

Introduction

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This *Barents Studies* issue discusses something that is already “gone”, namely the pre-war realities of the Finnish-Russian borderland. Articles collected here concentrate on the border between Russia and Finland, and particularly between two regions which belong(ed) to the Barents Euro-Arctic Council: the Republic of Karelia of the Russian Federation and the province of North Karelia in Finland. The inclusion of the Republic of Karelia (in 1997) and Finnish North Karelia (in 2016) in the Barents council was envisioned to strengthen cooperation between administrative bodies, businesses, and citizens. The membership was to promote everyday contacts and enhance peace, sustainability, and security in the region. The war against Ukraine that Russia started on 24 February 2022 suspended Russian membership in the Council.

Since February 2022, we have all lived in a new reality, and the future is in many ways open. Were there warning signs that we could have read better? Could the war have been prevented? How do people adjust to the new realities of a shifting geopolitical situation? These questions are painfully relevant both in terms of the recent past and what now looks like turning into a war of attrition.

The articles in this collection were originally written for the final publication of the international research project *Images of Russia across Eurasia: Memory, identities, conflicts*, carried out in five countries in 2015–2017. Estonia, Moldova, and Kazakhstan represented post-Soviet countries, Poland stood for post-Socialist Eastern Central European countries, and Finland and France served as “old European” countries. The researchers of this international project had Estonian, Moldovan, Russian, Finnish, Polish, and French citizenships, which did not always correspond with their ethnic backgrounds. The project was funded by the European Era-Net research programme and national research funding bodies, in Finland by the Academy of Finland.

The final publication was planned to be issued in Russia, but already in 2018–2019 the findings and ideas of the project started to feel somewhat incompatible with Russian official scientific discourse. Also, only the Finnish team seemed to be willing and prepared to publish their contributions in a Russian publishing house, while the other teams hesitated. In the end, already written articles remained unpublished. Now some of them have been revised and collected for this issue, keeping in mind the new international and geopolitical milieu.

The funding application of the project was written in 2015, when after the first shock of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the new status quo was already established. Russia became the target of European and American sanctions and issued its own "counter-sanctions", but the "open" border regime between Finland and Russia, one of the main achievements of the post-Soviet period, was still in place, and the cross-border traffic involving local dwellers from both sides of the border continued. Not only did Russian tourism to Finland revive after the drop in the value of the Russian rouble in 2014, but transborder cooperation was sustained in projects funded by EU-Russian cooperation programmes. Everyday transnational connections also continued. They had been established between people living in the border regions since the opening of the border in the early 1990s and the start of Russian immigration to Finland. Still, the affective condition of mistrust, insecurity, and fear began to grow in Finland. The articles of this volume analyse the changing perceptions of neighbouring Russia in the Finnish North Karelian border region during this historical period.

Images of Russia in Finland have long been multilayered. They have also changed over time. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the common view on Russia was based on the idea of opening the border and enhancing socio-economic development in the neighbouring regions through new neighbouring relations. Russia was seen as a potential opportunity for Finnish economic development, especially its eastern border areas. Russia was nevertheless seen as a threat, too. There was a sense of fear in the image of Russia. One of the open questions seemed to be whether it was possible to understand Russia. (See, for example, Kivinen and Vähäkylä 2015; Lounasmeri 2011; Tarkka 2015; Vihavainen 2004; Widomski 2015.)

The Finnish team of the international research project was especially interested in the possibility to study the lived experience of, and feelings towards, Russia among the people living on the border. The project idea stressed the necessity of studying images of Russia in the neighbouring countries from the experiences of the diverse populations

in these areas. In contrast to the previous studies of Russia's images in Finland, Russian-speakers were taken as one of the population groups that needed to be studied together with Finnish-speakers, who make up the majority of the population. So, the starting point of the project combined different angles on the image of Russia: the point of view of the border as known and experienced by the majority and minority populations; as represented in media; and the perspective of areas situated close to the border. The images of Russia had to be studied as existing in everyday consciousness, gained through own experience, produced, disseminated, and discussed in media, existing in historical memory – which were all envisioned to be diverse in different groups. The view adopted on the border area between Finland and Russia in the project and in this publication is based on the understanding of border not as a line drawn on a flat geographic map, but as a borderscape produced by bunches of multilayered and co-constitutive processes, practices, narratives, and representations (Brambilla 2015, 2021). The explicit aim of the project was to enhance understanding of multilayered perceptions of Russia, to look at Russia's image situated in time and space marked by post-Soviet developments, cross-border contacts, and the changed geopolitical situation.

