



# Private informational governance in Post-Soviet waters: Implications of the Marine Stewardship Council certification in the Russian Barents Sea region



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## ABSTRACT

The Russian Barents Sea represents a celebrated example of sustainable fisheries management owing to effective and stable bilateral cooperation between Norway and Russia. The success of the state regime has not ruled out the emergence of private certification of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). The current study investigates the intended and unintended implications of the emergence and implementation of MSC certification in the Russian Barents Sea region. The employed conceptual framework builds on the literature on private informational governance, more specifically by providing an analytical prism of three core concepts: transparency, participation and trust. Based on interviews with stakeholders closely involved in MSC certification in Russia and literature analysis, this study concludes that MSC performs primarily a supplementary commercial function for Russian Barents Sea fisheries, which are already generally considered as sustainable, by ensuring access to the world market of sustainable fish and potentially providing a premium price. The certification mechanism has little to add to the well-established practices at sea, but it does urge companies to prioritise attention to such environmental issues as bycatch, discards and negative effects of bottom trawling through encouraging cooperation between fishing companies, NGOs and research institutions. Our analysis also suggests that indirectly MSC certification contributes to a growing divide between larger-scale, internationally oriented, distant-water fishing companies and the smaller-scale coastal fisheries dependent on state support. Finally, our analysis draws attention to the distrust of the Russian state in transnational private governance arrangements, like MSC, the implications of which are currently unclear.

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## 1. Introduction

The Barents Sea is widely praised as a case of sustainable fisheries management (e.g. Hønneland, 2000). The main commercial fish stocks of cod and haddock are regarded to be exploited sustainably and presently have full reproductive capacity (ICES, 2014). This achievement results from the long-standing cooperation between Norway and Russia, the two states governing the Barents Sea. The centre piece of this cooperation is the Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission (JNRFC) that has been successfully managing

the Barents Sea fisheries since its establishment in 1975 (Glubokov et al., 2014).

The Commission's scope expanded substantially with the establishment of the Permanent Committee for Regulation and Control in 1993 (Stokke, 2010), which responded to the widespread illicit practices among Russian fishermen after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent failure of the state fisheries regime to maintain compliance (Stokke, 2009). Thus, the cooperation broadened from primarily procedural measures (e.g. distribution of quotas, fish size and mesh size) to joint technical regulations, information exchange and mutual enforcement of fishery policies. The intensified cooperation stopped the intense overfishing of the early 1990s and 2000s (Hønneland, 2005) and initiated the recovery of fish stocks. As a result, in the past decade total allowable catches (TAC) almost doubled to 894,000 tonnes for cod and 178,500 tonnes for haddock in 2015 (JNRFC, 2014). Pragmatism and rigid mutual

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control born of complex political relations between Russia and Norway have been the main keys to the Commission's success.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the Barents Sea fisheries are an important economic sector in Northwest Russia. The Barents Sea fisheries comprise the fishing efforts of Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO), the Republic of Karelia, Arkhangelsk region and, most prominently, Murmansk region. The Northern fishery basin, which includes the Barents and Norwegian Seas, has a 15% share of total Russian catches (Gulbrandsen and Hønneland, 2014), second only to the Far Eastern basin (70%).

Russian fisheries have undergone a significant market transformation since the 1990s. They are now well connected to global trading networks; a significant share of the total Russian fish catch is exported. This export orientation has exposed Russian fisheries to western consumer expectations regarding environmental performance. Consumers demand reliable information about the sustainability of fish products; information that the traditional state-based management system cannot deliver. Consequently, private certification schemes have started to emerge. The dominant fisheries certification scheme in Russia is the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) ecolabel. MSC started in 1997 as a WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) initiative in partnership with Unilever and in 1999 became independent non-profit organisation (Fowler and Heap, 2000). It has developed into the world's leading certification programme for wild-capture fisheries (Auld, 2013). According to its mission statement, MSC aims to use its "ecolabel and fishery certification program to contribute to the health of the world's oceans by recognizing and rewarding sustainable fishing practices, influencing the choices people make when buying seafood, and working with our partners to transform the seafood market to a sustainable basis" (MSC, 2015). MSC's first involvement in Russia was in the Far East. More recently, it has rapidly expanded in the Barents Sea (see Table 1). In 2010, the Ocean Trawlers/Three Towns Capital group of companies became the first MSC certified company in the region, followed in 2013 by the Fishing Industry Union of the North (FIUN). FIUN represents the interests of 88 small and medium enterprises in the fisheries sector that account for some 37% of total cod and haddock catch in the Northern fishery basin.<sup>2</sup> The third MSC certification in the Barents Sea was given in May 2014 to the fishing companies Strelets and Eridan that operate three vessels. Currently the share of MSC certified Russian-caught Barents Sea cod and haddock is approaching 60% (Gulbrandsen and Hønneland, 2014). With the admission of Arkhangelsk Trawl Fleet, which is currently going through the certification process, the share of MSC certified Russian cod and haddock would reach some 90% of the TAC in the Northern fishery basin.

