

STATE AND NON-STATE CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION BETWEEN NORTH KARELIA AND ITS (UN)FAMILIAR RUSSIAN NEIGHBORS

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ABSTRACT. Russia has often been seen in a negative light and as a difficult place for foreigners to operate, both currently and in the past. To a large extent, this is also true for Finland, which has fought several wars against its eastern neighbor and whose border with Russia has been closed for years. However, Finland, and in particular North Karelia, also has a long history of cross-border cooperation with Russian partners.

This paper seeks to analyze why North Karelian governmental and NGO actors choose to engage in cross-border cooperation with Russian counterparts and explain why they have been so successful.

The answers are sought via a historical review of the relationship between Finland and Russia, in particular the role and importance of Karelia as a source of both conflict and consolidation. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with Finnish cross-border cooperation actors are utilized in the analysis. The theoretical approach is grounded in (un)familiarity, which is used to explain the pull-push effects of the border.

In conclusion, it was found that the Finnish actors harbor a historical feeling of connectedness and nostalgia towards the Karelian area which pulls them across the border. Because of the proximity they see cross-border cooperation as a natural extension of their work. Finally, the success is connected to the increased familiarity and close personal relations that have been build up over the years.

KEYWORDS: cross-border cooperation, Finnish-Russian relations, Karelia, perception, (un)familiarity

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INTRODUCTION

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the expectations that Russia would transform from its communist-inspired system and adopt a Western understanding of capitalism and democracy were high. Despite making enormous changes, Russia was not even given until the end of the decade before it was labeled a failed and corrupt country led by the mafia (Shleifer and Treisman 2005; Jakobson 1998). While the election of Putin in 2000 brought about a short-lived optimism (Shleifer and Treisman 2005), the negative perception has proven to be quite durable (Nielsen 2019). Some opine that the negative perception is a stigma Russia has had for centuries and that it reflects the country's history (Paul 2001; Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). Whether the negative perception of Russia is a century-old legacy, a Western media construction, or something else is as such irrelevant, yet it is real. So real that it has been a concern for Russian President Putin, who has tried to change the negative perception (Feklyunina 2008).

As a former part of Russia and its neighbor, Finland holds many of the negative narratives that are connected to Russia. In

2017 Finland celebrated its 100th anniversary of independence after breaking with Russia. In that context, I was approached by a Danish journalist who wanted to hear about the Finnish perception of Russia. Although it was not said explicitly, it was clear she expected, perhaps even wanted, me to say that Finns have a negative opinion of Russia, yet to do so would be too simplistic. While the view of Russia in the general media in Finland does hold an overwhelmingly negative tone (Jerman 2004; Laine 2013; Németh 2015), Etzold and Haukkala (2011) have concluded that Finland actually has a much better relationship with Russia, including more and closer ties, than Denmark, Sweden, and their common neighbor Norway. This has led the country to become somewhat of a mediator or gateway for Europe into Russia and vice-versa (Dominguez and Mercier-Suissa 2015; Rytövuoi-Apunen 2008a). Yet how has Finland managed to develop a good working relationship with Russia when it, in general, is very difficult to establish genuine and lasting cross-border activity (O'Dowd 2002; Klatt 2017), especially in an atmosphere dominated by the negative perception towards Russia?

The aim of this paper is twofold: to uncover why Finnish North Karelian local government and NGOs seek cross-border

cooperation (CBC) with their Russian neighbors, and also to offer a perspective on why their CBC has been successful. The questions are answered via a historical review of the Finnish-Russian relationship and interviews with Finnish CBC actors. Throughout the paper, the concept of (un)familiarity is used to analyze the data.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data consists of a short historical review on the Finnish relationship with Russia, and particularly the role of Karelia as both a source of conflict and bonding. Because of the special relationship, North Karelia has often been the starting point for Finnish-Russia research (See Ahponen 2011; Laurén 2012; Scott 2013; Nielsen 2019). Not only does North Karelia border Russia, but it also borders the Russian Republic of Karelia with whom it shares a long history and culture (Scott 2013). In addition, a series of semi-structured interviews with Finnish actors have been analyzed on a micro-level using the concept of (un)familiarity.

