

## 50 years of Russian studies in Tromsø

*Tore Nettet*

### 1. Introduction

In the fall semester of 1974, Associate Professor Ingvild Broch received the first four students of Russian at the University of Tromsø (UiT). In November 2024, we celebrated the first half century of Russian studies at our university, which is now known as UiT The Arctic University of Norway. In this article, I provide a brief historical sketch and a report from the anniversary seminar.<sup>1</sup>

Two main factors have had a strong impact on the development of Russian studies at our university: the geopolitical situation and overall changes in Norwegian academia. Since UiT The Arctic University of Norway is located in the Arctic and relatively close to the Norwegian-Russian border, shifting political climates have been important for our field. Russian studies were established in Tromsø during the Cold War. Then came the perestroika period with more extensive contacts across the border. Beginning from the 1990s, our university saw a period of extensive Norwegian-Russian collaboration with regard to education and research. This lasted until Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine started in 2022.

Changes in Norwegian academia have also impacted Russian studies. The rationale behind the establishment of a university in Tromsø was to create a knowledge hub for Northern Norway and to educate much-needed specialists for the regional labor market. Around the turn of the century, however, this regional perspective yielded to a more international orientation, whereby publications in international journals became more important. In the same period, Russian studies were “modularized”, i.e. divided into smaller courses, and, as a result of the so-called Bologna process, the degrees cand. mag. and cand. philol. were replaced in 2003 by a three-year bachelor's degree followed by a two-year master's program.

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<sup>1</sup> The present article is based on Erik Egeberg and Tore Nettet's presentation at Novemberseminaret in 2024. I am grateful for Erik Egeberg's contribution and comments on earlier versions of this article by Andrei Rogatchevski and Laura A. Janda. I will limit myself to discussing Russian studies in Tromsø at (what is now called) the Department of Language and Culture. In 2013, Finnmark University College merged with our university, but Russian studies in Finnmark is beyond the scope of this article. I will also not discuss the valuable contributions of colleagues from other departments in Tromsø. For a recent overview of the history of Slavic studies in Norway, see Janda (2019). An earlier overview is Egeberg (1982).

## 2. Student enrollment

As mentioned above, in 1974 four students enrolled in the beginners course. Since then, student enrollments have fluctuated, to some extent reflecting changes in the geopolitical situation. Enrollments peaked in the perestroika and early post-Soviet periods; in 1990, as many as 99 students enrolled in our beginners course. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, enrollments have been going down. In 2024, we had about 30–35 active students at all levels.

Figure 1 displays the aggregate numbers of graduates until 2003, when the old degrees were replaced owing to the Bologna process. “Semesteremne” was a one-semester beginners program (30 ECTS credits). “Grunnfag” (60 ECTS credits) involved two semesters of study on top of the “semesteremne”. A “mellomfag” was a four-semester program (120 ECTS credits), adding one semester to the “semesteremne” and “grunnfag”. As shown, 357 students completed one semester of Russian studies, while 173 did two more semesters of Russian studies, and 131 completed all four semesters of undergraduate Russian studies.

“Hovedfag” was a two-year graduate program leading to the cand. philol. degree. This program consisted of one semester of obligatory courses (“deleksamen”), followed by three semesters that were mainly devoted to a dissertation. A total of 51 students completed the obligatory courses, and 27 students defended their cand. philol. dissertations.

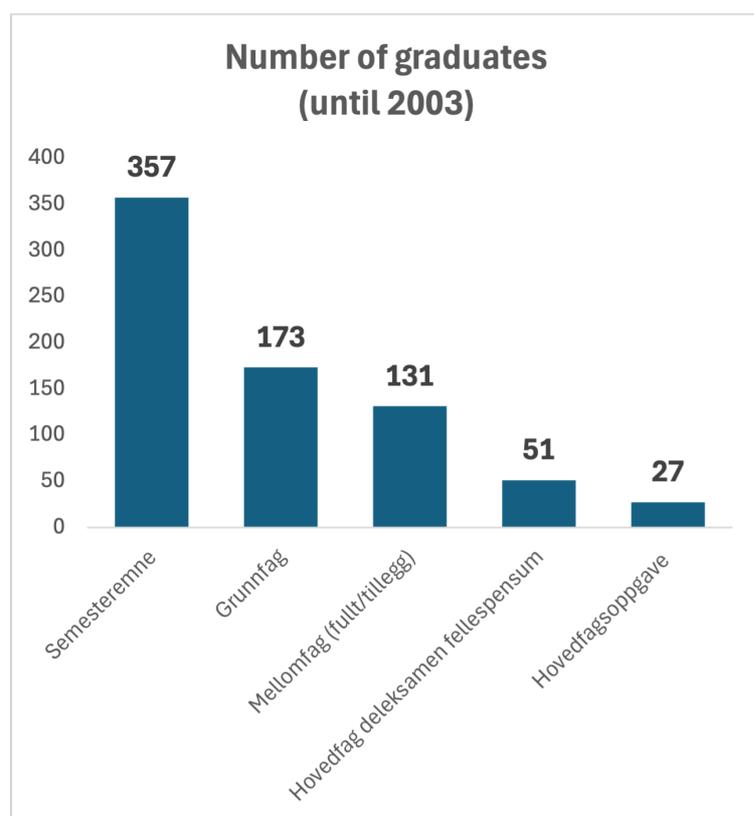


Figure 1: Number of graduates in Russian Studies at Tromsø in 1974-2003

From 2003 we have offered a one-year program (“årsstudium”), as well as full bachelor’s and master’s programs. Figure 2 shows that 15 students have completed the one-year

