

CROSS-BORDER INTERACTIONS OF THE PSKOV REGION IN THE CONTEXT OF RESTRICTIONS: POLICY – PERCEPTION – PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT. This paper uses the ‘Policy – Perception – Practice’ approach to assess the impact of neighbourhood character dynamics and restrictions on cross-border relations in the Pskov region between 2013 and 2024. The information base includes the authors’ database of documents that regulate various aspects of cross-border interactions in Russia, over 3,000 articles from Pskov media for 2013-2024, and expert interviews with government officials, as well as semi-structured interviews with the population in the regional capital and specific border towns. The analysis found that the cross-border relations of the Pskov region are asymmetric. Before the global pandemic and the geopolitical crisis of 2022, there was an emphasis on fostering cooperation with Latvia and Estonia, a collaboration that was institutionalised. The prevailing sentiment among the population, as shown by an analysis of media discourse, was that the Baltic borderland was seen only as a source of opportunities, while the Belarusian borderland was also viewed as a source of challenges. This finding underscores the imperative for cross-border cooperation to mitigate the potential for illegal activities, competitive economic pressures, illegal migration, and trade-related activities to grow without such collaboration. Despite a clear increase in the intensity of cross-border ties with Belarus after 2022, the study reveals significant shortcomings in the current approach to cross-border cooperation in Russia.

KEYWORDS: cross-border cooperation, discourse analysis, cross-border mobility, border resource, open border, asymmetric cross-border interactions

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INTRODUCTION

Cross-border relations between Russia and Western countries have been in crisis since 2022. At the same time, interest in establishing or expanding cooperation with so-called ‘friendly states’ began to grow. In this context, the question of introducing a programme similar to the Russia-EU cross-border cooperation programme on the border with friendly Belarus started to be raised at federal and regional levels in Russia¹. This rhetoric has led to an increased need to analyse the directions, intensity, problems, and achievements of cross-border interactions along Russia’s western borders.

Cross-border cooperation and the cross-border practices of the population are often seen as resources for peripheral

territories. They demonstrably improve the quality of life for people living in border areas. In Christophe Sohn’s words, the border can act as a resource. It produces asymmetric cross-border interactions, which are contacts that occur when people seek benefits in the neighbouring country (Sohn, 2014).

The Pskov region’s position across multiple neighbourhoods was a significant factor in its selection as the testing region for this study. Extending from north to south, the region shares borders with three countries to the west: Estonia, Latvia, and Belarus. Despite numerous challenges in political relations with its Baltic neighbours, the period from 2004 to 2022 saw a noticeable increase in interaction between Russia, Latvia, and Estonia. This period

¹ The Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, together with Belarusian colleagues, are developing a cross-border cooperation program within the framework of the Union State. [online] Available at: https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/news/minekonomrazvitiya_i_mid_rossii_sovmestno_s_belorusskimi_kollegami_razrabatyvayut_programmu_prigranichnogo_sotrudnichestva_v_ramkah_soyuznogo_gosudarstva.html (Accessed 14.10.2024).

was characterised by the implementation of various cross-border cooperation programmes, particularly those initiated under the Estonia-Latvia-Russia framework from 2007 to 2013. There were also Estonia-Russia and Latvia-Russia programmes from 2014 to 2020. It is also noteworthy that certain areas of the Pskov region were included within the scope of the Pskov-Livonia Euroregion. However, the effectiveness of the latter organisation has been subject to considerable debate (Barinov and Kiryushin, 2013).

During the same period, relations with Belarus developed against the backdrop of integration processes within the Union State and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, various studies have repeatedly noted that this had little effect on the effectiveness of cooperation between the border regions of Russia and Belarus (Katrovskiy, 2022, Morachevskaya, 2016, Sebentsov et al., 2023). In the context of the declared priorities of integration, border cooperation was mentioned from time to time, though it lacked substantial support, particularly concerning financial instruments. Although there is a significant amount of literature on the institutionalised contacts between the Pskov region and Estonia, Latvia, and Belarus (Barinov and Kiryushin, 2013, Tsvetkova, 2017, Shlapeko, 2019), the role of neighbouring states in the everyday practices of the population has received almost no attention in studies (Barinov, 2011, Manakov, 2014). It can be hypothesised that the population of the depopulating Pskov region, which has a depressed economy, shows limited mobility. However, our previous research in the region (Morachevskaya, 2013, Sebentsov et al., 2023) shows that cross-border practices in the Russian-Estonian, Russian-Latvian (until 2022), and Russian-Belarusian border areas were quite varied and widely present among the population of the border areas and the city of Pskov.

This paper aims to answer how the dynamics of neighbourliness between 2013 and 2024 and restrictions influenced the characteristics of regional development. This is examined through the analysis of cross-border cooperation institutions, the population's cross-border practices, and perceptions of neighbours and borders.

The Policy-Perception-Practice (PPP) approach, which focuses on the interdisciplinary study of border activities, border policy, and border perception, has become a significant part of border studies (Kolosov, 2008, Kolosov and Scott, 2013). A main principle of this approach is that cross-border interactions depend on many factors, which can be divided into three main groups.

