

Incommodious border? Rethinking the function of the Finnish-Russian border

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This article examines the manner in which the often-mentioned barrier effect of the Finnish-Russian border as well as the greater interaction, enabled by the gradual opening of the border, is perceived among actors involved in cross-border co-operation or border management. The discussion surrounding the impacts of borders on the areas they divide provides the analytical basis on which this article is built. It is a composition of several proposals, which taken together suggest that, first and foremost, borders are barriers for interaction, which have several different roles, some of which are more resistant to change. The empirical data consists of 81 questionnaires, originally collected for the EXLINEA research project from North and South Karelia, in Finland and in the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad Oblast in Russia. The basic assertion of this article is that despite the benefits gained from its partial opening, the Finnish-Russian border and its side-effects still function as a barrier, separating the two sides from each other and hindering interaction. Given the role that the border plays this is not, however, a purely negative thing. A majority on both sides perceives the border as a necessary and useful institution that is sufficiently transparent to enable the two neighbours to interact in a mutually beneficial manner.

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Introduction

A border is a line that separates one from another. Its essential function has been to keep people in their own compartments and to control, regulate, or even prevent interactions between the included and the excluded. Reasons for the demarcation are often manifold. Throughout the history of the nation-state, political argument has been in vogue; a border consists of a margin around the edge of an entity sovereignly governed by a supreme power. In this sense, the diagnosis of who is in and who is out has also been unproblematic and straightforward. Nonetheless, for many whose everyday life is affected by a border, a particular line drawn on a map is often not the factor limiting their actions; it is rather the mental, symbolic, cultural, ethnic and virtual aspects that make a border incommodious from them.

Especially in today's Europe where cross-border co-operation (CBC) seems to be perceived as a useful tool for regional development and forging togetherness, the role of the border *per se* has

been transforming from a barrier towards a bridge; i.e. from a fence towards a resource. The opening of borders allows more flexibility and movement of various kinds, the benefits of which are now commonly perceived to be greater than the ill effects. In contrast to building cohesion and blurring divides, at the Finnish-Russian border the issue of concern is more the "ambiguity between co-operation and control" (Cronberg 2003: 223). Hence, the basic argument behind current EU policies that borders are barriers and barriers are to be removed sounds logical within the European Union, but at its external borders such a straightforward course of action may not be feasible – or even desired.

In comparison to internal EU borders, the function of the external one is more complex – especially as the role of the border happens to be bulked up with the Schengen *acquis*¹. Even though undergoing a process of opening, the Finnish-Russian border still illustrates the existence of fence-like borders in very close proximity to the heart of the 'borderless world'. Accordingly, the strict dif-

ferentiation of external/internal borders in the European context has elicited Anderson et al. (2002: 9) to argue that this "variable permeability of borders" represents "one of the major contradictions of the contemporary world". It is this variation that makes borders worth studying.

The aim of this article is to examine the manner in which the often-mentioned barrier effect of the Finnish-Russian border as well as the greater interaction, enabled by the gradual opening of the border, is perceived by the actors immediately involved either in CBC or border management. A barrier effect exists when the intensity of a certain form of interaction suddenly drops where a border is crossed due to the characteristics of the border (Rietveld 1993: 49, 2001: 83). Hence, this article focuses primarily on clarifying what these characteristics actually are in the Finnish-Russian context.

The empirical data derives from a standardized questionnaire survey completed by 81 actors involved in cross-border co-operation or border management in North and South Karelia, in Finland and in the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad Oblast in *Russia*². It should be noted that these individuals may be regarded as a specific group of people and their opinions may be unrepresentative of the respective national populations. A majority of the respondents can be classified as experts in the grounds of their practical experience and expertise, rather than in the sense that they would plainly obtain a position that allows them to offer authoritative informed views of specialized fields. Even though expert opinions are most often regarded as clear, consistent and accurate, it is unlikely that they would be free of personal values and attitudes.

Relying on the logic of Saarinen (1976) that people's perceptions of a subject tend to be increasingly exaggerated the further away they are from the subject in question, the actors working at the border formed an ideal sample group for this study. Certainly, it may well be the difference in interpretative frame that makes the border to appear in a different light depending on the level it is observed from; local level actors view the border through different lens than the actors at the national or supranational level. The perceptions of the local and regional level actors, one would hope, are the most likely to arrive closest to the actuality of situation at the Finnish-Russian border, an understanding of which may guide us to make better decisions and actions in the future.

Analytical underpinnings

Border as a barrier

A barrier is defined as any condition or action that hinders or restricts free movement and interaction of people, capital, products, services, ideas, etc. The barrier effect of a border, then, refers to the negative effect of such conditions on border exchanges between territories (Lösch 1940/1954: 196–205; De Boe et al. 1999: 36; Alanen & Eskelinen 2000: 22–56). The effect underlines differences between two countries and the lack of spatial integration between them. Such a discontinuity can also generate difficulties for CBC, in the sense that differences in behaviour, cultural and linguistic background or in socio-economic level can reduce the possibilities of relationships and interaction. On the other hand, a high barrier effect can be seen as catalyst for increased co-operation in the sense that the 'differential' they provide or the 'complementarity' they show can encourage flows between areas (De Boe et al. 1999: 17).