program, while 108 students have taken a full BA degree. A total of 42 students have been awarded a master's degree in Russian studies.<sup>2</sup>

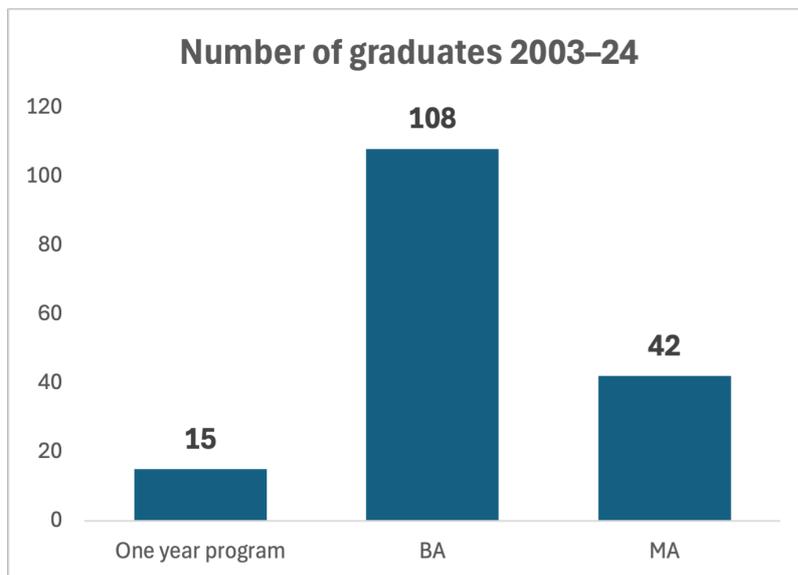


Figure 2: Number of graduates in Russian Studies from 2003 to 2024

### 3. *The pioneers*

Our first faculty member, Associate Professor Ingvild Broch (born 1939), was hired in 1972. She first taught introductory linguistics and phonetics, before she offered the first beginners course of Russian in the fall of 1974 (Bråstad Jensen 2018: 61). Broch taught at our university until 1994, when she was appointed as UiT's director of research, a position she held until 2004. As a linguist, Broch is known for her work on the Russo-Norwegian pidgin language Russenorsk (e.g., Broch & Jahr 1981).

In 1975, Broch was joined by Erik H. Egeberg (born 1941), who taught Russian until his retirement in 2008. Professor Egeberg is the author of a large number of scholarly publications on Russian literature and culture (e.g., Egeberg 2020), and is well known for his numerous translations of Russian fiction into Norwegian, spanning from Archpriest Avvakum's *Life* to Andrei Platonov's *Čevengur*. Among his translations are Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina* and Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*.

When Broch and Egeberg came to Tromsø in the 1970s, the university was still new. The decision to establish a university in Tromsø was made by the Norwegian Parliament in 1968, and the university was officially opened in 1972 (Fulsås 1993: 6). Broch and Egeberg therefore were true pioneers; not only did they build up Russian Studies in Tromsø from scratch, they did so in an entirely new university.

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<sup>2</sup> The names of the programs have changed several times. Figure 2 contains aggregate numbers for Russian studies, broadly defined as Russian language, literature, culture, and society. Numbers were obtained from the university administration in November 2024.

#### 4. *Expansion and collaboration with Russia*

For about fifteen years, Broch and Egeberg were the only permanently employed faculty members in the field of Russian Studies. However, when the Soviet Union opened up under Gorbachev and student enrollments increased, Russian Studies at UiT expanded. In 1989, Gunnar Opeide (born 1945) was hired as a research fellow, and then in 1993 as an Associate Professor (Egeberg 2005). He taught Russian literature and culture until his untimely death in 2005. His introduction to Russian history *Russisk historie fra Rjurik til Gorbatsjov: fakta og resonnement* (Opeide 2009) has been widely used as a textbook.