A total of 11 different actors were identified which in the end amounted to eight interviews. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, except for two that due to COVID-19 had to be done online. The actors represent different branches of local government, both Joensuu city and the North Karelian council (two interviews), NGOs (five), and higher education institute (one interview). The interviews were structured around four themes creating a natural flow. The themes were Background, Current projects, Experience, and Influence of perceptions, with (un)familiarity embedded in all the themes. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) compare interviewing to mining, where the interviewer tries to chip away at the information to get to the essence. Following their idea, these interviews have been conducted by starting with broad themes and as the interview progressed the questions became more specific. The questions have therefore varied depending on the information provided by the interviewee.

Conceptualizing (un)familiarity

Earlier (un)familiarity was primarily used to explain why some people crossed borders, while others did not within the areas of tourism and shopping (Dann 1981; Timothy 1995; Timothy and Butler 1995). The focus was on the so-called push and pull factors. Since Spierings and Van der Velde (2008) developed their model 'Bandwidth of (un)familiarity', its usage has grown steadily (See e.g., Spierings and Van der Velde 2008; Izotov and Laine 2012; Klatt 2014; Németh 2015; Nielsen 2019). Although the foundation in these studies is built on Spierings and Van der Velde's (2008) theocratization, there have been different adaptations (see e.g., Spierings and Van der Velde 2013; Andersen 2013; Szytniewski and Spierings 2014; Nielsen 2019; Zotova and Gritsenko 2020). Today the usage has expanded

to include analysis of cross-border issues within areas such as labor movement, perception, identity, and representation of otherness, including what encourages and discourages mobility across state borders. Yet, much of it is still structured around push-pull, which are the factors that push and pulls us towards the other side of the border e.g., financial gain and adventure, and 'Keep-Repel' factors which discourage us from crossing e.g., language and different legal systems (Spierings and Van der Velde's 2008; 2013).

For a cross-border interaction to occur, the other side of the border cannot be too unfamiliar, nor can it be too familiar as it will weaken the reason for crossing. This means that an unfamiliar place can have just as much of an attraction as a familiar place, but exactly where the line goes is based on the individual and how much familiarity and unfamiliarity (s)he is willing to accept (Spierings and Van der Velde's 2008; 2013). Van der Velde and Naerssen (2015) have expanded the model by adding a threshold. The threshold functions as a gateway, a mental border that needs to be overcome before even contemplating crossing the physical border.

As mentioned earlier, there are different interpretations of (un)familiarity and, while agreeing with Spierings and van der Velde, this paper uses Nielsen's (2019) multi-dimensional division of (un)familiarity into knowledge, experience, and cultural and physical proximity. A similar division has been done by Hu and Ritchie (1993) and Szytniewski and Spierings (2014), although the latter has a fourth dimension, self-assessment, which is not used here. This study will utilize the ideas of push-pull and keep-repel to determine what drives CBC between North Karelia and its neighbors, and what could possibly hinder it. Furthermore, the division of (un)familiarity into knowledge, experience and proximity will provide further depth into the push-pull factors and also help determine the key to the success.

RESULTS

Finland between a rock and a hard place

Like the Danish journalist, some people will undoubtedly think that hatred towards Russia would be embedded in Finns considering Finland was under Russian rule for 100 years until independence in 1917, and later fought two wars against the Soviet Union to keep the independence. On the surface, the signs of resentment are there. The coat of arms of Finland is one example, it dates back to the 16th century when Finland was a part of Sweden and features a lion tramping on a curved saber, a symbol of the wars against Russia. Other similar symbols of the struggle against the eastern neighbor are found in the North and South Karelian coats of arms, in which the western (Finnish) sword faces the eastern (Russian) saber (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The Finnish (left), North Karelian (middle) and South Karelian (right) coat of arms