There exist various reasons for the existence of the barrier effect. According to Rietveld (1993: 49, 2001: 83), the most important of these are: 1) weak or expensive transport infrastructure service links; 2) consumer preference for domestic rather than foreign products and destinations; 3) government interventions; and 4) lack of information on foreign countries. Apart from consumer preferences, all of these may have both *monetary* and *time* effects (Rietveld 2001: 84–86); e.g. the border crossings entail extra costs and/or time. Consumer preference may be based on taste, language or ethnic and cultural differences. In addition to distance-bridging costs in transport and communication, linguistic and cultural dissimilarities, as well as differences in the scope of social and political life, political influences may deliberately or unintentionally result in the further separation of countries (Peschel 1993: 27).

Alanen and Eskelinen (2000) have examined impact of borders on economic activities. They suggest that borders are primarily *institutional obstacles* for potential economic activities (see also Batten & Nijkamp 1990; Nijkamp et al. 1990; Knox & Agnew 1994: 65–106; Janssen 2000; Blatter 2004). Such a way of thought derives from the works of Lösch (1940/1954: 196–205; cf. Boggs 1940; Giersch 1949/1950), who described borders as *artificial obstacles* for trade. In his opinion, state borders truncate regular market networks, result-

ing in economic losses. "Tariffs are like rivers", he argues, "which separate their banks economically more than would correspond to their actual width" (Lösch 1940/1954: 200). Van Houtum (1999: 9–19; cf. O'Dowd 2002) has discovered that in addition to economic constraints, borders tend to increase the euclidean, travel or transport, communication, time, economic, administrative, social, cultural, affective, cognitive and/or mental distance. Thus, the economic aspect is by far not the sole underlying motive for border analysis.

Open versus closed borders

"The whole issue of borders", van Houtum (1998: 15) states, "would not be so challenging and interesting a subject if man would not want them to be changed". Borders are subject to continuous change not only in space, but also through time. Categorizing borders as either 'open' or 'closed' paints a rather black and white picture. The reality is greyer, as a border may be permeable at one point in time and impermeable at another or may be permeable for some functions and impermeable for other functions. Furthermore, a distinction between 'openness' and 'permeability' has to be made (Langer 1999: 32–33). Openness refers to "the level of expenses needed to cross the border

at official border crossings", whereas permeability "designates the ability of a border to prevent illegal crossings, inside and outside the check points" (Langer 1999). Hence, a closed border may be permeable and *vice versa*.

Translated into human activities, an open border situation refers to "a centrifugal orientation of the actors contained with the border" (van Houtum 1998: 16). In a situation where borders cease to limit the space for action, free movement is prevalent (van Houtum 1998: 16; cf. Ratti 1993). Such an open border no longer functions as a barrier, but rather as a bridge connecting two sides of a border together, creating a meeting place for actors from various levels. In a closed border situation, where borders present an insurmountable barrier, the centripetal effect of the border is more prominent, i.e. people inhabit a closed territory and activities are oriented towards the interior (van Houtum 1998: 17).

The effect of the border, shown in Fig. 1, is the same whether it is examined from a purely economic or a more general perspective. A closed border functions as a dividing line separating the two sides of the border from each other. This forces not only companies, but also people in general to orient themselves towards the interior of the country, limiting simultaneously the potential market

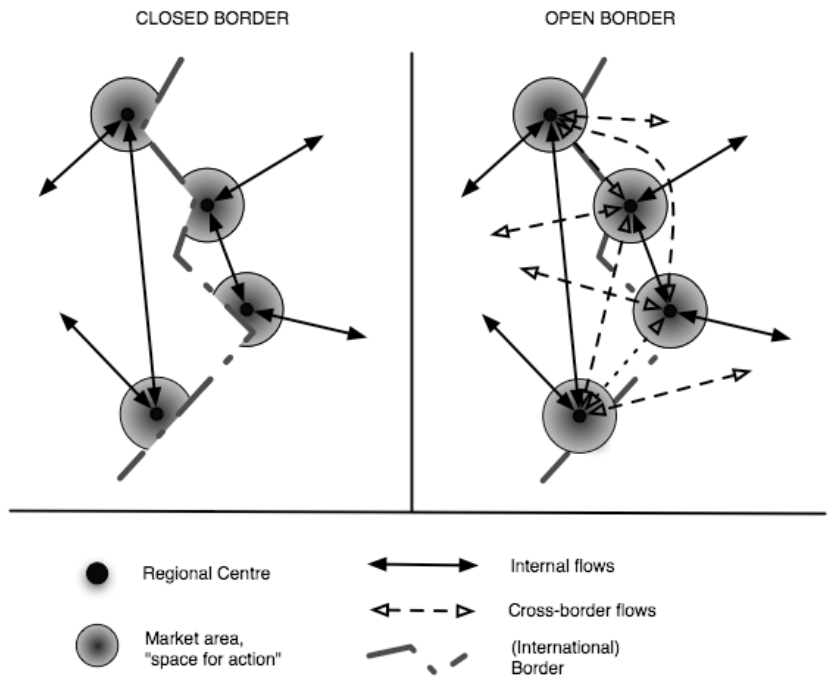


Fig. 1. Influence of the opening of a border on the increase of cross-border contacts. Adapted from: Heigl (1978) and Janssen (2000).

area or potential space for action. Such a demarcation means weaker competitiveness in relation to other otherwise comparative centres (cf. Rietveld 1993, 2001). The location as an edge of a community, often sidelined from the central power's reach, is what encourages border regions to be referred to as 'peripheral'. The EU is perhaps the most well known example of what is considered to be an open border situation. In this case national governments have decided to relax – at least certain functions of – their national borders. This decision encourages cross-border economic activities, which in turn aims to deliver economic growth for the states in question and for the Union as a whole.