In the early 1990s three more faculty members came to Tromsø. Olga Komarova (born 1939) was hired in 1992, Lennart Lönngren (born 1942) in 1993, and Tamara Lönngren (born 1953) in 1994. Associate Professor Olga Komarova taught Russian until she retired in 2009. Professor Lennart Lönngren worked in Tromsø until he retired in 2007. He has published on a large number of topics in Russian and Slavic linguistics including valency structures in Russian (e.g., Lönngren 1998). Professor Tamara Lönngren has published on the dialects of the Russian old believers (e.g., Lönngren 1994), the saint Nil Sorskij (e.g., Lönngren 2000), and the Norwegian Slavist Olaf Broch, the first professor of Slavic studies in Norway and Ingvild Broch's great uncle (e.g., Lönngren 2016).

The 1990s were characterized by extensive cooperation with Russian institutions. In particular, the academic ties between Tromsø and Arkhangelsk became strong. In 1993, our university chartered an airplane and filled it with researchers and politicians who participated in a large conference in Arkhangelsk. This was the first western airplane ever to land in Arkhangelsk after the breakup of the USSR (Bråstad Jensen 2018: 64). Ingvild Broch was instrumental in developing the collaboration with Arkhangelsk and received an honorary doctorate from the Northern Federal University in Arkhangelsk in 2011.

In 1997, the first November Seminar of Russian studies, or "Novemberseminaret", was organized. This has become an annual seminar for faculty members and students, as well as invited scholars from Norway and abroad. One year later, in 1998, the first issue of our journal *Poljarnyj Vestnik* was published. The journal comes out once a year, since 2014 under the auspices of the Norwegian Association of Slavists. *Poljarnyj Vestnik* is a peer-reviewed online open-access journal that publishes scholarly articles about Slavic languages, literatures and cultures.<sup>3</sup>

An important event was the establishment of the Norwegian University Center in St Petersburg in 1998. The center played an important role for Slavic studies in Norway until it was forced to close in 2018. Every fall semester, our students would go to St Petersburg to take an intensive Russian language course at the Norwegian center.

A significant number of Norwegian and foreign Slavists have visited Tromsø and given invited lectures at our university. The Norwegian colleagues have included Erik Krag, Siri Sverdrup Lunden, Geir Kjetsaa, Terje Mathiassen, Aleksej Perminow and Jan Ivar Bjørnflaten from the University of Oslo, and Alf Grannes and Jostein Børtnes from the University of Bergen. A far from complete list of international visitors includes Boris

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<sup>3</sup> More information about the journal is available here: <https://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/vestnik>.

Uspenskij, Jurij Karaulov, Igor Mel'čuk, Valerij Berkov, Elena Padučeva, Vladimir Plungian, and Ekaterina Rakhilina.

### 5. *Russian Studies in Tromsø today*

As of 2024, we have five faculty members with permanent positions: Laura A. Janda, Tore Nesset, Andrei Rogatchevski, Yngvar B. Steinholt, and Svetlana Sokolova (the current head of the Russian Studies section). Our research is organized in two groups: CLEAR (Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian) and PSIF (Pax Slavica in Flux: European Contexts).

The CLEAR group led by Tore Nesset carries out empirical analyses of grammatical phenomena in Russian, mostly based on corpus data. The group has a strong emphasis on creating digital resources for language learning. Although the main focus has been on Russian language, members of the group are also engaged in research on other languages, such as Norwegian, North Sámi, Czech, Ukrainian, Spanish, and Persian.<sup>4</sup>

The PSIF group (led by Andrei Rogatchevski) is engaged in multidisciplinary research of Slavic histories and cultures within a wider European and indigenous context. The group's main focus is the concept of Russian space, understood as real and imaginary territories that Russia (provisionally or potentially) considers its own. Topics to do with the High North are given priority.<sup>5</sup>

### 6. *The 50 years' anniversary in 2024*

In order to celebrate the first fifty years of Russian studies in Tromsø, a "special edition" of Novemberseminaret was organized on November 29, 2024.<sup>6</sup> Present were the pioneers, Ingvild Broch and Erik Egeberg, as well as the retired professors Tamara and Lennart Lönngren. The seminar was opened by university director Jørgen Fosslund. One of our alumni, Deputy Secretary of State Jon Elvedal Fredriksen, gave a presentation of his professional journey from studying Russian in Tromsø via work as Norway's consul general in Murmansk and Norway's ambassador to Ukraine. Erik Egeberg and Tore Nesset gave an overview of the history of Russian studies at our university, and Professor Egeberg's new book of translations from Nikolai Karamzin (Karamzin 2024) was presented. The seminar also included scholarly papers by Tamara and Lennart Lönngren, as well as presentations of the two research groups, PSIF and CLEAR. PhD students Libbie Katsev and Valentina Zhukova presented their ongoing research projects. Another alumna, Gøril Johansen, told the sizeable audience about her work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, before Svetlana Sokolova closed the seminar.

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<sup>4</sup> For information about CLEAR, see <https://site.uit.no/clear/>.

<sup>5</sup> More information about PSIF is available here: <https://uit.no/research/rsopr>.

<sup>6</sup> The seminar's program is available here: <https://site.uit.no/novemberseminaret/novemberseminaret-2024/>.

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