The term 'policy' is typically used to refer to the institutional framework that governs cross-border interactions. This includes security policy, foreign economic regulation, and the regulatory and legal framework for cooperation.

The concept of 'perception' includes elements such as images of a neighbouring country or region that reflect public opinion or shaped by public and media discourse. It also covers the cultural distance between the population of a country as a whole and the inhabitants of its border regions,

historical narratives, political discourse, and the symbolic landscape (Kolosov and Sebentsov, 2019, O'Toal, 1996).

In a broad sense, the term 'practice' can be understood to denote the entire complex of cross-border interactions. These interactions may be defined as flows of people, information, goods, transport links, cross-border cooperation between authorities at different levels, and non-governmental organisations, among others.

One of the postulates of securitisation theory is that the perception of a particular situation in socio-political discourse frequently acts as the initial catalyst for changes in the prevailing state of affairs, affecting public institutions (Buzan et al., 1998) and international relations (Vendina et al., 2014). This assertion suggests that discourse is influenced by the politics and practice of cross-border interactions, and that discourse also influences these interactions. Consequently, our study will primarily comprise an examination of media discourse.

From the perspective of the discursive approach, the study of media materials in dynamics is most often based on analysing the general evolution of discourse. Such analysis includes the dynamics of the number of publications, their tonality, defining the internal structure of discourse based on key topics, and identifying cross-cutting motifs (Galkina and Popov, 2016). A systematic qualitative analysis of the entire array of news flows reveals key themes in a particular area and integrating ideas (Vendina et al., 2014). The evaluation of both the expectations and results of cross-border interactions in border regions is facilitated by long-term series in the assessment of discourse formed by the media (Kolosov and Sebentsov, 2019, Sebentsov et al., 2022, Sebentsov and Kolosov, 2020).

In the context of the Pskov region's cross-border relations, most researchers have concentrated on its borders with EU countries or Belarus. There is a lack of comparative analysis between these two types of neighbourhood relations (Gritskevich, 2016, Kolosov and Borodulina, 2006, Popkova, 2018, Sapogov et al., 2022). Regarding policy, some researchers have observed a paradoxical difference between the state of inter-state relations and the development of cross-border cooperation institutions on the borders with EU countries and on the internal borders of the Union State (Vardomskiy, 2008, Sebentsov and Lomakina, 2025).

Consequently, the analysis of policy, perception, and practice reflects the current reality and shapes the agenda for the future. In a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, this allows us to understand, on the one hand, the existing problems in the development of cross-border relations, and on the other hand, possible areas for cooperation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the context of this study, the following methodology will be employed (Fig. 1). Firstly, an assessment of cooperation institutions as a reflection of policy will be made. Secondly, media discourse will be analysed. Thirdly, an analysis of the population's cross-border practices will be



Fig. 1. Overview of study stages

conducted. The analysis of the institutionalisation of cross-border cooperation was based on over three hundred documents collected by the authors. These documents regulate various aspects of cross-border interactions across the entire Russian border and in the Pskov region.

A substantial proportion of the research data was provided by the Pskov media. At the preliminary stage, the media landscape of the Pskov region was analysed. To do this, the authors used the full-text database of print media 'Integrum', which contains four newspapers from the Pskov region: 'Pskovskie Novosti', 'Pskovskaya Pravda', 'AiF Pskov' and 'Pskovskaya Gubernia'. A preliminary analysis of the archive revealed that, firstly, the data for a number of newspapers is limited to specific years, and secondly, the thematic focus of the newspapers over a long period does not allow for a comprehensive assessment of the cross-border interactions of the Pskov region (for example, AiF Pskov focuses more on entertainment content). For this reason, it was decided to shift the main focus of the analysis to the region's key news media portal – Pskovskaya Pravda. This media resource was created based on the region's oldest newspaper. For the purposes of the study, the range of news topics covered by the media was important. Therefore, the degree of independence and other characteristics of the publication were not of fundamental importance.

A database comprising 3,150 publications was meticulously compiled for the period from 2013 to 2024, including the first nine months of 2024. This comprehensive compilation was conducted using the specific tags 'belarus*', 'latv*', and 'eston*'. The database was analysed quantitatively, examining the distribution of messages by topic (for which 12 thematic categories were used) and tone (positive, neutral, negative). The qualitative analysis involved identifying salient trends in the transformation of cross-border relations between the Pskov region and its neighbouring regions.

The data source, primarily used to assess the cross-border practices of the population, also included field research conducted by the authors in the Pskov region during 2016-2017, 2021, and 2024. This field research involved expert interviews with representatives of the authorities and semi-structured interviews with the population in various cities and districts of the region. These locations included Pskov and the border towns of Pytalovo, Pechory, Nevel, and Sebezh. The Sebezh district is given particular attention in the study due to its proximity to both Latvia and Belarus, and the strategic importance of the transport routes that cross the district, connecting it to both countries.