Consequences of the opening

Despite their multifaceted blocking abilities, borders need not be associated as inherently disadvantaged; they have also the potential to catalyze innovation. The degree of border openness relates to its relative effect as a barrier. In other words, the effect of a border depends on the capability of people to cross the border. Borderlands, then, have distinct features and unique characteristics due to either increased interaction or lack thereof. Merckx (2000) describes borderlands as dynamic areas with interplay between restrictions and opportunities. As the barrier effect of the border becomes lower, new forms of movement across the political, restrictive dividing lines can lead to new relations and dynamics, or even give rise to new complex identities along with creating stronger regional attachments (Merckx 2000). Wilson and Donnan (1998: 22; see also Donnan & Wilson 1999) also note that a border may act both as a barrier and a bridge, even simultaneously. Borders limit movement and, consequently, fruitful communication, but two-way flows across it can bring progress and benefits.

Despite its ill-effects, most notably smuggling, illegal migration and other delinquencies, openness is often seen in positive light. Lower barrier effect may enable a border region to develop from a national level periphery towards an international centre by allowing people and enterprises in the close proximity to the border benefit from their new window-position. Openness creates new opportunities, for example by the means of new contacts and expanding market area, but on the other hand also competition is likely to intensify as the enterprises across the border are able to capture

the same markets. Albeit a necessary condition, openness alone is insufficient to transform a border region from a mere transit zone to what van Geenhuizen and Ratti (2001) refer to as "active space". In order to generate cross-border interaction and subsequently to deliver social added value in terms of cohesion between the two sides, not only demand, but also creative learning abilities as well as a concern for sustainability is required (Geenhuizen & Ratti 2001).

The dynamics of change and future opportunities it may bring along are often based on the mental constructions people have. These constructions sketched by a person's perceptions of the reality are often demonstrated through his or her day-to-day behaviour and actions. In this respect, a border may well be open *de jure*, but closed *de facto*. The same applies to interaction; it has to be perceived as mutually beneficial and favourable by actors themselves in order to maintain itself and prosper. In the following emphasis is placed on perception in order to challenge the simple but profound concern of geographers that humans interact most with those to whom they are closest – the axiom being that the way in which a border is perceived affects the volume of interaction across the border.

Construction and changing role of borders

This article ponders how people mentally construct borders according to their own experiences and knowledge, how the consequently reproduced border is perceived, and according to which criteria the neighbouring regions diverge from each others. Thus, the analysis of the border barrier effect relies more on social constructions and feelings of belonging, rather than habitual market flow or locational disadvantages models. In trying to determine the actions and behaviour of people at and within the national borders, the borders themselves are no longer seen merely as territorial lines at a certain place in space, but as symbols of processes of social binding and exclusion that are both constructed or produced in society as well as reproduced via perceptions, symbols, norms, beliefs and attitudes (van Houtum 2000: 7).

Borders are doubtlessly in flux, but they are not likely to disappear, as some authors were eager to announce in the 1990s (see Reich 1991; Ohmae 1995, 1999). Others (see e.g. Anderson 1995; Hirst & Thompson 1996/1999; Paasi 1996, 2005; Newman 1999) call for more analytical approach-

es to scrutinize the changing role of not only borders, but also the state, power and sovereignty in a globalizing world. Traditional definitions and comprehension of borders have been challenged for the simple reason that the context in which they have existed has also altered. The world, where borders were understood merely as concrete, empirical manifestations of state sovereignty, no longer exists. Whereas the nation-state has been losing some of its importance, sub- and transnational regions have elevated their profile. As Anderson and O'Dowd (1999: 594) have discovered, every state border, and every border region, is unique. Even if there are no common solutions to context specific problems, it does not mean that the structural properties of the larger system, which dictate the depth and range of the regional arrangements, could be neglected. Local particularities, whether political, economic, social or cultural, can only be understood in terms of wider conceptualizations (Anderson & O'Dowd 1999: 594).

Borders guide, and even obstruct, human activities in space. Whether concrete or abstract, borders serve a purpose. Concrete borders are visible indicators of the limits of an organization's jurisdiction, whereas abstract borders are cognitive borders – borders that have been mentally conceived by people (van Houtum 1998: 39). This distinction is based on dualism between "things as they 'really' are and things as they look to us" (Koffka 1935: 35). In this respect, perception plays an important role as the starting point of a cognitive process. The knowledge and recognition of environmental stimuli, a 'spatial cognition', must be regarded as the subjective 'knowing of a space' given that it results from the interaction between appearance and personal perception (van Houtum 1998: 39; cf. Veitch & Arkkelin 1995).

It is crucial to understand the role of a border as a barrier in a cognitive sense. As discussed by Kamann (1993), territorial units divided by a border are likely develop different cognitive spaces. The information on one side of the border reaches the other side rarely or not at all and thus, spatial cognition, the frame of reference for activities in space, declines across the border (van Houtum 1998: 40). Cognitive space is determined mainly by personal experience-based reality, but also by knowledge-based reality (van Houtum 1998: 41). New contacts invite new information and experiences, which in turn enable people to develop new assumptions about reality. These assumptions guide their actions in everyday life. Openness, in terms

of more extensive information flows and increased mobility, makes it also possible for one to expand his or her knowledge-based reality, thereby making a positive distinction between the borders of the mind and territorial borders (van Houtum 1998: 41).