Yet, the perception of Russia in Finland is not straightforward. Point in case, the coat of arms originates from when Finland was under Swedish rule. It was commissioned for King Gustaf Vasa's sarcophagus thus it is a symbol of the Swedish King's fight against Russia and not the Finns. Later his son, Johan III (King of Sweden and Grand Duke of Finland), used it as the Grand Duchy of Finland's coat of arms as it symbolized the war which he, like his father, fought against Russia (Meinander 2020). With few alterations, Finland has kept the coat of arms and made it their own, thus boasted the argument that Finland, partly, inherent Russophobia from Sweden (Paasi 1996). In addition, both the North and South Karelian coats of arms are just as much symbols of how Finnish Karelia, and all of Finland in general, was in between Sweden and Russia, as they are symbols of being anti-Russian. So, while these images could be used to illustrate Finland's tensions with Russia, it is not the whole story.

Finland has often been described as between East and West in both political and geographical terms (Paasi 1996; Moisio 1998; Browning and Lehti 2007; Rytövuori-Apunen 2008a). Since the 13th century, before there even was a Finnish nation, the area was a battleground for wars between Sweden and the Slavic city-state of Novgorod, and around a century later the first demarcation between the two rivals was placed in the nowadays Finnish territory (Eskelinen 2011; Scott 2013), though it fluctuated until Finland gained independence in 1917. As WWII developed, Finland was once again between two great powers, the Soviet Union and Germany (Vehviläinen 2002), and during the Cold War Finland had to balance between the East and the West, a geopolitical limbo which to a certain extent still exists today (Rytövuori-Apunen 2008a).

When Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, it stirred up public debate in Finland as the country was caught between supporting the sanctions adopted by the EU and continuing to develop its relationship with Russia. Talks of NATO membership surfaced again, yet they were brushed aside on the count of being too damaging for the Finnish-Russian relationship (Åtland 2016). Instead of pushing Russia away, Finland started, and succeeded, a strong lobbying work to keep the Finnish-Russian projects, funded via the European Neighbourhood Instrument, off the EU sanction list so they could continue (Koch and Vainikka 2019). The rising tension between the EU and Russia did in some cases hinder local CBC, yet the Finnish-Russian CBC managed to flourish despite the tense situation (Sebentsov 2020; Palomowski and Federov 2020). The strength of the Finnish-Russian relationship was further emphasized by the fact that the annexation did not influence the general public's concern as to whether Finland is threatened by Russia. Minister for Foreign Trade at the time, Alexander Stubb, said Finland had no reason to be afraid of Russia: "Russia has been our neighbor for a long time. We have been a part of Russia, and have had our difficulties with Russia in course of our history. Sometimes things go really well and other times things are worse. Just now we are going through a difficult phase."¹

Instead of fearing Russian aggression, the Finnish government was more concerned about the economic situation resulting from the EU sanction.² This pragmatic approach has characterized the relationship and is confirmed by the former Finnish President J.K. Paasikivi's famous words «There is nothing we can do about geography» (Raivo 2000).

Having to carve out a space for themselves has impacted the Finnish national identity in many ways. While there is a consensus that Russia plays an important role as 'the other' in the Finnish state and identity building (Paasi 1996; 1997; 1999; Harle and Moisio 2000; Laine 2015), it is often overlooked that the first steps towards an independent state and a national identity were taken with help from and under Russian rule, partly in opposition to the dominant Swedish culture (Paasi 1996; Wassholm 2014). It was not until the turn of the 20th century, and following Finnish independence, that Russia became 'the other' and hatred towards them began building in Finland reaching its highest peak in the interwar period (Paasi 1996; Harle and Moisio (2000). Despite the enmity towards Russia, there was a certain level of self-censorship in Finland in the years between independence and WWII, which meant such feelings were not directly expressed in the media but instead conveyed in codes (Kangas 2007). Post-WWII, the relationship was based on the 1948 Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (Laine 2014), which laid out the rules for cross-border interaction and gave the Soviet Union a certain level of soft power over Finland (Rytövuori-Apunen 2008a) that led to a continuation of the censorship. The agreement also moved Finland in geopolitical terms. Though officially declaring themselves neutral, it has been argued that Finland shifted from being a part of the western block pre-WWII, to the eastern bloc post-WWII (Paasi 1999)."