The articles of this volume present some findings and ideas raised throughout the project within the Finnish team of the consortium. The articles are written on the basis of ethnographic, interview, and media materials collected during the project. Three articles written by members of the project team are supplemented by Henrik Nielsen's study of the perceptions of Russia among international and Finnish students from Joensuu who participated in a study tour to Russia.

The opening article of the collection, "Images of the Russian threat as printed at the border", is an analysis by Teemu Oivo, who has examined coverage concerning Russia in the North Karelian daily paper *Karjalainen* in 2016. Oivo studies the images and ideas about Russia that were widely discussed in relation to daily politics and were widely aired predominantly by the Finnish-speaking population. The article concentrates on the mediatized debate about Russia as a threat, and also reflects on the impact of the medium (traditional printed newspaper) on the character of the images. Oivo discerns and discusses different layers of threat-laden images of Russia in relation to international, national, and regional politics. He finds it intriguing that Russia's threatening image is associated with certain historical periods, such as the period of independence, but is almost absent from the discussion of the period when Finland was a part of the Russian Empire. As a distinctive feature of the border region, attitudes towards Russians are somewhat uneasy regardless of the locals' familiarity with Russian people. What

journalists strive to do is keep Russians and the threatening Russian state regime separate from one another. In Oivo's findings, the journalism of *Karjalainen* clearly separated geopolitically threatening "Russia from afar" and its high-ranking actors from familiar, down-to-earth "Russia from nearby", which included tourists and Russian-speaking immigrants living in North Karelia. While Russia's image as a geopolitical threat has been balanced by the image of Russia as an economic opportunity on the regional level, Oivo comes to the conclusion that Russia's image rests on a selective remembrance of historical events and participates in re-producing the perception of Russia as exceptional compared to other great powers. At the same time, *Karjalainen* creates multilayered representations of Russia, distinguishing the Russian state regime from Russian people and Russia as a place, the manner of which is now, according to Oivo, changing.

Henrik Nielsen's article "Us and Them: Cross-border interactions between Finland and Russia" delves into the changes of the dichotomous construction of "us and them" through the prism of cross-border interactions on the Finnish-Russian border. Nielsen's theoretical premise is the discussion on the concept of Other that is needed for the definition of national Self. Nations result from the definition of their borders, not vice versa, Nielsen argues. Both borders and nations may also be seen as dynamic, constantly changing concepts. Historically, Finnish actors have constructed Finnishness as distinct and opposite to Russianness. Nielsen's semi-structured interviews of employees of Finnish NGOs and his analysis of questionnaires targeting Finnish students before and after their study trip to Russia, help him establish that in the views of Finnish actors, the "Us vs. Them" construction had lost its sharpness. The border between Finland and Russia was seen rather as an opportunity for cooperation. The hostilities of the past were history. As in the journalism of *Karjalainen*, the interviewees made a distinction between the Russian regime and the Russian people. That Russia is different only applied to the functioning of institutions rather than to "national characters". Nielsen argues that the "Us vs. Them" dichotomy was barely noticeable in personal cross-border interactions. This article also can be seen as a strong statement in the discussion on building a fence on the Finnish-Russian border. Nielsen warns that the fence, if built, will have serious consequences on the interactions over the border and the attitudes of future generations towards Russia and Russians.

In the next article, "The unbearable lightness of everyday border: Meanings of closeness of the border for Russian-speaking immigrants in the Finnish border area", Olga Davydova-Minguet and Pirjo Pöllänen present their findings of ethnographic studies

among Russian-speaking dwellers of North Karelian border municipalities. The article is based on the authors' long-term ethnographic work in the rural border area and interviews with Russian and Finnish speakers conducted during the project. Living on the border involves many mundane, often unnoticed everyday routines that are connected with the border and border crossings. The understanding of everyday comes from feminist studies, where it has been conceptualized as something repetitive, routinized, and gendered, which typically goes unnoticed in ordinary life. The interactions over the border are approached from the perspective of everyday transnationalism and neighbourliness, with mundane reproduction of social ties, habits, and interactions. The authors ponder how the atmosphere of the border area has changed after the annexation of Crimea, and how it has affected the everyday transnationalism of Russian-speakers. While Nielsen found in his study that Finnish participants of cross-border cooperation did not shelve their common projects, many shifts occurred in Russian-speaking immigrants' everyday transnationalism: the atmosphere of the border became more strained and unpredictable, thus affecting border crossings and transnational care as an essential element of transnational familyhood. Additionally, tensions and ruptures had appeared in relations between family members, relatives, and friends. These changes, although not visible, were experienced as adding tensions in transnational living over the border and between people on the Finnish side of the border. They also made some border-dwellers refuse to be interviewed. One of the factors that produced these divisions was identified as transnational use of Russian state-controlled media. Russian-speaking immigrants live at the crossroads of Finnish and Russian mediaspheres and perceive this as highly conflictual. In this environment, Russian-speakers have developed a new "post-Crimean" way of communication with their Russian-speaking acquaintances which excludes political and societal conversations.