RESULTS

Institutions for cooperation in the Pskov border region

Until recently, the Pskov region reflected the institutional imbalance that had developed along Russia's borders by the late 1990s. As early as 1996, a Council for Cooperation was established between the border regions of Latvia, Russia, and Estonia. The Russian national authorities did not officially endorse the establishment of this Council. However, in 2003, the Pskov-Livonia Euroregion was established based on this Council. At the same time, the federal centre supported the region's collaboration with its European neighbours through the European TACIS programme. This programme helped implement several projects to improve border crossing points and encourage bilateral interaction. In the 2000s, even though both Estonia and Latvia joined NATO and the EU, cooperation between

the three states became more institutionalised, developing within the framework of neighbourhood programmes. Initially, these programmes were carried out on a trilateral basis (from 2000 to 2013), and later on a bilateral basis, with separate programmes implemented with Estonia and Latvia respectively.

Cross-border cooperation with Belarus has not been as dynamic. The agreement on the development of mutually beneficial cooperation with the Vitebsk Regional Executive Committee, signed in 1993, remained for a considerable period the only framework document attesting to the cooperation between the two regions (Gorskaya, 2019). During the 2000s, twinning relations between a number of cities and districts in the Vitebsk and Pskov regions underwent accelerated development. As a result, a new agreement was signed with the Vitebsk Regional Executive Committee in 2015. Nevertheless, genuine cooperation was primarily confined to the visits of official delegations and the organisation of exhibition and fair activities.

The geopolitical crisis in relations with the West in 2022 brought about significant changes to the institutional environment of the border region. Almost all regional and municipal agreements with the Baltic countries were terminated, and Russia's participation in three cross-border programmes – Russia-Estonia, Russia-Latvia, and Interreg Baltic Sea Region — was discontinued. The operations of the Pskov-Livonia Euroregion, which had already seen a substantial reduction in activity during the pandemic, ceased entirely. In 2022, the cross-border activities of the Chudskoy Project organisation were completely paralysed. The presence of the Tartu 'branch' (Kolosov, Borodulina, 2006) and its high level of activity in implementing various environmental, educational, and social projects led to this organisation being regarded as a 'Euroregion-like' entity.

Concurrently, the focus of institutional cooperation shifted towards Belarus. The deepening of collaboration between Russia and Belarus within the Union State has allowed the Pskov and Vitebsk regions to proactively advocate for the creation of a cross-border cooperation programme between the two countries. Interviews conducted in the Vitebsk and Pskov regions in June 2024, and with representatives of the Border Policy Department of the Presidential Administration of Russia in October 2024, have led to the conclusion that the programme is being prepared with very little input from regional authorities. National authorities are more interested in the interregional aspect of this programme than the cross-border aspect. At this point, the border cooperation programme is seen solely as a way to establish cooperative links between large industrial companies, rather than as a method for developing cooperation between regional and local authorities and territorial communities.

The integration within the Union State has contributed to the institutionalisation of cooperation at the municipal level between districts in the Pskov Region and districts in neighbouring Belarusian regions. However, the absence of available financial resources, along with the lack of specific financial instruments from the Union State, means that specific cooperation projects based on these agreements cannot be expected to emerge.

The everyday practices of border residents: a view from the Sebezh district

Before 2020, residents of the Pskov region regularly travelled to Estonia, Latvia, and Belarus for various reasons. The frequency of these trips depended on several factors, including where people lived. Residents of Pskov and

nearby border districts travelled more often. Individual mobility also played a significant role, influenced by income levels and established habits. Between 2013 and 2021, incomes in the Estonian and Latvian border areas grew particularly quickly in real terms (Fig. 2). On the Russian side, income growth was more moderate, while incomes in Belarus remained stagnant. Additionally, currency exchange rate changes were important in shaping travel patterns. Comparable price levels, calculated using the World Bank method and adjusted for living standards in Russian regions, help explain the changes in cross-border travel. Unfavourable exchange rate movements made neighbouring countries (except Belarus) relatively more expensive for shopping, which made cross-border travel less appealing for Russians and more appealing for residents of the border areas of Latvia and Estonia.

The interviews demonstrated that the primary motivations for visiting Estonia included leisure activities such as day trips or weekend excursions to spas and swimming pools. Secondary motivations encompassed the acquisition of food and clothing and, less frequently, medical services (primarily for childbirth) and education, notably in Tartu. The motivations for travel to Latvia were comparable, with consumer purposes being the predominant factor.

It is evident that there was a high prevalence of trips from Latvia and Estonia to Russia, with the primary purpose of procuring petrol. In addition to this, residents of the Baltic states also purchased medicines and certain food products, such as pasta and cereals, in Russia.

Trips to Belarus were more common in the southern part of the Pskov region. However, for the population of the entire Pskov region, only trips for sanatorium and resort treatment were significant. In certain cases, individuals managed to obtain an education in Belarus. More often than not, these were either secondary specialised education programmes, which were generally better preserved in Belarus, or higher education programmes that were, on average, cheaper to obtain on a commercial basis than in Russia.