Karelia in the Finnish narrative

Border areas are often located away from the political power centers of a country where the attitudes and policies concerning the border are created. Yet, they are experienced and lived in the border areas, creating multiple discourses on the role of the border (Paasi 1999; Nielsen 2020).

Karelia is no exception, it is located away from the political centers in both Finland and Russia, and the border is much more ubiquitous in everyday life. However, before venturing further into Karelia and its meaning, it is imperative to clarify what and where Karelia is. Many areas hold the name Karelia: White Karelia, East Karelia, Ladoga Karelia, etc. and Karelia to a Finn means something else than to a Russian. Russians will most often relate Karelia to the Republic of Karelia. The Finns conceptualization, and the one used here, includes North and South Karelia located in Finland as well as the adjacent areas of the Karelian Isthmus, belonging to Leningrad Oblast, and the south-west part of the Republic of Karelia, sometimes known as Border Karelia (See fig. 2). The remaining part of the Republic of Karelia, especially in a historical context, is sometimes referred to by Finns as East Karelia. The cultural composition in the area is likewise complex to define. Scott (2013, 81) describes it as a «mosaic» border

¹YLE News article: Ukrainian crisis has not increased Finns' fear of Russia. Available at: https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/ukrainian_crisis_has_not_increased_finns_fear_of_russia/7150925 (Accessed 18 March 2021)

²YLE News articles: Ukrainian crisis has not increased Finns' fear of Russia. Available at: https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/ukrainian_crisis_has_not_increased_finns_fear_of_russia/7150925 and: Niinistö looks for understanding over Finland's Russia stance. Available at: https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/niinisto_looks_for_understanding_over_finlands_russia_stance/7155797 (Accessed 18 March 2021)

landscape that from 1809 until now has experienced periods with Russification, Finnishization, conflict, Sovietization, and «New Karelianism» which all have left their trace.

Despite the mosaic, Karelia holds an important role in the Finnish consciousness due to the folklore Kalevala – the national epic of Finland – which takes place in Karelia and East Karelia and is central in the creation of the Finnish identity (Anderson 1983; Scott 2013; Meinander 2020).

The blurred lines between Finland and Russia continued post Finnish independence as the exact location of the Finnish-Russian border remained unsolved. Late in the 19th century, the idea of a Greater Finland had started to gain a foothold, and it continued after Finnish independence. In the spring of 1919, the Finnish politician Santeri Alkio echoed the idea, which was earlier expressed by amongst others General Mannerheim (Kirby 1975) and supported by other politicians: “The concept of the Finnish state includes the union of East Karelia and the Olonets region with Finland, and this has been publicly proclaimed many times over the past few years... The aim of our endeavors is to free East Karelia... we Finns demand that the birthplace of the Kalevala must be united with the rest of Finland. (Kirby 1975, 249)”

Even after the Peace of Tartu in 1920, which officially settled the location of the border, the dream of a Greater Finland lived on. As a result of the treaty, a number of Finnish-speakers stayed on the Russian side, which helped to keep the idea alive and led to tension in the following couple of years (Paasi 1999). Its support, however, quickly diminished post-WWII (Paasi 1996; Meinander 2020). During WWII, Finland fought two wars (Winter War 1939-1940 and Continuation War 1941-

1944) against the Soviet Union, which resulted in the Soviet Union annexing almost 10% of Finland, including the Karelian Isthmus and Border Karelia (See figure 2.) (Eskelinen 2011). The loss of territory played, and still plays, an important role in the Finnish consciousness – especially the ceded territory that was a part of Karelia due to its historical and cultural importance. In order to cope with the loss «the Karelians preserved their lost landscapes and homes in their collective memory, their literature, collective action and myths» (Paasi 1999). Today there is a certain familiar strangeness with the Russian part of Karelia that originates from conflicting memories and feelings of nostalgia, enmity, and fear (Scott 2013).

