

# The boundaries of Finland in transition

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Various types of boundaries crisscross the Finnish territory. Aside the politico-administrative boundaries of the Finnish state, there are technical-logistical barriers and cultural, socio-spatial, and economic divisions. The main tendency has, however, been the increasing contingency in relation to their location and stability. Some of these boundaries may overlap and therefore strengthen each other, others can hardly be mapped due to their fuzziness. This article provides an introduction to the recent changes of the boundaries of Finland.

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## Introduction

Modernism brought people to believe in clearly demarcated and relatively firm boundary formations (Paasi 1996: 25–26; Medvedev 1999: 46). This conception has now been challenged, mainly as a result of global interaction and increasing awareness of global interdependence in the fields of economy, social life and culture, ecology, and politics. Like natural, physiographic obstacles to human interaction (rivers, mountains, seas, etc.), all man-made boundaries (economic, politico-administrative, cultural, etc.) are in a constant state of flux – though the latter obviously change more rapidly than the former. The borders that deline-

ate the Republic of Finland and define Finnish national culture are also changing, yet the latter at a much slower pace. Boundaries vary with respect to how easily they can change (or, rather, how easily they can be changed). According to Hans Westlund (1999), technical-logistical and politico-administrative boundaries are much less resistant to change than cultural or biological boundaries (Table 1).

The boundaries of Finland are no exception: its politico-administrative borders have seen more dramatic and frequent changes than its economic and cultural boundaries. It is no more than 55 years since the external boundaries of the Finnish state were redrawn (in 1944) (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. Inter-

<i>Rapid change</i>				<i>Very slow change</i>
<b>Technical-Logistical</b>	<b>Political-Administrative</b>	<b>Economic-Structural</b>	<b>Cultural-Historical</b>	<b>Geographical &amp; Biological</b>
Costs of production and transport of goods	National/regional regulations for goods and services	Economic development level/demand patterns	Language Religion Mentality Ethnicity	Physical distance Geographical obstacles (e.g., rivers)
Costs of transport of persons	Custom duties Tariff zones	Economic structure	Population density	Time zones Human biology
Costs of capital and its transfer		Educational level	Power structure and property rights	
Cost of information and its transfer		Compatibility and standard of infrastructure		

Table 1. Barriers grouped by potential for change (Westlund 1999: 107).