The Sebezhdistrict of the Pskov region is unique because it is bordered by two countries, each with its own border crossing regime. This has led to various opportunities for cross-border activities among the local population. Until 2020, residents of the Sebezhdistrict frequently visited neighbouring Latvia. Semi-structured interviews with the population revealed several reasons for this. Initially, the frequency and destinations of trips for purchasing food products were influenced by price differences, as

mentioned before. Secondly, people travelled from Sebezhdistrict to Rezekne in Latvia for clothing and footwear, attracted by a wider selection, high quality, and reasonable prices. Thirdly, visits were made to a building supply store in Rezekne because no such store existed in Sebezhdistrict in earlier years. Fourthly, shuttle trading, particularly of approved food products, was a significant practice. Finally, due to the limited number of official car dealerships in the Sebezhdistrict (and, for certain brands, in Pskov), Russian citizens sometimes had their vehicles serviced in neighbouring Latvia.

Concurrently, cross-border mobility showed a less pronounced asymmetrical pattern. Latvian residents also took advantage of price variations, with the Sebezhdistrict being a popular destination for shopping. Sugar, cereals, pasta, flour, and similar items were in high demand among Latvian residents at retail outlets in Sebezhdistrict. The availability of medicines in Sebezhdistrict pharmacies contributed to this trend. As in other regions along the Russian border, it was customary for Latvian residents to travel to border petrol stations located on the Russian side.

The interviews conducted showed that cross-border mobility towards Belarus was generally less pronounced, and the range of motives was considerably more limited. Purchasing food products in Belarus was not a common practice, partly due to the widespread availability of Belarusian goods on the local market, including through mobile trade. A small number of labour ties exist, such as Belarusians working in the social sector, and educational ties involving training in specialised fields at vocational schools in Sebezhdistrict.

Cross-border interactions in media discourse

The shift in the character of interstate relations had consequences for both the institutional sphere and the cross-border practices of the local population. This shift was also reflected in media discourse.

In relation to the dynamics of mentions of neighbouring states, primarily Latvia and Estonia, on the Pskovskaya Pravda portal, 2013 stands out. This year coincided with a period of flourishing cross-border cooperation in the European direction (Fig. 3). It can be suggested that the geopolitical crisis of 2014 influenced the media's caution in mentioning the foreign context and led to a decrease in the intensity of external relations. The intensity of external relations decreased somewhat, so the number of news items tagged 'belarus*', 'eston*', and 'latv*' fell by almost half in subsequent years compared to 2013. In 2013,

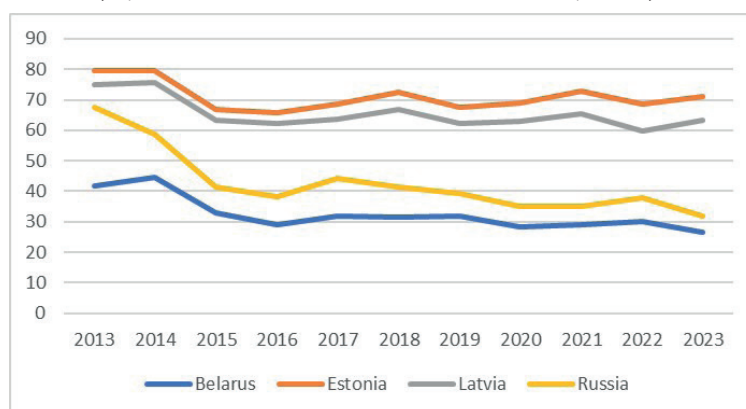


Fig. 2. Comparative price levels in borderlands, % to US price levels²

² The comparative price levels is the ratio of a purchasing power parity (PPP) conversion factor to the corresponding market exchange rate between different countries. It provides a measure of the differences in price level between the country and the United States by indicating the number of units of the common currency (US dollars) needed to buy the same volume of the aggregation level in each country. At the level of GDP, the price level ratio provides a measure of the differences in the general price levels of countries.

there was still active rhetoric of mutual support between countries in the event of any emergencies or tragic events in neighbouring regions.

The geopolitical crisis of 2014 was reflected in media discourse as a period of uncertainty concerning cross-border cooperation between the Pskov region and Latvia and Estonia. In this context, the media has recently started to address issues characterised by complete polarisation. On one hand, there is heated debate on the complex issue of bilateral relations: the Russian language in schools in the Baltic states. To lessen any potential discord with neighbouring nations, some news outlets use the narrative of 'Europe in our home', thereby aiming to reduce the perceived importance of any differences with these countries. Conversely, other topics emphasise the improvement of cross-border relations with Baltic countries. For example, there is a significant discussion about organising air traffic between Pskov and Riga. It can be suggested that this era of uncertainty is ending, with a prevailing consensus that cross-border cooperation aimed at improving the quality of life for people living in border regions should be exempt from political interference.