In many regions of the world, the situation in border areas is determined by the geopolitics of memory. Cultivating certain representations, they distinguish key periods of common history with neighboring countries or regions. A negative interpretation of such periods helps to oppose an identity under construction to the identity dominating on the other side of the boundary, to deepen a new cleavage, while a positive attitude forges the feelings of solidarity or reconciliation with the neighbor (Kolossoff 2011).

The Finnish part of Karelia is filled with both resentment and hope, as well as nostalgia towards its neighboring area. More recent CBC has been focused on the promotion of local culture and preservation of historical heritage to help mend the gap (Sebentsov 2020; Palmowski and Federov 2020). Oksa (1999) has described Karelia as a bridge between Finland and Russia, yet a more nuanced and fitting border metaphor is that of ‘suture’ coined by Salter (2012). The suture represents a wound that, despite being healed, has left a noticeable scar both on the body and in the mind.



Fig. 2. Map of Karelia

Involvement of North Karelian Actors with Russian counterparts

In 1992 the Neighborhood Area Cooperation framework was put in place to structure the CBC that lasted until Finland became an EU member in 1995. The change from national to supranational framework also meant that the funding, which is instrumental for most CBCs, changed from Finnish to EU.

Most of the CBC actors have been involved with Russia ever since the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia started to open to the west. As one respondent formulated, we started CBC «as soon as Russia started to be Russia again» (North Karelia Chamber of Commerce). 'Russia being Russia' is as interesting a phrase as it is elusive. Yet what it does convey is that the Soviet Union, or at least the system that was in place during the existence of the Soviet Union, the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, which dictated the cross-border interaction, was a threshold that hindered CBC. Russia becoming Russia again, also indicates a perception of Russia returning to normal, which makes it more familiar. While some venture further into Russia in search of CBC, most of the respondents mainly have an interest in the neighboring area. Sometimes the reason is practical and relates to infrastructure, but there are also historical and national memory aspects that create a sense of imaginary community.

To archive a good neighborhood relation and cooperation, it is important to face each other, be orientated towards one another.¹ The Soviet Union was important for Finland in many ways, Finland was also important for the Soviet Union, and later Russia, as a gateway to western Europe and subsequently the EU: "Within the European Union, Finland will always work, in its own interest, for good relations with Russia... Finland's views on Russia are listened to in Brussels. Such a rational view of Russian interests is gaining ground in Moscow... (Jacobson 1998, 153)."

More recently, Finland's role as a mediator between Russia and the EU has diminished, yet the relationship remains friendly. On the local level, the case of North Karelia and its adjacent Russian neighbor is a case of mutual interest. Both regions are peripheral within their respective states (Scott 2013), so the border easily becomes an opportunity that helps to open the neighborhood from a peripheral to more central «...it [CBC] is significant for us, as we are located here at the Eastern border» (North Karelian Regional Council). The Russian wish to engage is reflected in their eagerness to participate in CBC. Most of the local government and the NGO involved in CBC say it has been easy for them to find Russian partners to work with, often they come by themselves which indicates they are facing North Karelia. From the Finnish perspective, the naturalness in which they approach CBC shows that they are also facing Russia, meaning we have a face-to-face situation which according to Henrikson (2011) is essential to create the best possible CBC. Besides changing their peripheral status, the North Karelian actors appear to have a deeper underlining reason to engage in the CBC, a reason that is bound to the Republic of Karelia and its historical ties to Finland (Ahponen 2011). Besides an almost romantic reminisces regarding some of the towns build by Finns when the area was a part of Finland,

there is a general sense of connectedness and familiarity with the landscape including a heartfelt feeling towards the area: «We have always had Karelia in our hearts» (Joensuu Diabetes Association).