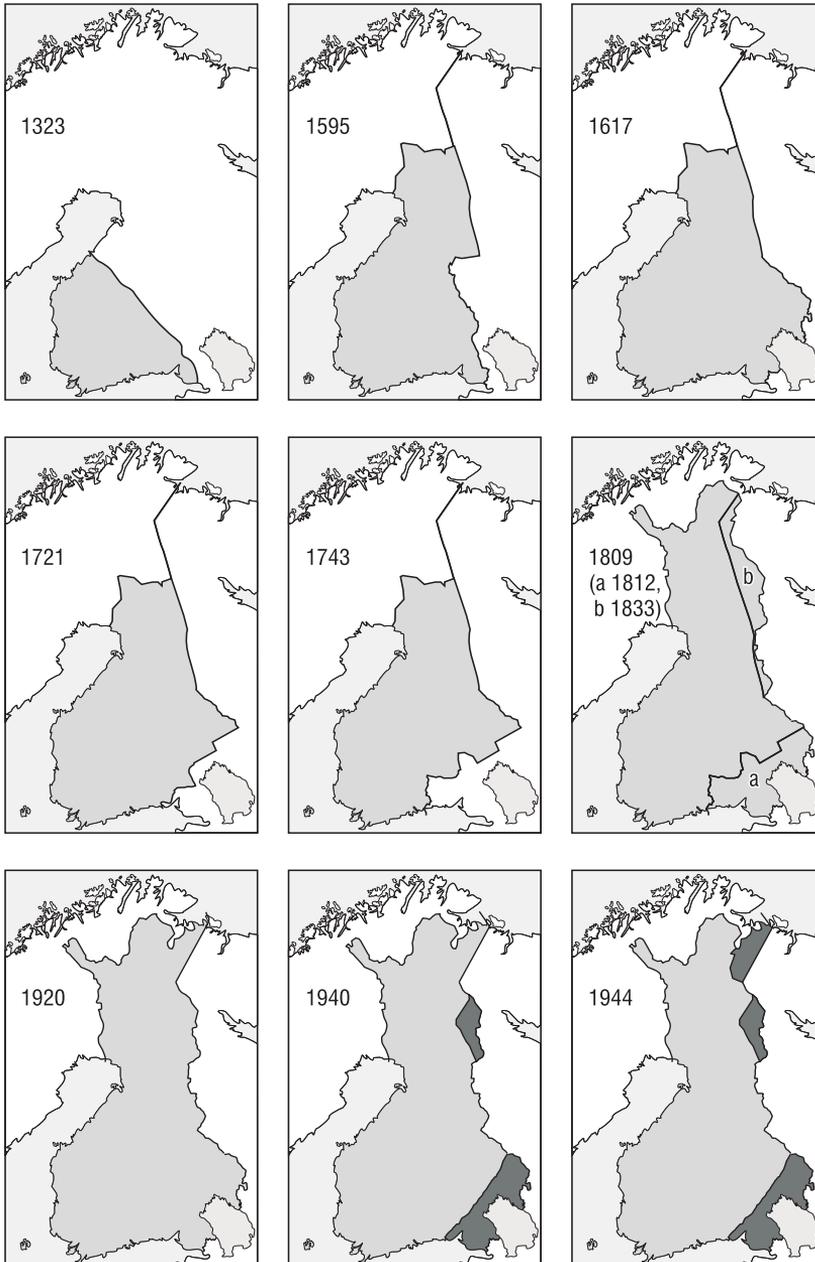


Fig. 1. The territorial shape of Finland since 1323.

nally the change has been even faster; its has been five years since the regional structure was overhauled (in 1997), and the country's municipal structure has been reshaped on countless occasions. Cultural boundaries, on the other hand, seem to be far more resilient. Irrespective of – or perhaps owing to – European integration and

globalization, nationalism is very much alive now and new regionalisms are emerging. In addition, along the Finnish-Russian border the economic gap has widened over the past few decades, whereas along Nordic borders the opposite is true and the asymmetries are relatively small.

**Politico-administrative boundaries**

Today, in the year 2002, Finland is surrounded by a 2,700-kilometre-long land border and a 1,250-kilometre shoreline of territorial waters (Rajavartiolaitoksen... 1996). The Republic is divided into 5 provinces (in Finnish, *lääni*), 19 regions (*maakunta*) and 448 municipalities. In addition, there is the autonomous region of the Åland Islands (STV 2000). In 1995, when Finland joined the European Union together with Austria and Sweden, the country's border with Russia at once became the Union's easternmost border.

Politico-administrative boundaries have not only been replaced, but also more or less abolished within a very short period of time. Trans-border regionalisation and networking are among the major tendencies that have recently removed the barrier effects of Finland's internal and external politico-administrative borders. As early as in the 1970s, the Nordic Council of Ministers and its Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Regional Policy (NÄRP) started to establish and fund trans-border regional organisations. There are now nine Nordic regional organisations, many of

which overlap spatially with the so-called Interreg Regions funded by the European Union (CD-Fig. 1). The Nordic regions were established in order to surpass border-created barriers for regional development. Regions are thus an extension of national regional policies (Nilson 1997: 410).

If anything, the cross-border cooperation has increased since Finland and Sweden joined the EU, above all as a result of the funding mechanisms of the Interreg Community Initiative and LACE-TAP programme, plus the PHARE-CBC and Tacis CBC (cross-border cooperation) programmes targeted at the EU's external, easternmost borderlands. The Interreg Initiative has perhaps been the most successful in increasing internal cohesion within the Union by means of promoting cross-border co-operation. Its problem, however, has been its EU-centricity; actual funding has only been possible in areas inside the Union. External partners (i.e., non-EU-members) have to find other ways of matching the Interreg contribution on their side of the border. Norway, not being a member of the EU, has taken part in Interreg-region-building with its own governmental funding. EU-funded co-operation – not to mention regionali-



Fig. 2. Euregio Karelia (Euregio Karelia... 1998).

sation – along the Finnish-Russian border has been much more problematic, as there have been two separate development programmes (Interreg and Tacis) for the opposite sides of the border, with divergent principles, decision-making procedures, and strategies.

