While we can learn from the experiences of other countries, it is crucial to tailor strategies to the unique circumstances of each context. A one-size-fits-all approach is scarcely meaningful, even among Nordic NATO allies.

An important point concerns the relationship between security actors and researchers on the one hand, and people living in areas particularly exposed or vulnerable on the other. In the current security climate, the need for clear communication about vulnerabilities and threats is crucial. However, it must be done in manners that do not exacerbate distrust and further alienation. An observation made in the literature review points to the fact that journalists,

researchers, and the security apparatus frequently illustrate their threat assessments by relying repeatedly on the same incidents (typically 5-6 different cases), predominantly from the North. This may contribute to weaken the credibility of both the messenger and the messages and thus impact the effect of the communication, leaving it open for those already skeptical to pose that threats are exaggerated. In this regard, it should be noted that the media coverage on these topics frequently prioritizes sensationalism over quality research, risking alienating local populations in addition to making unfounded attributions. One avenue to address this challenge could be a higher degree of accommodation to local contexts in the open security evaluations by security services.

We note that the landscape of social media has undergone substantial changes, evolving from digital "town squares" to entertainment platforms driven by sophisticated algorithms beyond the control of Nordic states. This shift has significant implications for research, as much of the existing work was conducted in a different social media environment with different apps, user habits and dynamics. The ever-changing nature of social media, exemplified by the rapid growth of platforms like TikTok, necessitates ongoing adaptation in research methodologies. The study on TikTok in the context of the municipal election conducted by UTSYN during 2023 (Skare, 2023), underscores the value of incorporating qualitative measures to capture nuanced experiences of users.

In line with that, an important takeaway is the need for incorporating qualitative methods in studies of online discourses and influence operations. Indeed, interviews and reviews of online debates reveal new insights and critical nuances to the digital data, prompting further questions and analytical points. The need to secure sufficient contextual anchoring when examining external influence operations should also be emphasized in order to fully understand the depth of conflicts and their drivers in local discourses. Accordingly, it is essential to include a contextual and thorough analysis of any threat actor's goals and approaches from the outset of the research, to enhance and refine the relevance of the research questions.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges of influence operations requires a nuanced, context-specific approach that considers potential culprits' motivations and capacities, as well as the evolving nature of social media and the multifaceted influences on public opinion. We need more empirical studies, the development of new cases, and broader analytical frameworks to better understand how influence operations work and enable us to counter them effectively.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Monitoring Facebook groups. Selection criteria

The selection of posts has been based on three criteria that the post must meet:

1. **Content:** The post should be related to wind power on land or at sea to be included in the study. Some posts that do not specifically deal with wind power may be included at discretion if they are relevant. This is particularly relevant in groups such as “Stop ACER” and “We Who Want Cheaper Electricity” which do not specifically focus on wind power.
2. **Dissemination:** The post should have a relatively large spread compared to the average in the group. Thus, the criteria vary from large national groups to small local groups. The post should not have a below-average spread for the relevant group and should have a number of comments with likes from which narratives can be extracted.
3. **Medium:** We have chosen to limit the posts based on the medium. We only extract posts based on a news article or website. This is to limit the number of posts and to identify posts containing articles from outlets known to spread misinformation and Russian propaganda.

Classification of Narratives

The posts were classified according to these main narratives identified in the material:

1. Anti-politicians/elite. (The elite also often includes energy companies, media, and analysis agencies. Mainly, one finds anti-politician sentiment.)
 - a. This narrative is often expressed by calling Norwegian politicians/the power elite corrupt, incompetent, saying that they lie, etc.
2. Anti EU/EEA (also somewhat anti UN, WHO, and WTO – but not to the same extent)
 - a. Often expressed by presenting the Labour Party/Conservatives or others as being in the pocket of the EU, arguing that various EU directives are the problem with the Norwegian electricity market and that the EU is undemocratic.
 - b. This is the category with the most conspiratorial content and memes.
3. Anti-green shift
 - a. The main narrative is that the green shift is destroying the environment, but there are also comments that reject the green shift entirely. This also includes comments addressing environmental protection and biodiversity conservation.

8.2 Conversation guide

Interview Guide – (translated to English with Chat GPT)

1. About the Interviewee:

Engagement:

- What are the main reasons you actively participate in the wind power debate?

Political Affiliation:

- Would you disclose which party you vote for, both in local and parliamentary elections?

Narratives:

- What are your three main arguments for or against wind power? Have you changed your stance, and if so, why?

Probing into Their Narrative:

Refer to statements they have made in the media. Why did you say this? What is the basis for this statement?

Sources of Information and Stimulation:

- What sources do you use for news and information about wind power? Do you follow any groups on Facebook or other social media on this topic?
- Who do you discuss wind power issues with?

Interviewee's Experiences and Assessments of the Debate:

Tone and Content of the Debate:

- How do you perceive the tone and content of the debate?
 - Possible framing/follow-up: Do you think the debate is largely characterized by a controlled tone, factual content, and references to credible information? Or is there a significant element of a heightened tone, high conflict level, unfactual content, and personal attacks?

Duration and Evolution of Participation

- How long have you participated in or followed the debate, and how do you experience its development in terms of tone and content?

Opinions on Fellow Debaters:

- What do you think about the conduct of your fellow debaters, both those who agree and disagree with you?

Presence of Foreign Elements or Profiles in the Debate:

- Do you experience any strange or foreign elements or profiles in the social media debate? Anything or anyone that stands out in terms of language, content, tone, and background online? * NB: Should not be named.

Trust:

In Local Politicians

- To what extent do you find that people trust you and other local politicians to provide accurate information about wind power development? And to what extent do you perceive that people trust the government and parliament, as well as power companies, to provide accurate information on wind power issues?

In Others

- To what extent do you trust that local politicians and other political institutions such as the government and parliament, as well as power companies and the media, provide accurate information on issues concerning wind power development?

- To what extent are people concerned or uncertain about whether decisions are made on the wrong basis, for instance, from non-democratic pressure groups or the level of local involvement? If yes, elaborate.

Decision-making Processes – Only for Local Politicians:

Experience with Wind Power Projects:

- What has it been like to work on wind power project cases in light of the public debate on the topic?

Impact of Public Debate on Decision-making:

- How has the decision-making process around decisions in wind power project cases been influenced by the public debate?

Debate Dynamics:

- Is the debate constant or dynamic regarding support or opposition?

Questions for Journalists and Editors:

Filtering Content:

- To what extent have you had to filter out content (in reader contributions and interviews) or refrain from publishing opinions that have been unfactual and based on unreliable information within the wind power theme?

Tone and Content of the Debate:

- How do you perceive the tone and content of the debate?

- Possible framing/follow-up: Do you think the debate is largely characterized by a controlled tone, factual content, and references to credible information? Or is there a significant element of a heightened tone, high conflict level, unfactual content, and personal attacks?

Duration and Evolution of Debate Coverage:

- How long have you followed or worked on the debate, and how do you experience its development in terms of tone and content? What do you think about the conduct of the debaters?

Trust in Media:

- To what extent do you find that people trust the media to convey accurate information on wind power issues? And how are the media received by the debaters?

Presence of Foreign Elements or Profiles in the Debate:

- Do you experience any foreign elements or profiles in the social media debate? Anything or anyone that stands out in terms of language, content, tone, and background online? * NB: Should not be named.

Appendix 2 (see attachment)

Appendix 3 (see attachment)