For both the local government and NGOs it is natural to stretch across the border as they agree that neighborhood is important. In fact, what has driven the CBC has been a sense of naturalness, seeing past the border and perceiving the other as any other neighbor. In this sense, the border can be described by using the concept of intermestic (Lowenthal 1999). Intermestic, a contraction of international and domestic, means the CBC actors comprehend the border and the adjacent area as not entirely international nor national but somewhere in between which is very fitting for this case. Karelia is intermestic for Finns and at the same time, it is also familiar yet unfamiliar, familiar in a historical sense but unfamiliar in a more modern perspective. While some expressed that there were differences in work approaches, it was still «natural» to engage in CBC because of the proximity in both culture and distance (Karelia University of Applied Sciences). The Joensuu Scouts has even received special permission from the central office to act on their own when it comes to CBC with Russia. Normally all international engagements need to go through their central office but in this case, an exception has been made because Russia from the North Karelian view is not necessarily international, but intermestic: «We don't do international work but cooperation with a neighboring area» (Joensuu Scouts Association).

Although borders, physical as well as mental, do pose a threshold for CBC, Koch and Vainikka (2019) argue that it has not been enough to discourage CBC between Finnish and Russian actors. However, it does not mean thresholds are not experienced. Considering O'Dowd (2002) and Zimmerbauer's (2011) conceptualization of borders as layered and manifested in different areas of society, respondents said they experienced boundaries in social, legal, political, and cultural areas, in the form of language, different legal systems, governance, and traditions. They also believed that while the encountered borders most likely keep some from participating in CBC, it is part of the learning process. In fact, most of these hindrances diminish with time as younger generations with better language skills join, and legal systems and traditions are learned on both sides, a process some of the actors help to push. «It is normal for us to have Russian students that do internships in Finnish companies and then use those skills in Russia when interacting with Finnish companies» (Karelia University of Applied Sciences). One barrier appears to be constant though, the centralized rules, which include applying for visas, something that is not and cannot be regulated or determined by the CBC partners but relies on what is being agreed at the national, and sometimes supranational level. It has been argued that for Finland, CBC with Russia has more potential but also includes more risks than with other neighbors (Eskelinen 2011). This is also the perception here, thus, knowing your partner becomes more important «...especially with Russia, familiarity is an important element as there have always been more risks connected to Russian co-operation compared to Germany for example» (Joensuu City, Youth Department).

¹Alafuzoff, Georgij; Blom, Anders; Kurvinen, Mihail; Pyykönen, Juha; Luoma-aho, Vilma & Tsetsura, Katerina (2020) Govorit Moskva – Moskova puhuu: Venäjän strategisen viettinnän erityispiirteet. Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja. Available at https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162201/VNTEAS_2020_16.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

One of the risks is concerning the management of funds. There have been cases when spending money on the Russian side has raised some concerns as to whether it was spent according to the plan. It is not only because of corruption concerns but because of different perception and cultural practices in handling a budget that needs to be reached across, like how to get handwritten receipts in Russian accepted by the EU. There is a consensus that it is important to understand both culture and history of the partner country as the devil is in the detail. What may seem strange at first can often be explained by knowing the cultural habits and history and, consequently, allow to avoid misunderstanding. Thus, the actors underline that the better grasp they have of each other's (and their common) history, the greater are the chances of developing fruitful CBC. Several actors also expressed that they often use the same partners for different projects, underlining good personal relations as well. It has been argued that Finland's proximity and common history have afforded them a certain level of familiarity with Russia (Rytövuori-Apunen 2008b). Yet, living with a closed border for years has eroded, or at least frozen this familiarity in time, thus, it is not a current understanding of Russia, but an understanding of how Russia used to be. Several actors expressed that Russia and the Russian way is unfamiliar to many, the North Karelia Chamber of Commerce also stated that their reason for engaging in CBC is «...to lower the step into Russia a little bit» (North Karelia Chamber of Commerce).