Since 2015, as evidenced by news reports and the results of our own interviews, there has been a noticeable trend of declining cross-border mobility to Latvia and Estonia. This decline is primarily due to economic reasons, such as changes in exchange rates, as highlighted in several news outlets. The reduction in the flow of people has also resulted in several negative institutional changes. These include the cancellation of booking options for border crossing queues and the closure of tax-free facilities at the border. These changes are being actively discussed in the media.

The period of cooling and uncertainty that characterised 2014–2015 gave way to a new phase in 2016, when cross-border cooperation became a prominent feature in media discourse. It is explicitly stated that this area should not be subject to any sanctions, as the quality of life of the population in border areas depends on it.

Such rhetoric significantly influences the optimism shown in business relations. The emergence of new small businesses focused on the EU market is a notable phenomenon in this regard. Headlines such as 'Pskov residents are invited to break into EU markets', while 'Latvian residents are invited to join the Moglino Special Economic Zone'³ (2018) and 'We have studied the European market

and understand what awaits us"⁴ (2021) confirm the intention to maintain and develop economic ties between neighbouring regions.

It is evident that until 2020, the Baltic neighbours maintained a dominant presence within the information field, as shown by the greater number of mentions directed towards them compared to Belarus. It is also clear that the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus has had a significant impact on the nature and intensity of cross-border relations. However, before the events of 2022, which led to a major transformation in external relations with Western countries, Belarus had consistently ranked first. Firstly, it is important to note that in 2021, a number of restrictions on movement between Russia and Belarus, which had been introduced at all borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were lifted. Secondly, there was a significant increase in the number of news items concerning the situation at the border – the illegal import of tobacco products from Belarus into the Russian Federation. In 2021, excise duties on such goods were considerably increased in Russia (by 20%), leading to an increase in illegal flows of cigarettes from other EAEU countries.

The tone of mentions of Belarus, Latvia, and Estonia in Pskov news throughout the entire period is consistent with federal political discourse and the key geopolitical vector (Fig. 4). In 2023, a number of positive news items tagged 'latv*' and 'eston*' were observed. These items primarily concerned the participation of representatives from the Russian-speaking diaspora in Estonia and Latvia in cultural events, such as exhibitions and theatre performances, within the Pskov region. Regarding the Russian-Belarusian borderland, there has been a considerable amount of crime-related news over the years, partly due to the open nature of the border. The majority of negative incidents at the border pertain to representatives of third countries who commit various violations related to export-import operations.

The thematic structure of the news materials examined throughout the entire review period is highly diverse (Fig. 5), so the focus will be on some of the most significant features. History and culture were the predominant themes throughout the entire period. In the period leading up to the acute geopolitical crisis of 2022, despite the emergence of contradictions in the relationship between Russia and the Baltic states, the discourse continued to feature terms that indicated fairly close socio-cultural ties and a shared

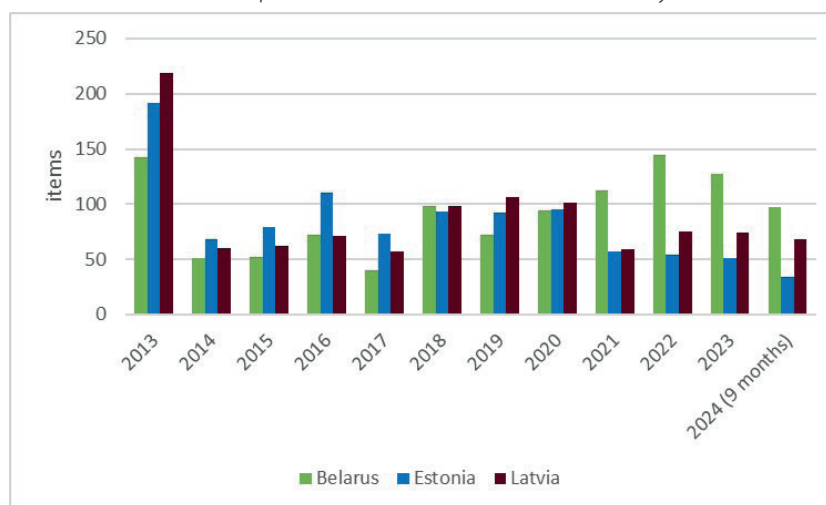


Fig. 3. Total number of news items mentioning the tags 'belarus*', 'eston*' and 'latv*' in 2013–2024

³Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2018). Neighbors are forever. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/society/0005218.html> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

⁴Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2021). German Petrushko presented an investment project at the forum in Kazan. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/news/0024654.html> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