Lundén's (1973) study of different kinds of spatial cognition verifies that a border can cause a true division. Even though he discusses the situation at the border between Norway and Sweden, where the setting differs greatly from that at the Finnish-Russian border, its message seems valid also here, where – if anything – the role of the border as a separator should be even stronger. His results show that only recreational activities and shopping profit from the division, whereas all other activities are obstructed by the border's presence. This comes fairly close to the situation at the Finnish-Russian border, where a great deal of the border traffic consists of short visits for buying low-cost commodities, petrol and tobacco.

The Finnish-Russian border as a barrier

Barriers for co-operation

The part of the EXLINEA research project that focused on identifying barriers to interaction and cross-border co-operation consisted of 42 border-related factors that were grouped in six main categories. The analysis of the collected material shows that the respondents perceive the Finnish-Russian border as an intermediate barrier for interaction. Given that the border used to be practically closed, it can be argued that a significant change has occurred during the last two decades. However, the role of the border as a barrier is perceived as much higher in the case of some factors than in others. In total, the factors that fall under the category of *trade conditions* is perceived to be the highest barrier, followed by *general conditions*, *level of assistance* and *economic geography*, all of which are perceived as intermediate barriers (Fig. 2). In the case of *trade conditions*, the opinion of both the Finnish and the Russian respondents is close to analogous, whereas a significant differences between the nationality groups can be found in the case of *general conditions* and *economic geography*, which the Finnish respondents rank higher than the Russians, and *level of assistance*, which form a higher barrier for the Russians than the Finns. Of the six categories, only *border*

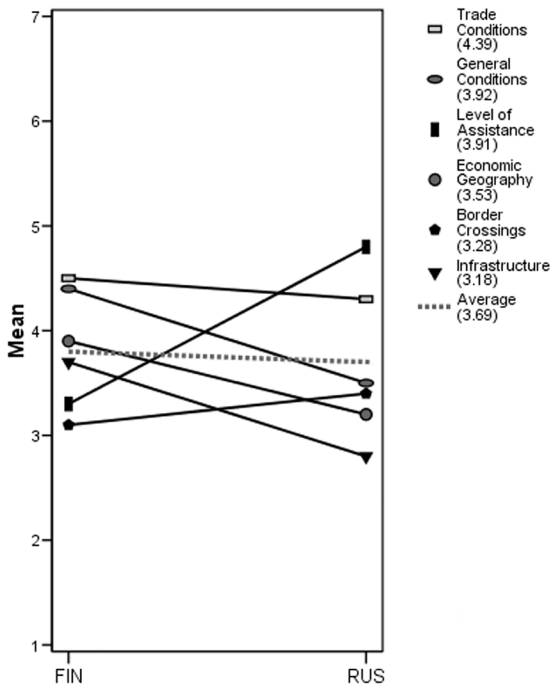


Fig. 2. The comparative assessment of the height of the barrier effect (1 = no barrier, 7 = insurmountable barrier).

crossings and *infrastructure* are perceived as low barriers in total. Here, a statistically significant difference³ is found in the case of *infrastructure*, which the Finnish respondents perceive to form a higher barrier for interaction than the Russian respondents.

The differences between the Finnish and Russian responses become more apparent when the main categories are broken up and all the variables studied individually. Table 1 illustrates all the factors that are perceived to be high barriers for CBC ($M < 4.5$).

It should be mentioned that not all the factors featured here are directly related to the border *per se*, but are rather perceived at least to be caused by it and, thus, to have an influence on the formation of the barrier effect. It seems that the interaction across the border is mainly perceived as being hindered by the problems originating from the Russian side. From the Finnish respondents' perspective, the main obstacles for interaction are *frequently changing rules in business*, *corruption* (in Russia) and *security problems* (in Russia). From the Russian respondents' responses, then, it becomes clear that it is particularly the *level of assistance*, i.e. financial support and political will, from business associations and agencies of various levels as well as from the national government that seems to form the most outstanding barriers for interaction.

In the other end, amongst the lowest obstacles ($M < 3.5$) to CBC a number of surprising factors can be found (Table 2). Historical events, cultural differences and infrastructure, factors that were assumed to pose a barrier given their prevailing presence in popular writings and discussions, are perceived by the respondents to hinder CBC only to a minor extent.

Even though the Finnish and the Russian perspective seem to differ also when it comes to the

Table 1. The highest barriers for cross-border co-operation (mean).

Finnish respondents	Russian respondents
1. Frequent changing of the rules in business (5.6)	1. Insufficient national business associations' assistance (5.5)
2. Corruption (5.1)	2. Insufficient national agencies assistance (5.4)
3. Security problems (4.9)	2. Insufficient local agencies assistance (5.4)
3. Limited product differentiation of local economy (4.9)	3. Insufficient regional agencies (5.3)
4. Quality of banking system (4.8)	4. Insufficient national government (5.2)
5. Different Language (4.7)	5. Insufficient regional business associations' assistance (5.1)
6. Tariffs or duties imposed by Russia on exports (4.6)	6. Insufficient local business associations' assistance (4.8)
6. Low purchasing power of the nearby markets (4.6)	7. Bureaucratic procedures in imports (4.7)
6. Different Culture (4.6)	7. Limited product differentiation of local economy (4.7)
7. Bureaucratic procedures in imports (4.5)	7. Frequent changing of the rules in business (4.7)
7. Technical requirements concerning exports (4.5)	7. Limited product differentiation of local economy (4.7)
	7. Bureaucratic procedures in import (4.7)
	8. Technical requirements concerning imports (4.5)

Table 2. The lowest barriers for cross-border co-operation (mean).

