

PERCEPTIONS OF CROSS-BORDER INTERACTION IN THE FINNISH-RUSSIAN BORDER REGIONS

Introduction

In the present-day integrating Europe, several political discourses emphasise international networks and cross-border contacts as tools in competing in the globalising world. International and cross-border contacts are seen necessary not only in national level, but in regional and local level development as well. While state borders loose their meaning as a separating factor, have border regions encountered a new situation by being enabled to direct cooperation across the borders. In the Finnish-Russian border this has meant above all opportunities to an increasing integration with the neighbouring side of the border, but also challenges of how to benefit from the partial opening of the border, which has the status of external border of the European union, as well.

This paper presents main findings of the interviews collected from 81 local cross-border cooperation (CBC) actors in North Karelia and South Karelia in Finland (altogether 39 respondents), and in the Republic of Karelia and Leningrad region in Russia (42 respondents). The interviews are based on the Finnish-Russian contribution to the European union funded EXLINEA research project (years 2003-2005), which has examined opportunities and constraints of cross-border cooperation at the EU's external borders. Karelian Institute of the University of Joensuu has been responsible for executing the Finnish-Russian case study research.

Perceptions of cross-border interaction (CBI)

Importance and on the other hand problematic of cross-border relations is as well pointed out by the interviewed Finnish and Russian CBC actors. Among the actors, cross-border interaction between Finland and Russia is seen to benefit both sides of the border. However, mutual interaction between the Finnish and Russian border regions is considered yet low and is expected to increase. Equal benefiting on both sides is regarded very important, because unbalanced benefits

would cause a situation, which does not encourage to sustaining cooperation in a long-term.

Most significant barriers regarding the CBI are frequent changing of the rules in business, corruption, and security problems, to which all the Finnish respondents took a more serious view than their Russian counterparts. Further, bureaucracy at the border (including visas, tariffs, queuing, and bureaucratic procedures in exports and imports), different language, and in addition in the Finnish side prejudices (especially indifference) towards the other were emphasised in terms of barriers. Moreover, as regards the Russian side, the respondents pointed out insufficient assistance by national, regional and local level associations and agencies, while in the Finnish side they were not seen as barriers at all. In the Russian side, only local government and European organisation's assistance for CBI were regarded as sufficient.

Interestingly, although the level of CBC is supported to be increased and the bureaucracy of the border crossing to be alleviated, the respondents were not enthusiastic about abolishing all the institutional barriers of the border. For instance visas and the present level of border control were generally accepted. This manifests on one hand, that the border still represent a meaning of (soft) security protection and a construct of national identity to the citizens and is important as such, but on the other hand, it expresses dependence of international scale politics, which in the Finland's case mean commitment to the Schengen agreement, and waiting of European union's outlook on visas towards Russia.

The Finnish and Russian respondents don't actually identify themselves with the idea of a "cross-border" region, but they both consider it as a desirable aim. They recognise common cross-border interests and some small scale examples of cross-border regionalism and find acceptable influences resulting from a more intensive cross-border interaction, but regard the border yet as a separating factor, however.

Regarding identification of a cross-border regionalism, the respondents recognise some small scale regionalism efforts. For instance in Imatra, there has introduced an alleviated visa application procedure to young persons (comprehensive school pupils), by allowing the visa to all those who apply it, for free. This is wished to lower the threshold to cross the border and make acquaintance to the other side and with the people living there. The experiment is seen as important in bringing

nearer the young citizens across the border, because some respondents in Imatra were especially concerned about young peoples indifference towards their Russian neighbours. Another and a different type example of small scale cross-border regionalism is given by a Finnish customs officer, who see the unified procedures on both side border checkpoints as an evidence of cross-border regionalism – although as a very specific branch example as it is.

Conclusions

In this paper I have discussed shortly the findings picked from the interviews made to Finnish and Russian cross-border cooperation actors, by concentrating on the subjects of meanings of the border, and cross-border regionalism. The results show, that the Finnish-Russian border is seen as an opportunity, which has still institutional and mental obstacles to be overcome. Although the respondents represent experts who are specialised in cross-border cooperation and are working to promote it, nonetheless, they are not enthusiastic about abolishing all institutional barriers. This also contributes to the observed absence of the feeling of a common cross-border region. On both sides, however, cross-border regionalism is regarded as a desirable long-term aim. The above mentioned small scale cross-border regionalism practices operate in given policy frames and are not recognised by a larger publicity, but as a long-term goal, it can be assessed that through these new established practices there is a possibility to achieve a perceptual change also regarding the concepts of border and cross-border regionalism.