Private and state-based fisheries management arrangements for the Barents Sea now exist side by side. They both influence fisheries practices in the Barents Sea and they influence each other, but how and to what extent is poorly understood. This paper explores how the introduction of the MSC scheme has changed fisheries and fisheries management in the Russian Barents Sea. Following Gulbrandsen's (2009) premise that fisheries certification alone is unlikely to successfully address fisheries problems, the Russian Barents Sea provides an excellent environment for studying emerging private certification mechanisms in the conditions of well-established public policy for management of fish resources. The paper aims to make a contribution to the body of research on interactions between state institutions and non-state certification programmes (e.g. Foley, 2013 for insights from Canada). Three factors contribute to the relevance and timeliness of this research topic: Russia's strong tradition in state-based

command-and-control mechanisms, the background of intensifying economic activities (fisheries, hydrocarbon extraction and others) in the Arctic region, and the emergence of (private) informational governance as a new governance paradigm. Moreover, the recent political tension between Russia and the west over the Ukraine crisis, the resulting economic boycotts, and the rising sentiments against foreign involvement raise questions on the implications and limits of private governance in Russian fisheries.

The paper's central research question is: what implications have the emergence and implementation of MSC certification had in the Russian Barents Sea region? Some of these implications are intended: they are stated objectives of the MSC programme reflected in 3 core principles, namely, sustainable fish stocks, minimising environmental impacts, and effective management. There may also be unintended implications: effects of the MSC programme that were not explicitly envisioned but nevertheless influence fisheries practices or management. Both the intended and the unintended implications with regard to sustainability of fish stocks, environmental impacts, and management are addressed in this paper.

The paper approaches the research question from a private informational governance perspective. Three interlinked themes dominate the literature on informational governance: transparency, participation and trust (Mol, 2008, 2006). These three themes constitute the structuring framework for the study's empirical material. The heart of this empirical material is a set of interviews with key stakeholders involved in the Russian Barents Sea fisheries system. The objective of these interviews was to elicit stakeholder views on the effects of MSC certification. The interview results are complemented by a review of the scientific literature as well as policy documents on the issue.

The paper is organised as follows. Materials and methods are described in Section 2. Section 3 provides some theoretical background on private informational governance and its three core themes. The empirical results are presented in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the results and concludes the article.

## 2. Material and methods

The views of key stakeholders were elicited using a semi-structured interview approach that provides reliable and comparable qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 352–356). Semi-structured interviews allow respondents to share their knowledge, experience and opinions, and the interviewer to explore interesting viewpoints in more depth and detail. Fisheries management in the Russian Barents Sea is dominated by a handful of key actors, and the aim was to have all of them represented in the interview round. To minimise the likelihood of overlooking a major stakeholder organisation, and to maximise the likelihood of identifying the most knowledgeable person within each organisation, interviewees were selected using three complementary approaches. First of all, key organisations and individuals were extracted from publicly available MSC reports, interview accounts on specialised Russian fisheries websites, such as Fishnews and Fishkamchatka, and professional and scientific reports (e.g. Hønneland, 2004) on fisheries in the Barents Sea. Secondly, additional interviewees were identified during the conference "Sustainable Use of Biological Resources in the Russian Seas: Challenges and Perspectives" that was organised in Murmansk by WWF Russia. This conference, which was attended as part of a preparatory visit to the region from 13 to 23 May 2013, also served to establish contacts with previously identified stakeholders. Thirdly, recommendations from fisheries experts provided additional names of vital actors in Russian fisheries, using a so-called "snowball approach".

<sup>1</sup> Interview with stakeholders SC2 and MSC2, see Table 2.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.srps.ru/index.php/msc.html>.

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