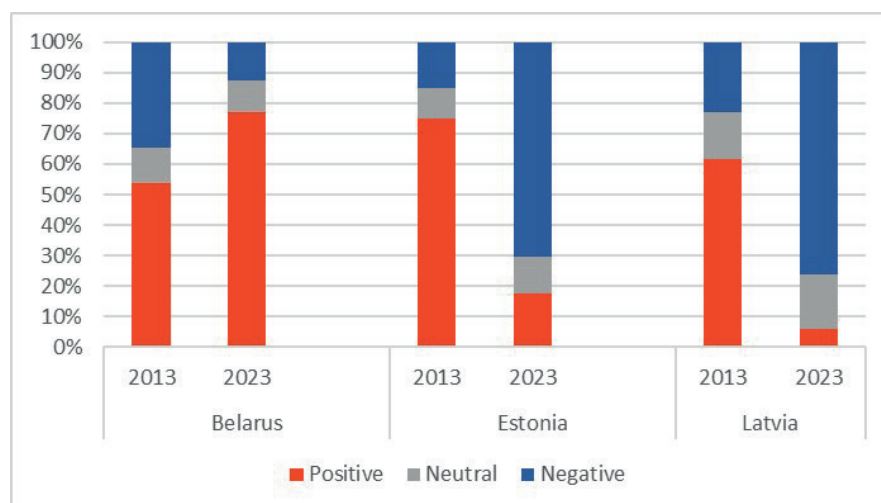


Fig. 4. Tone of news items mentioning the tags 'belarus*', 'eston*' and 'latv*' in 2013–2023

historical past. These included references to the Second World War, the Friendship Mound⁵, the Hanseatic League, and Alexander Pushkin.

The second popular topic was borders and customs. News about incidents along the border is frequently featured in the media, although the context varies considerably between different sections. A paradoxical comparison can be drawn between the 'open' border with Belarus and the 'barrier' borders with Latvia and Estonia (prior to 2020). The former is a source of problems, while the latter is a resource ('the border location is not a limitation, but an opportunity'⁶; 'border resource'^{7,8}). The open border has demonstrated unintended consequences, with research indicating that it can act as a conduit for crime and illegal activity. The media has repeatedly drawn attention to issues such as the illegal alcohol trade in markets, poaching (hunting and fishing) in the southern regions of the Pskov region, and illegal migration. The issue of competition between Belarusian and Russian producers is considered complex: 'Local producers are being squeezed out by Belarusians'⁹.

The third topic, institutions, should be discussed separately (Fig. 3). News outlets have dedicated considerable coverage to projects implemented within the framework of cross-border cooperation programmes between Russia, Estonia, and Latvia. These projects cover diverse sectors, including transport, ecology, education, science, and tourism. The following quote from an article on this subject encapsulates the essence of this cross-border contact with our Baltic neighbours: 'The existence of unsolvable problems between neighbouring countries is to be avoided'¹⁰.

It has only been since 2021 that specific plans for cooperation between the Pskov region and Belarus have

been mentioned in the media. According to Pskovskaya Pravda (a news item from 2022), 'there has been a "reset" in relations between the Pskov region and the Vitebsk region'¹¹. Issues concerning the potential for industrial cooperation, the synchronisation of special economic zone regimes, and rural development management are being raised. This new stage of constructive interaction has been marked by several notable developments. These include the establishment of agreements between enterprises and universities, the initiation of specific projects for personnel training in secondary vocational schools, the protection of transboundary lakes, the fostering of cooperation between trade unions, and the organisation of joint job fairs. In news coverage of Belarusian relations, labour market issues are often raised. This is particularly true regarding the recruitment of personnel to work in depopulated areas of the Pskov region, especially within the healthcare sector.

The status of a border crossing point has a considerable influence on the regional situation. The existence of an international border crossing point on the Russian-Latvian border distinguishes it significantly from the Estonian border, where border issues are barely discussed. Following 2022, the majority of news items related to the tags 'latv*' and 'eston*' concerned incidents where border guards or customs officers stopped someone or something at the border^{12,13}.

DISCUSSION

The use of the PPP approach in analysing the Pskov region has helped identify several significant themes related to border dynamics and cross-border interactions.

⁵The Friendship Mound is a memorial complex erected on the border between Russia, Belarus and Latvia in memory of the cooperation between partisan units during the Second World War.

⁶Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2016). Experience – for replication. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/rubric/3/13792> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

⁷Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2017). Sergey Pernikov: Cross-border cooperation is unique. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/rubric/3/14832> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

⁸Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2018). Envoy and Team. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/politics/power/0003166.html> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

⁹Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2015). Pricier but closer to heart. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/rubric/82/11714> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

¹⁰Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2013). The Federation Council Committee on International Affairs, chaired by Mikhail Margelov, will host guests from Estonia. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/news/12082> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

¹¹Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2022). A «reset» in relations occurred in the cooperation between Pskov Oblast and Vitebsk. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/news/0031190.html> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

¹²Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2023). Pskov border guards detained two foreigners attempting to illegally cross Russia's state border. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/news/0034825.html> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

¹³Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2024). Pskov customs officers intercepted two batches of smuggled cigarettes within a week. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/news/0039903.html> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