Finnish respondents	Russian respondents
1. Closeness of check points (1.9)	1. Difficult geographical conditions in border regions (1.9)
2. Difficult geographical conditions in border regions (2.6)	2. Closeness of check points (2.0)
3. Inadequate number of check points (2.7)	3. Different religion (2.1)
3. Different religion (2.7)	4. Telecommunications (2.2)
4. Roads (3.0)	5. Roads (2.3)
5. Insufficient local agencies assistance (3.1)	6. Large cities in Finland too far away (2.4)
5. Insufficient regional business associations assistance (3.1)	7. Historical events (2.6)
5. Insufficient local government assistance (3.1)	8. Different Culture (2.8)
6. Insufficient regional agencies assistance (3.2)	9. Low purchasing power of the nearby markets in Finland (2.9)
6. Insufficient local business associations' assistance (3.2)	10. Political instability (3.0)
6. Insufficient regional government assistance (3.2)	11. Inadequate number of check points (3.2)
6. Large cities in Russia too far away (3.2)	12. Public transport (3.3)
7. Insufficient European (international.) organizations assistance (3.3)	13. Different Language (3.3)
7. Passport officers treatment and attitude (3.3)	14. Insufficient (in size) nearby markets in Finland (3.4)
8. Insufficient national business associations' assistance (3.4)	
8. Insufficient national agencies assistance (3.4)	
8. Telecommunications (3.4)	

lowest barriers for CBC, a number of similarities can also be found. Interestingly both sides perceive *closeness of check points*, *inadequate number of check points*, *difficult geographical conditions*, *different religion*, *roads*, the location of *large cities the other side of the border* and *telecommunications* to be either low or even very low barriers for interaction. Unlike in Russia, it seems that on the Finnish side the level of assistance is sufficient and that the infrastructure does not pose a major barrier for CBC either. From the Russian point of view, CBC seems to go fairly unhindered by the basic circumstances and setting of the border area; thus, investment in support and assistance could fetch improvements fairly rapidly.

Greater interaction and its impact

Respondents perceive CBC at the Finnish-Russian border in a positive light. This is not only the *result* of successful policies and practices, but also an essential *prerequisite* for future development. Images of the other are mainly positive; however the Finnish respondents have a clearly more restrained positive image of Russians than *vice versa*. The study also reveals that CBC practices at the Finnish-Russian border have failed to realize their full potential, presumably largely due to several out-

standing factors which are underlined as causes of a high barrier effect. While all governing levels on the whole are perceived positively by both sides, actors at the local level are perceived to be the most effective. From the Russian perspective, efforts at both the regional level and in particular at the national level are perceived to lag behind in efficiency. Furthermore, the impact of the EU, the newcomer in the field, is also seen in a positive light by both sides. The activeness and efficiency of the local level is perceived to be bolstered by private citizens, cultural associations and universities and research centres. Most importantly, the potential gains of greater interaction are perceived to be greater than losses in both border regions and, in general, the respondents perceive that both countries stand to gain from interaction (Fig. 3).

Discussion

Border and flows

The Finnish-Russian border is still perceived as an element of distance. It has various implications not only for spatial interaction alone, but also for the economic development of the border regions. The high barrier effect of *trade conditions*, but also of