As Koch and Vainikka (2019) aptly stated, there is a high level of trust between Finnish CBC actors and their Russian counterparts, that is detached from the mediated perception of Russia and geopolitical tension. Nonetheless, the trust is not instant but builds up over time and goes both ways. The building of trust is also connected to the increase in knowledge and experience, as it is how it can be earned. In addition to the concerns mentioned earlier, several described Russians as apprehensive and slow to open up at first but when the trust is established, it does not wither easily. The trust, however, is aimed at individuals and does not necessarily extend to the Russian system/government who is described as difficult and tends to halt CBC. In here lies a paradox, while the Russian government sometimes is considered as a hindrance for CBC «...the Moscow end is as stiff as an iron bar» (Joensuu city, youth department), several Finnish actors describe themselves as «stiff» in comparisons to their local Russian partners.

CONCLUSION

Although the history between Finland and Russia has been the root for tension between the two, Finns have been «... on the whole remarkably free of resentments or hang-ups in their attitude towards Russia – self-confident without vindictiveness». (Jakobson 1998: 153). The negative portrayal of Russia both within and outside of Finland has not been enough to deter the CBC, neither have the traumatic Winter War and Continuation War. This has also been the case here. None of the CBC actors expressed historical or current negative images of Russia as having any significant effect on their interests in CBC or on the actual cooperation. The fact that both sides are facing each other is a sign that they are not too

unfamiliar with each other. Despite being unfamiliar with such elements as legal systems, procedures, language, etc., which possibly keeps some potential actors from CBC and complicate things, it is still deemed to be worth it due to the potential and historical familiarity. Consequently, the threshold for CBC has not been as high as one could expect, and it is seen in the naturalness in which the North Karelian actors approach it.

The modern Finnish national identity is largely created in opposition to Russia and is partly based on the memories of the wars between the two, still, the mental borders that normally follows in the slipstream (Andersen and Prokkola 2018) have not established themselves as firmly as they could have. The CBC actors do report unfamiliar factors caused by the long period of separation, and it does add to the unfamiliarity, but on the other hand, the familiarity through historical remembrance and sense of connectedness to the Russian side function as a counterbalance, making CBC neither too familiar nor too unfamiliar. This also means that there are several reasons why the local government and NGOs choose to participate in CBC with their Russian neighbor. With the close proximity as well as felt cultural and historical connection to the other side, the Republic of Karelia in particular has a distinct strong pull effect and helps to suture the gap created by decades of the hermetically closed border, transforming the international border into an intermestic one. Most see CBC as a natural extension of their neighborhood cooperation that just happens to cross an international border. It also appears that the local Russian partners see a similar potential in expanding their neighborhood across the border, but without further research on the Russian side this has yet to be confirmed. While there might be a national interest in using these CBCs to exercise soft power, it does not seem to be a factor for the local CBC practitioners.

The key to a successful CBC lies in familiarity. Besides the physical and cultural proximity, there is a certain knowledge about Russia which is important. Although it has been suggested that the generic Finnish understanding of Russia is outdated (Laine 2015), unfamiliarity has not had a deterrent effect, more the opposite. Unfamiliarity is often what pulls us across the border as seen in other studies (See e.g. Nielsen 2019). In that context, an open mind and willingness to learn are embedded in the unfamiliarity pull. After the initial contact, experience and a better knowledge have grown and that is what has ensured the continuation of the success. While the actors concur that the beginning was difficult, they also say that once the ties were established, the increase in knowledge and experience keeps the actors (from both sides) interested in continuing and expanding on the CBC. That means the increase in familiarity, not just with Russia but also with the project partners, helps to ensure the success of CBC. It does not need to be a complete familiarity, but enough to know and respect that things are done differently and that your own approach may not work on the other side. Logically, the novelty of unfamiliarity will eventually wear off, thus the question remains whether Russia will ever become too familiar or the continuance of growth in knowledge and experience will keep the actors interested. ■

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