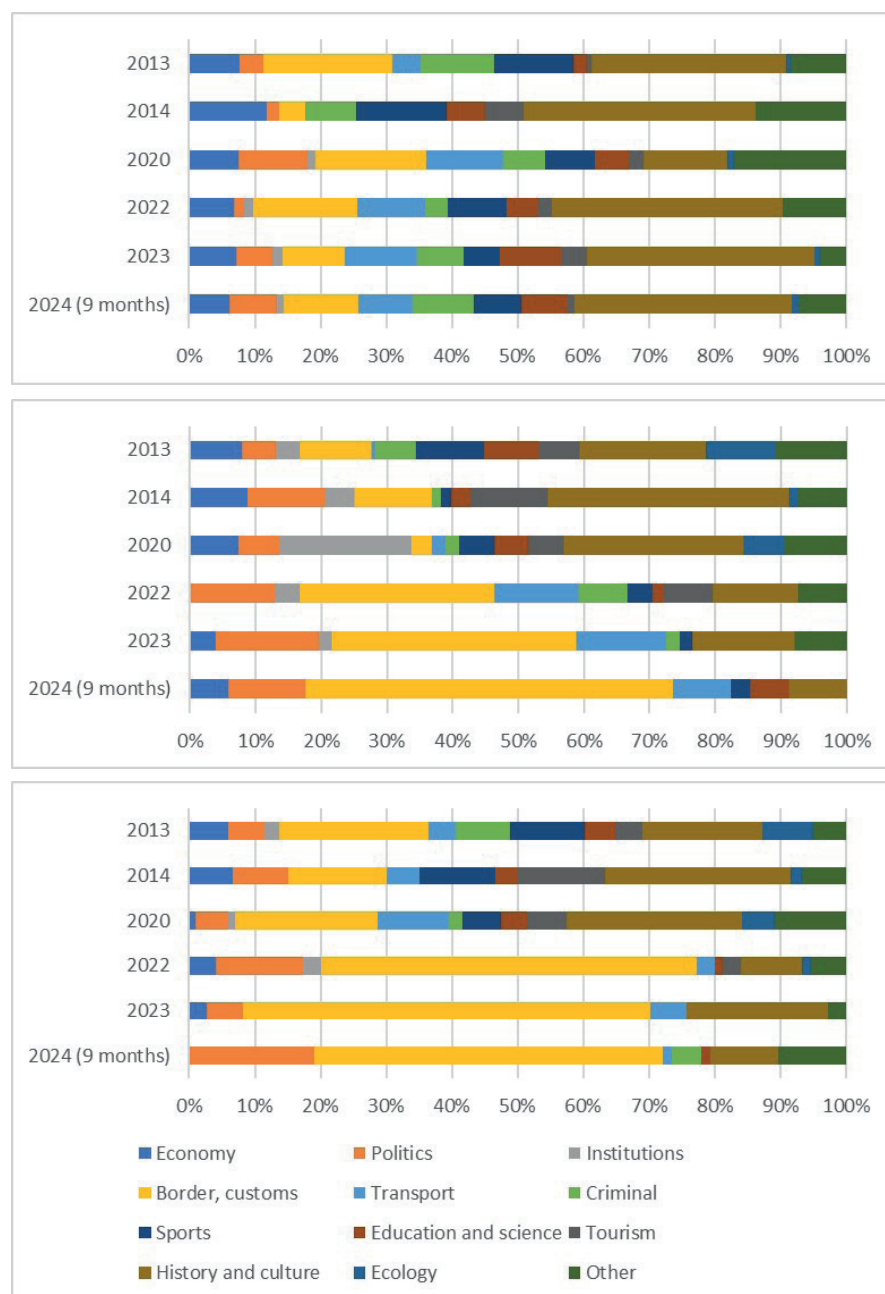


Fig. 5. Thematic structure of news items mentioning the tags 'belarus*', 'eston*' and 'latv*' in 2013–2024

Comparison with neighbours as an impetus for local development. A prominent theme that emerges from an examination of regional discourse concerns the tendency to compare with neighbouring regions. This tendency often favours the domestic context. The subjects to which the study is compared primarily relate to the social sphere and the quality of life in urban environments.

Media often discusses proposals to adopt practices from neighbouring countries. These include the organisation of taxi services and park development in Latvia, technology and maternity hospitals in Estonia, and waste collection, the state of houses, and streets in Belarus. Healthcare reorganisation in Belarus is also a topic. Examining this dynamic helps observe regional changes, partly driven by these comparisons. For example, in 2013, several news outlets reported on women from Pskov choosing to give birth in Estonian hospitals due to better facilities and medical equipment. By the end of 2014, a new perinatal centre was established in the region, meaning women in Pskov no longer needed to travel abroad for high-quality care.

The region's border location has resulted in two primary consequences. Firstly, it has fostered the development of

new functions, and secondly, it has significantly influenced the growth of specific economic and social sectors. For example, an advertising campaign for new programme tacks at Pskov State University highlighted that graduates would possess the skills to work with or within businesses in neighbouring countries. The development of tourist locations in rural areas of the Pskov region in the form of eco-villages has been largely stimulated by the experience of neighbouring countries. The popularity of European cheeses and the ban on their import into Russia in 2014 led to the emergence of individual farmers in the Pskov region producing elite varieties of cheese. The examples provided demonstrate how political comparisons with neighbouring countries can stimulate internal changes in border regions.