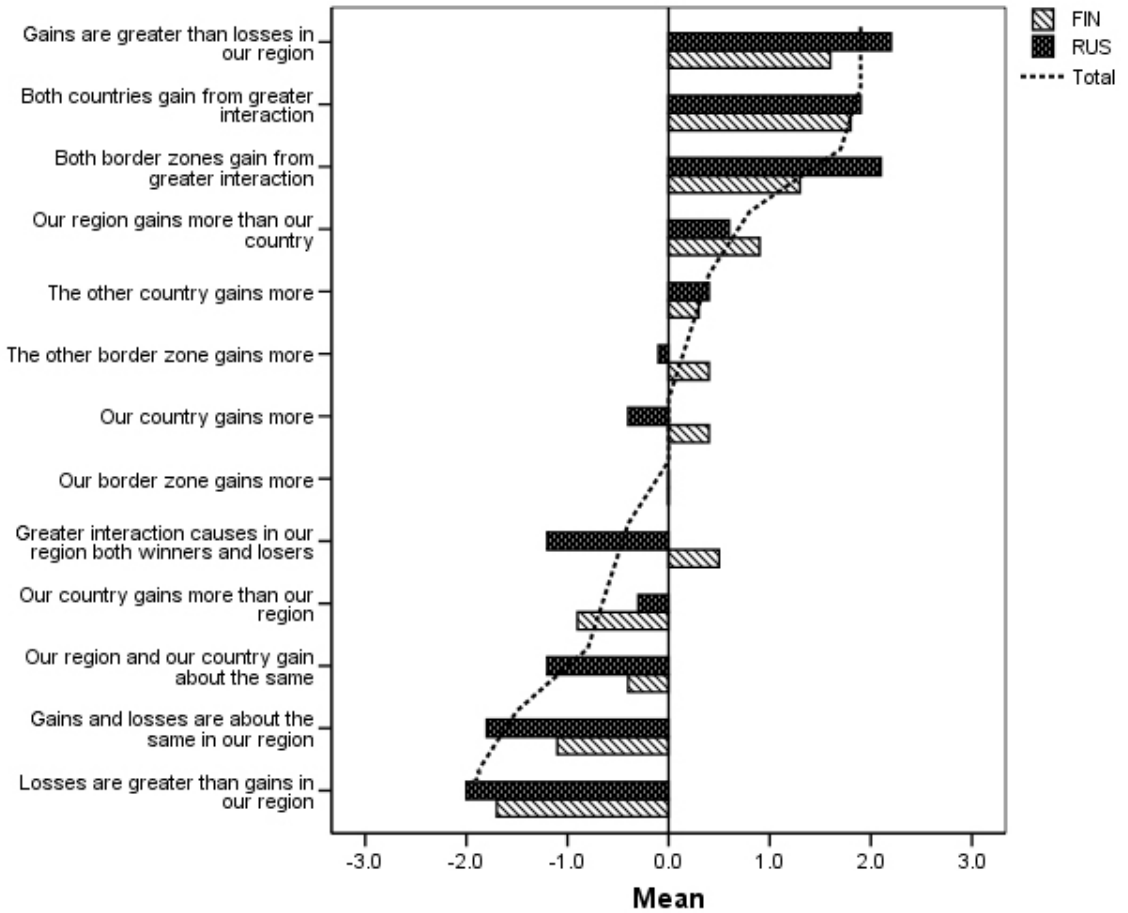


Fig. 3. Comparative assessment of the gains of greater interaction between the two countries (−3 = not at all true, 3 = absolutely true).

economic geography, causes the interaction across the border to be weaker than within each respective state. Keeping in mind that infrastructure has the ability to drastically alter a region’s competitive advantage, it was encouraging to discover that it was ranked the lowest barrier of all the given main sectors.

There are various reasons for the existence of the border barrier effect. In total, none of the 42 factors are perceived as very low barriers or non-barriers to interaction. A majority of them (33) are perceived to function at least as an intermediate barrier and six as a high barrier for CBC. Most of these factors have both monetary and temporal effects. Not all of these factors relate strictly to the actual border *per se*, but at some level all of them originate from it. This indicates that the border

ought to be understood as a wider social construction rather than merely as a narrow political line.

Trade conditions, particularly bureaucratic procedures concerning foreign trade (both imports and exports), and technical requirements concerning both imports and exports, are among the major obstacles to CBC. This supports the way of thought that the Finnish-Russian border functions first of all as an institutional obstacle for potential economic activities. However, like most of the highest ranking barriers from the Russian point of view, these factors can be changed fairly easily. While trade obstacles can be changed by decision-makers – provided that there is the will to do so, corruption, security problems and fluctuating rules in business are more deeply imbedded barriers and

more resistant to change. From the Finnish perspective, it is precisely these factors that pose the highest barriers to interaction. Therefore, concentrating on these factors could yield considerable results.

The large differences in the evaluation of the separate factors, from a low barrier to a very high barrier, indicate that the open-closed division paints an indisputably exaggeratedly black-and-white portrayal of reality. The findings suggest a constant juggle between access and control, and support the claims by Langer (1999: 32–33) who has argued that a border may be permeable for some functions and impermeable for others.

It should be stressed that the mere ranking of factors (Tables 1 & 2) neglects the actual differences between them. More often than not, the statistical testing proved that there exists a relatively strong mutual understanding of which factors within each main sector represent the main barriers for interaction and which do not. This is an important prerequisite for the future development of CBC towards a more intensive, mutually beneficial co-operation between equal partners.

Due to its multifaceted nature, the Finnish-Russian border is likely to remain as a filter for a diverse set of flows and the regions divided by it as battlegrounds between fragmenting and cohesive forces. There exists, however, a fair amount of potential for the regions to transform from a national level periphery towards an international centre, if the border's barrier effect continues to decline, enabling each side to expand their contacts and active space across the border. Furthermore, as Westlund (1999: 107) argues, technical-logistical and political-administrative borders are much less resistant to change than cultural-historical borders. That is to say that even if the political role of the border would change, its mental characteristics etched in people's memories cannot be erased with a single political decision. Newman's (2003: 130) argument that "the longer they [borders] remain *in situ*, the harder they are to remove or change" seems to cast doubt onto the notion that proximity equals interaction.

Consequently, the neo-liberalist logic that borders are barriers and barriers are to be removed sounds too simple when considering the situation surrounding the Finnish-Russian border. Based on the interview material of the EXLINEA project, Ruusuvoori (2004; see also Liikanen et al. 2007) concludes that even though border bureaucracy and the red-tape surrounding border crossings should

be curtailed, the border itself must be maintained in terms of border control and visas requirements. Conversely, for some of the respondents the future opening of the border seem evident, even if they themselves believe that the border should not be totally opened. However, notwithstanding the downplay of the historical aspects, the desire to maintain the barrier effect of the border at least to a certain extent, even if it entails perpetuating peripherality, would suggest that the *raison d'être* of the border is unlikely to be surrendered in the foreseeable future.