There have been interesting efforts, however, to co-ordinate the PHARE Cross-Border Co-operation Programme, which covers the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the Tacis CBC programme, which covers the countries and provinces of the former Soviet Union, with the Interreg programme. One interesting initiative designed to overcome the problem of incompatibility is a project called Euregio Karelia. This projects aims at establishing a joint decision-making mechanism and administrative structure for smoother and better co-ordinated cross-border co-operation between the members of Karelia Interreg II region of Finland (i.e., the Regional Councils of Northern Karelia, Kainuu and North Ostrobothnia) and the Karelian Republic in Russia (Fig. 2) (see Euregio Karelia... 1998). The Euregio or Euroregion concept and model – first implemented within the European Community – has thus been adopted at the EU's external boundaries as well, possibly helping to reduce the risk of the development of a 'Fortress Europe'.

## Technical-logistical boundaries

Finland's technical-logistical boundaries have also transformed rapidly during the past decade or so. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Finnish–Russian and Estonian–Finnish borders have been opened for freer international passenger traffic and many new crossing points have been created. This lowering of the politico-administrative border has reduced the barrier effect most of all in a logistical sense. Consequently, both passenger traffic and freight transport across Finland's southern and eastern borders have increased dramatically during the past few years (Rajavartioliitoksen... 1996, 2000) (CD-Fig. 1), with the volume of traffic flows exceeding all early prognoses (see, e.g., Idän... 1990). Finland's southeastern corner has become a major condensation area of cross-border traffic. Journeys both start and end mostly in the immediate surroundings of the border, somewhere along the Helsinki–St. Petersburg axis (Leviäkangas et al. 1995).

Another area of intense trans-border traffic is between the capitals of Helsinki in Finland and Tallinn in Estonia. Within the past three years, largely due to tax free shopping tourism, the number of crossings has tripled from 2.2 million to 6.1 million passengers a year (CD-Fig. 1) (Meriliikenne... 1998, 2001). In the northern areas, by contrast, there have been only minor changes in this respect. Passenger traffic has shown only a slight increase between Finland and Norway and has actually begun to decrease between Finland and Sweden.

It is not only the cross-border passenger traffic, but also other traffic flows, including international communications, that are increasing constantly. For instance: In 1980, the number of international calls from Finland totalled around 12 million. In 1990, the figure was 41 million and by 1998, it had climbed to 115 million (STV 2000: 285). Similar trends were witnessed in the number of mobile phone subscriptions: in 1980, there were no more than 23,000 subscriptions in Finland, ten years later almost 258,000, and in 1999, a staggering 2.9 million. This latter figure actually marked an important turning point in that it was the first time that the number of mobile phone subscriptions exceeded the number of land lines in the country (STV 2000: 283). The number of Internet subscriptions has also doubled during the past few years. The figure was 283,000 (or 56 per 1,000 people) in 1997 and it had soared to 546,000 (or 107 per 1,000 people) by 1999 (STV 2000: 285).

## Cultural boundaries

Cultural boundaries, linguistic divisions, and 'us' vs. 'them' demarcations for constructing identities have been far more resilient than politico-administrative boundaries. State borders, in particular, have still been seen to form an essential symbolic part of daily life and culture (see, e.g., van Houtum 1998) even to an extent that we are caught in a "territorial trap" – fixation on state-centric thinking (Agnew 1998: 51–52). This was clearly found among the borderlands youth in Finland. Recent research on the Finnish–Swedish and Finnish–Russian borderlands showed that attitudes among young people aged 10–16 were rather nationalistic. The youngsters made rather clear cultural and linguistic demarcations between the nationalities. Interestingly enough, this was the

case even in the northern twin town of Haparanda–Tornio, where the politico-administrative boundary between Finland and Sweden is very permeable, almost non-existent, as a result of intense municipal cross-border co-operation and the Nordic boundary-reducing policy (Jukarainen 2000).