Advertising the neighbour for life and everyday practices. Until 2020, there was considerable promotion of additional opportunities for residents of border areas. These opportunities are primarily associated with Latvia and Estonia, with Belarus not being mentioned in this context. Semi-structured interviews with residents of the Sebez district suggest that the motivations for travelling to Latvia are considerably more varied than those for travelling to Belarus.

The news reports include details on purchasing apartments in Latvia and Estonia with funds from selling a two-room apartment in Pskov, and establishing a business in Latvia within a day. It was also explained how to start a business in Estonia after completing training at Pskov State University, the acquisition of real estate in Estonia, and a list of Estonian universities where graduates from Pskov schools can apply.

Such practices are characteristic of border regions and typically demonstrate the population's high adaptability to price fluctuations and changes in the range of goods and services on the domestic market.

Friendship and/or cooperation? As previously stated, interaction with the Baltic neighbours was largely institutionalised. In addition to border cooperation programmes, intergovernmental commissions and bilateral agreements with Estonia and Latvia resolved a host of constructive issues, including the control of fish catches in Lake Peipsi, mutual recognition of work experience in another country for pensioners, and schedules for border crossing points during peak periods. This interaction was described in the media as 'the wonders of cross-border cooperation'¹⁴, and the principle of sharing experience was recommended.

However, despite the apparent absence of significant political and socio-cultural impediments, the Russian-Belarusian border region yielded only limited outcomes regarding border cooperation. As stated in an article in *Pskovskaya Pravda* in 2016¹⁵, 'unfortunately, no large-scale projects have been implemented'.

One potential explanation for this phenomenon is the relative remoteness of neighbouring territories and the lack of attention they receive from national authorities. There is a lack of clearly defined mechanisms for interaction on the supranational agenda, including financial instruments for cooperation. The discourse about integration processes between Russia and Belarus scarcely addresses the issue of border regions. A number of indirect influences have been identified as contributing to the phenomenon under investigation. These include a variety of business practices, such as taxation and lending, state regulation of the economy, and a lack of external incentives for developing cooperative business ties in border areas. In the absence of incentives and preferences for cooperation, business representatives in the border region have revealed that they are not motivated to develop ties with the border regions of neighbouring countries. This finding suggests that legal institutionalisation and financial support for cooperation are crucial in transforming amicable relations into a productive partnership for addressing shared challenges.

One of the observations made in the study clearly expresses the effectiveness of cross-border interaction between the Pskov region and its neighbours, with the following quote: 'A good neighbour is better than a relative'¹⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

The study's findings show that cross-border relations in the Pskov region developed in an asymmetrical manner until recently. Although cross-border cooperation between Russia and the EU is currently absent due to the geopolitical situation, institutionalised cooperation along the borders with the Baltic countries had developed before the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to establish cooperative institutions on the Belarusian side of the border were consequently unsuccessful.

The cross-border practices of the local population were also asymmetrical until 2020. Interviews demonstrated that travel destination choice was influenced not only by geographical residence but also by the possibility of satisfying certain needs. In any case, cross-border mobility towards Belarus was generally less intense, and the range of motives was significantly narrower.

A study of the perception of cross-border relations in the Pskov media also demonstrated the dominance of the Baltic neighbours in regional media discourse. Conversely, while the Baltic section of the border has been perceived almost exclusively as a resource for regional development until recently, the Belarusian section has been viewed as a source of various problems.

In the absence of adequate consideration of cross-border cooperation, an open border is associated with numerous disadvantages. These include, but are not limited to, the creation of an environment that encourages illegal activities, the facilitation of unfair competition among economic actors, and the occurrence of illegal migration and unbalanced export-import flows. At the same time, restrictions can reduce the border area's comparative advantages, such as the Pskov region's proximity to the EU market. However, they can also contribute to the development or enhancement of absolute advantages, including greater investment in the maintenance of intra-regional roads and increased tourist use of the internal territory.

Despite the geopolitical crisis of 2022, the importance of the neighbourhood with Belarus has grown significantly. However, the article's findings reveal considerable weaknesses in the current approach to cross-border cooperation and its institutionalisation. An open border between culturally and geographically close areas is essential, but it is not enough to foster cross-border cooperation. To encourage this, a specific cross-border cooperation programme should be created, drawing on the experience of cooperation with the European neighbours of the Pskov region. This programme should focus on a particular border area, consider the priorities for local and regional cooperation on both sides of the border, have a shared budget and common governing bodies, and establish clear criteria for selecting joint projects. Furthermore, it is important to involve not only national, regional, and local government representatives but also local communities in project activities. ■

¹⁴ Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2015). Wonders of cross-border cooperation. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/rubric/17/11797> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

¹⁵ Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2016). Sergey Pernikov: We are not afraid of a shortage of personnel but rather their transfer from other enterprises. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/rubric/3/13441> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

¹⁶ Pskovskaya Pravda Official Website, (2018). Economics exam. [online] Available at: <https://pravdapskov.ru/economics/investments/0004175.html> (Accessed 5.09.2024).

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