Border region and cross-border co-operation

Despite the barrier effect of the Finnish-Russian border, the respondents hold optimistic perceptions of both the initial conditions as well as the future prospects of CBC. Greater interaction is perceived to be mutually beneficial, which is the most probable reason behind the optimistic attitude. Evidently, maintaining a positive attitude may well be part of their job description, however their opinion is also encouraged by the gradually improving conditions at the border since the early 1990s. In any case, these positive sentiments are not only the result of CBC practices but also their prerequisite.

The border's barrier effect has an effect on people's behaviour in different circumstances and on their perception of places and their surroundings (Hallikainen 2003: 18). This effect depends on the capacity of people to cross the border, which in itself depends on the characteristics of the border (van der Schelde & Høekveld 1992: 483). The characteristics of the Finnish-Russian border have created a barrier that, despite its increased porosity, hinders interaction and the formation of cross-border regional systems.

The underlying aim of CBC is to remove barriers and other factors that contribute to the separation of political entities. In the Finnish-Russian context, however, the profound mission of co-operation tends to be to overcome the negative effects of the border and develop good neighbourly relations, rather than erase barriers completely. Here, for many, good fences really do make good neighbours. The openness of the border may well be an admirable objective, but it has to be borne in mind, as Cronberg (2003: 223) argues, that the co-operation practices at the external border of the EU, characterized by a constant juggle between access and control, have to face a remarkably different

reality from the EU's internal borders, where the co-operation aims to build cohesion and blur divides.

In the Finnish-Russian case, a process of 'hybridization' is taking place through the development of new transnational communities⁴ (cf. Matzeit 2005: 2). These communities form a link between localities on both sides of the border and help transcend the considerable barriers to interaction that exist between the two countries. EU policies and concrete co-operation projects have aimed to reduce historical animosities, resentment and negative images that have obstructed interaction in the past, often manifested as distrust and suspicion. The positive evaluation of historical events and the other as a partner may suggest that effective co-operation is already taking place – even though the existing opportunities and instruments to enhance CBC are not, in terms of perceptions, being fully utilized.

Effective CBC cannot be based only on goodwill; it requires input and motivation from both sides. The identifying of highest and lowest barriers for CBC will help to target future co-operation policies and practices more efficiently. As expected, differences do exist. Given that most of these differences are, nevertheless, perceived in a fairly positive light, it would be more useful to consider them as potential starting points, rather than simply herald their ability to hinder interaction. Both Finnish and Russian respondents have relatively similar opinions concerning the barrier effect of the border, which indicates that there exists a general awareness of shared problems. This is, according to Anderson (2000: 211), the most important requirement for an effective co-operation. On the other hand, the fields or factors, which are perceived not to pose a significant barrier effect, could, following the "go across where the fence is the lowest" logic, be utilized more effectively to generate more intensive co-operation.

Altogether CBC ranks high in the respondents' minds and visions. Creating good contacts with a former enemy state, across a dividing line that was once envisioned to be the battlefield of the clash of civilizations, seems to be feasible and desirable goal. To realize this would not only be valuable for the sake of these two countries, but a step towards region and trust building on various levels and sectors. Thus, the setting enabling conditions for the growth of CBC should remain one of the most important tasks of EU policy (cf. van Houtum & Scott 2005: 26).

People and the construction of the border

The last two decades have fundamentally changed the role and function of the Finnish-Russian border. Relying on the ideas of North (2005), a change depends on the ability and effectiveness of the societies in question to create institutions that are productive, stable, fair, broadly accepted and – perhaps most importantly – flexible enough to be modified in response to feedback. In contrast to evolutionary theories, the key to understanding change is to comprehend the intentionality of the actors involved (North 2005: vii). Change is a process that is guided by the perceptions of the actors. Choices and decisions are made in light of those perceptions with the intent of reducing uncertainty in pursuit of the given goal. Thus, change represents a deliberate process shaped by preferences and priorities the actors define for themselves on the grounds of the envisioned outcomes they presume their own actions and decisions will have. In this respect, the role of the border as a mental construction, which is derived from both contemporary and historical experiences, cannot be neglected.

The distinction between the Finnish and the Russian actors was made because of the belief that the time the border used be practically closed would have had a significant impact on the development of different, disjointed cognitive spaces. Geographic past of a person influences his or her performance and further contributes to the process of change. This in mind, the perspectives of the different sides were, however, not that different, which raises the question how different the two sides of the border are after all?

Even if co-operation comprises part of what North (2005: viii–ix) refers to as the "genetic architecture of humans", so is the human tendency to draw borders and build fences. The somewhat paradoxical finding that opening of the border and intensifying interaction is seen in a positive light, while the opinion that border *per se* should be maintained endures, denote the existence of a gap between intentions and outcomes. However, the finding that both sides perceive co-operation to be beneficial is the most important prerequisite for the future development of lively interaction. This indicates that in the minds of the respondents the role of the Finnish-Russian border has begun to transform from a great dividing line into a fuzzier zone of interaction. Mental constructions accumulate through time and they change slowly. Such

changes can, however, be accelerated when people perceive new opportunities or react to new threats to their well-being.

Practical issues from the time spent crossing the border to the money spent on custom tariffs or bureaucratic procedures influence the mental constructions individuals rely on to explain the world around them. We construct concepts and schemes to make sense of experiences that we then test and modify in light of new experiences (Schwandt 2000: 197). These interpretations are not, however, constructed in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and the like. All of these factors influence conceptions of the other and result in various evaluations of the other's perceived usefulness and potential as a partner for co-operation.