The last article of the collection, Olga Davydova-Minguet's "Maybe we've gotten a little better against them". Russian speakers' positionings in racializing "migration crisis" speech" continues the analysis of the mindsets among Russian-speakers. In 2015, during the European "migration crisis", over 30 000 asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, and other Middle East and African countries arrived in Finland. Some of them ended up in reception centres for asylum seekers in North Karelia. This influx of asylum seekers prompted different reactions within Finnish society from the wave of solidarity and help to openly racist attacks. The article discusses boundary formation within a multiethnic Finnish society, where Russian-speaking immigrants are considered as an already established part of community. They assess their position not only in relation to local Finns, but also related to newcomers. During the fieldwork of the project,

Russian-speaking and Finnish-speaking dwellers of the border region were asked about their attitudes towards new immigrants. The majority of Russian-speaking respondents expressed a negative stance on this issue. In the analysis, these opinions are set in the “national” framework of the formation of racialized hierarchies in an immigration society. Additionally, the view on Russian-speakers as transnational media users is applied to understand the harsh character of the speech. It seems that the interviewees’ opinions have been shaped by the “immigration-critical” discourse that has gained a strong foothold in Finland. The opinions also reflect the geopolitical views created by the Russian mainstream media, which many Russian-speakers in Finland use as their primary source of information and entertainment. In the interview speech, asylum seekers were racialized and presented as not belonging in Finland.

Davydova-Minguet’s article continues the analysis of the impact of media on the formation of opinions: while Oivo analysed a regionally operating printed newspaper as a medium conditioning the appearance of some opinions and disappearance of others, Davydova-Minguet presents transnationally operating Russian TV and social media as having a great impact on the views and language style of Russian-speaking immigrants. Transnational mediatized discourse on the “unsuitability” of asylum seekers in Europe and Finland is grounded in populist anti-immigration speech and was used by the interviewed Russian-speakers instrumentally to discursively improve their position in the Finnish racialized ethnic hierarchy.

Since the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine, the situation on the border and beyond has changed further. Finland is in the process of joining NATO, which the vast majority of population supports. Most Finnish companies operating on the Russian market have withdrawn their businesses from Russia, but some are still present. Academic cooperation with Russian research institutions has been suspended by decisions taken by the Academy of Finland and the Ministry of Education.

Since the beginning of the mobilization of reservists in Russia in September 2022, Finland has denied entry of Russian citizens holding a tourist visa, excluding visits on the basis of family ties. All political parties in the parliament now support the building of a border fence first in southeastern parts of the border, and later along the entire border with Russia. Obviously, feelings of fear, disapproval, and distrust are now on the surface and guide these decisions. Still, the border- crossing points go on functioning, and the traffic over the border now consists predominantly of people who have transnational care and family duties and obligations over the border. Although the broadcasting of

Russian TV channels through Finnish cable television operators has stopped, Russian-speaking inhabitants of Finland still are involved in Russian mediaspheres through social media and internationally operating internet television companies.

How will the decisions on cutting connections with the other side of the border impact on the future relations with Russia and Russians – those who live in Russia and those already in Finland – and more broadly in Scandinavian or European countries? How do they impact already in the production of “Us”, members of Finnish or more broadly European society? As Henrik Nielsen states in his article, these measures are part of the spectacularization of the border, conveying the message that people who live on, or have connections with, the other side of the border are dangerous. It is obvious that bordering processes have become fuelled and the whole borderscape stained by the war.

Nevertheless, the question of everyday security in multiethnic Finnish society and elsewhere in Europe is linked to the issue of good population relations. These relations intersect with images of Others and Us: good population relations among heterogenous immigrant groups, majority populations, and, in our context, between Finnish and Russian speakers depend on public discussions and politics. Questions of how to live on a border which is being fortified, and what kind of future is being envisioned, should be discussed with this turn to re/bordering and borderscapes in mind.

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