Not surprisingly, nationalist sentiments were strongest along the Finnish-Russian border: the Finnish youth showed highly prejudiced and reserved attitudes towards the Russians and vice versa, even though it has been almost ten years since the administrative border was opened for freer international traffic and contacts that were severed 50 years earlier during the Soviet time were made possible again (Jukarainen 2000.) Helppikangas et al. (1996) reported similar findings in a study of the attitudes of the young, adult, and elderly populations living in these border regions. Both Finns and Russians regarded each other as co-operative in principle, but as lacking in sense of responsibility. In addition, more than one-third of the Finnish respondents thought the opening of the border was a “rather bad” or “very bad” thing; even the long-standing co-operation across the border had not changed their attitudes (Helppikangas et al. 1996: 106).

Increased cross-border traffic and cross-cultural interaction may have paradoxical effects on cultural boundaries: rather than lowering those boundaries, they may actually strengthen them (Harle 1993: 11). The spread of foreign cultural influences may give rise to protectionist behaviour among people in the borderlands. This was clearly evident amongst youths living close to the Finnish-Russian border, where traffic flows have increased dramatically during the past few years. Young Russians and Finns, in particular, were mostly against increasing tourism across the border, not to mention the movement of immigrants from the neighbouring country into their own (Jukarainen 2000). On the other hand, politico-administrative decisions and changes related to borders are most concretely felt by the borderlands people (Wilson & Donnan 1998: 17). Metaphorically speaking, borderland is the ‘skin’ of the political society (Langer 1996: 62). A border that is loosened politico-administratively may therefore cause an unwanted reaction in the borderland, a process of cultural boundary building, which in a way aims to reconstruct the barrier that existed before.

## Socio-economic boundaries

Like cultural boundaries, socio-economic boundaries are also more resistant to change than administrative boundaries. According to various statistical indicators, the socio-economic gap between Finland and Russia has widened since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the opening of the administrative border. In fact, asymmetry along this border is one of the widest, if not the widest, in the world when measured in terms of regional GDP per capita in purchasing power parities (Alanen & Eskelinen 2000). For instance, in 1996, the Russian region of St. Petersburg received the index value of 23 when compared to the European Union average (100), whereas the figure for the Finnish region of Kymenlaakso was 96 (for more, see Alanen & Eskelinen 2000: 64). The disparity in living standards has only been accentuated by the fact that Finnish border regions are net recipients of public income transfers, whereas in Russia the mechanisms of interregional redistribution have been diminished by the economic crisis (Alanen & Eskelinen 2000: 63).

The divisive legacy of the easternmost border thus continues in economic and social terms. In principle the border is open for the free movement of people and goods, but partly due to the economic asymmetry the traffic has still been strictly controlled. Statistics of the Finnish Frontier Guard indicate, however, that illegal migration and trade seem to be a relatively minor problem: while almost six million people crossed the Finnish-Russian border in 2001, only 1,734 individuals were denied access that same year, mainly on account of smuggling (Rajavartiolaitoksen... 2001).

## Conclusion

The boundaries of Finland remain in a constant state of flux. Even if the politico-administrative territorial shape of the state of Finland were to remain the same, all the networking, regionalisation, and internationalisation that is going on will inevitably challenge the clarity of its borders, making them more like change-over zones than strictly divisive lines. This process is often called *de-territorialisation* (see, e.g., Paasi 1999; Ó Tuathail 1998). Consequently, all of Finland's boundaries (politico-administrative, cultural, economic, and others) become increasingly blurred

and a simplistic cartographical representation of Finnish territory becomes more and more difficult. Yet, the cultural national and regional boundaries may be the fittest to survive. It is often precisely in situations where peoples' identities are threatened that efforts are stepped up to strengthen them, potentially giving rise to cultural protectionism and xenophobia. Therefore, even in today's world of wireless communication, networking, and cross-border activity, a completely borderless world and global living may perhaps never become reality. As Falah and Newman (1995: 690) aptly state, we have learned to understand that only the existence of good boundaries makes good neighbours. Hence, some sort of cultural boundaries between the identity groups of 'us here' and 'them there' are perhaps always needed and reconstructed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Since the thirteenth century, Finland has been the object (or participant) in twelve different peace treaties, nine of which have involved a change of borders (Kirkinen 1996: 13).

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