Conclusions

This article has utilized the data of the Finnish-Russian case study of the EXLINEA project in order to examine the manner in which the often-mentioned barrier effect of the Finnish-Russian border as well as the increased interaction across is perceived among the actors involved in cross-border co-operation or border management. The analysis attests that despite its gradual and partial opening, the Finnish-Russian border and its side-effects function still as a barrier separating two sides from each other and hindering interaction between them. Given the role that the border bears, this is not, however, a purely negative thing. Earlier results have shown that a majority on both sides perceive the border as a necessary and useful institution that is sufficiently transparent to enable the neighbouring nations to interact in a mutually beneficial manner (Scott & Matzeit 2006: 48; Liikanen et al. 2007). The findings of the present study support this conclusion.

In contrast to the internal borders of the EU, where CBC aims to build cohesion and blur divides (Cronberg 2003: 223), here on the external EU border, where the Schengen *acquis* also plays an important role, CBC is characterized by a continuous juggle between access and control, and thus the barrier function of the border is also highly valued. Consequently, the argument that borders are barriers and barriers are to be removed, which seems also to be the basis of current EU policy making, is hardly valid in the Finnish-Russian case, in which the old dictum that "good

fences make good neighbours" seems still very valid.

This may well be because the border is no longer seen as a strict cut-off line, with the ability to shut out contacts and retain, if not generate, the mindset of repression, injustice, conflict, or even war, but rather as a social practice, situated within an understanding of neighbourliness that recognizes and respects the values of the other and the contributions that it brings. The border still functions as a barrier, but its partial permeability allows the relations across it to be now, at last, shaped by *dialog* rather than *confrontation*. This dialog allows both sides of the border to gain more knowledge about their neighbour, which in turn fosters mutual understanding, another important prerequisite for effective co-operation. To be able to work together we have to trust each other – and to be able to trust each other we have to know each other. Increased dialog, and especially its perceived usefulness and profitableness by both sides is the main prerequisite for further changes. Furthermore, the respondents see that even though the implementation of CBC policies and practices are high, their effectiveness lags behind. The role of the EU is seen in a positive light as it has brought well-needed vigour not only in form of funding but also in the currency of ideas; its capability to fuel CBC is perceived as successful and its impact beneficial.

A lower barrier effect has also increased mobility and, thus, forced people to adapt to new circumstances. Confronting the other has also compelled people to re-evaluate their own values and standards in a synergic manner. In this process the border is now being reproduced and acquiring a new role as an area of *contact* instead of being an area of *conflict*. It still functions as a barrier and a filter, but more and more it supports cross-border activities.

Interestingly, the border in a strict sense causes only a few constraints. More importantly, the respondents perceive the border as a barrier because it signifies where one set of rules end and another begins. Thus, cross-border flows are also impacted by a complex web of non-economic factors, some of which encourage diminishing the barrier effect and others, which reinforce it. Crossing a border is a move out of one's own familiar culture and into a different and unknown one. Simultaneously, new opportunities are created but others closed off. This seems to be a relatively high barrier especially for Finnish respondents. The Russian respondents

feel that more assistance would be needed in order to realize CBC in its full potential.

The data available for this study does not support claims that there exists the need for considerable healing and trust-building before true co-operation can occur. Historical events are not perceived to be a significant barrier for interaction, but this finding does not by any means imply that history has lost its significance. In Finnish-Russian relations, history has always played a crucial role, and it is highly likely that, at least in the background, it still does. The fact that we must look to the future does not imply that the past – and the valuable lessons learned from it – ought to be forgotten. Perhaps, the common past could even function as a further impetus for a future CBC projects.

The Finnish-Russian border region, as border regions in general, is characterized by specific forms of living together, which requires tolerance and solidarity (cf. van Houtum 1998: 1). Thus, the perception of the other and of interaction with the other has a significant impact on the lives of people. With this in mind, it was hopeful to discover that in terms of perceptions the responses reveals that things are finally beginning to change. The age-old stereotypes about 'Russianness' and 'Finnishness', derived from the past related to World War II and closed border era, have been replaced by more positive images. The image of the other may have a significant effect on the maintenance of the border in people's minds and its amelioration is likely to open more positive prospects for the future of CBC at the Finnish-Russian border.

NOTES

¹ The *acquis* is based on an agreement initially signed in Schengen, Luxembourg, in 1985 with the objective of abolishing border checks on travellers at the mutual borders of the member states. Since then the Schengen area has expanded and the *acquis* has been updated by a number of agreements and declarations. Finland became a member of the Schengen *acquis* in 25 March 2001. While abolishing control within the area, the *acquis* requires that border checks at the external border of the Schengen area, e.g. at the Finnish-Russian border, to be intensified.

² 39 from Finland and 42 from Russia. The data used in this article derives from the EXLINEA research project, which was supported by the European Commission Fifth Framework Programme on research and technological development. See: <http://www.exlinea.org>.

³ Standard deviations and standard errors of the Russian responses were consistently considerably higher than those of the Finnish responses, largely due to a large number of extreme values. Due to this relatively large variability within the Russian responses, a statistically significant difference was found only in few cases. Since a greater standard error indicates less reliable estimates, the calculated mean values of the Russian responses are unavoidably greater simplifications than it the case of the Finnish respondents.

⁴ Euregio Karelia as a good example.

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