
Us and Them: Cross-border interaction between Finland and Russia

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates cross-border interactions on the Finnish-Russian border to promote a better understanding of the current “Us and Them” construction between Finns and Russians. Typically constructed along and in combination with borders, this dichotomy holds both positive and negative representations that must be balanced to maintain a nation’s identity without creating unnecessary distancing from the Other. During the long history of interaction between Finland and Russia, Finns have frequently considered Russians an Other when creating a national identity. The data comprises interviews and questionnaires collected among Finns who engage in cross-border interactions, and the results show that Russians no longer play a prominent role as an Other to the Finnish self. While differences between the Finnish and Russian societies continue to exist, the “Us and Them” dichotomy in personal cross-border interactions is barely noticeable. Rather than being an enemy, the Other has become a stranger, yet one with whom the Finns share common ground. The findings also indicate that the Russian-Ukrainian war, at least initially, did not discourage Finns and Russians from engaging in cross-border cooperation.

Keywords: Us and Them, Russia, cross-border cooperation, identity

INTRODUCTION

In political discussions, borders are often portrayed as solid and enduring, perhaps even as permanent solutions to various problems such as crime and unwanted migration. Donald Trump’s successful presidential campaign, and much of his popularity, is one of the best examples but far from the only one. His campaign was built around the idea that a wall on the United States (US)-Mexican border would solve long-standing problems with the Other(s), who did not belong with the US people and who posed a danger to the American way of life. The notion of the Other is simple, and in geographical border studies also a notably simple conceptualization. It

is, nonetheless, also used by the European Union (EU) in creating what is sometimes referred to as Fortress Europe, an internally borderless European region with strong external borders to keep out unwanted people and goods. The Finnish-Russian border is a part of the external EU border and has been redrawn several times, most recently after WWII, when Finland had to cede some of its eastern territory to the Soviet Union as an outcome of the peace negotiations. After WWII, the cold war closed the border almost entirely and made it the symbol of West vs East – capitalism versus communism – or simply “Us vs Them”.

Although the Cold War ended decades ago and the borders have since opened, much of the negative “Us vs Them” rhetoric has remained, as nations have continued to portray Russia as an Other (Nielsen 2019). Currently, some view Russia as an enemy, both before and after Russia started its attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Peter Viggo Jacobsen from the Royal Danish Defence College encourages us to consider the term “war” in a broader sense and has suggested that while the so-called Western world is not involved in an open and direct military conflict with Russia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia’s involvement in the 2016 US presidential election, and its misinformation campaigns are, effectively, acts of war (Jacobsen 2022). Jacobsen’s statement carries even more weight today as the war on information, history, and “truth” has led to censorship of Russian media in the EU and media in general in Russia. Russia is upset about what they call NATO’s expansion into their sphere of interest, and has repeatedly warned Finland of military consequences if Finland joins the alliance (YLE 2018; RT 2021; Vänttinen 2022a). Despite tensions between Russia and Finland, cross-border cooperation and interaction continued on the Finnish-Russian border up until the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war. This interaction has been both rather extensive and successful and was even exempted from the EU sanctions against Russia following its annexation of Crimea that otherwise stopped cross-border cooperation (Fritsch et al. 2015). Russia’s incorporation of Crimea was fundamentally viewed as just that, annexation rather than occupation, which enabled continued cooperation. Post-February 2022, this has not been possible. Hence, cross-border cooperation has halted, and the war has also led Finland (and Sweden) to apply for NATO membership. These events have further strained the Finnish-Russian relations, and while Moscow has vowed to respond, they have yet to do so.

The state border between Finland and Russia has not changed since WWII, yet it has a history of movement and change, as have the attitudes of “Us” (the Finns) and “Them” (the Russians) (Laine 2013). This study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of

this construction and deconstruction when Finns encounter Russians. A key question is: how is the “Us and Them” expressed in cross-border interaction between Finns and Russians, and has it changed because of the war between Russia and Ukraine? The meeting of Finns and Russians is particularly noteworthy because it is set in a context of supranational geopolitical security, (dis)trust, and longing (Koch and Vainikka 2019; Nielsen 2021). If the EU (and NATO) wish to find a way to cooperate in the near future, the key to establishing relations might very well be found in the Finnish-Russian relationship. Finland has previously been viewed as a gateway to (or gatekeeper for) Russia, and considering Russia’s other EU neighbours, Finland might reassume that role.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Rather than considering the “Us and Them” construction from a purely theoretical perspective, I have interpreted it within the context of the Finnish-Russian border. The geographical space of the Finnish-Russian borderlands relates not only to knowing the terrain and where the border (crossing) is located. It also includes a “special extension” (Sayer 2000, 110) of humans and the relations they form in the creation of borders often distant from the territorial limits (Newman 2003). Thus, considering the “Us and Them” construction in the context of borders and through the lens of human geography rather than in a void allows for a broader and historically founded understanding of how it has been used to create Finland, further enabling the study to adopt a more applicable practical approach. The contextualization is also an acknowledgement: because borders are created by humans, they are not static or the same around the world, but influenced by the people who create, dismantle, and uphold them every day.

The politics of creating a nation is well suited for the establishment of an “Us and Them” narrative (Marker and Hendricks 2019), and Finland is no exception in this regard. Scholars have argued that Finland, even during its autonomy under Russian rule in 1809–1917, was not a nation but “...a territorial expansion of Russian military power...” (Paasi 1996, 82). There was no real connectiveness between the people living within the territory. As such, Finland did not grow out of a common culture or identity but was rather created (Klinge 1982; 1980).

Creating an identity, be it national or personal, requires an Other different from one’s nation or oneself. Much of the Finnish identity has been built on not being Russian (or Swedish), as exemplified by the slogan “Swedes we are no longer, Russians we cannot become; Let us be Finns.” (Klinge 1992, 94). This was used in the fight for independence around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Creating separation and

setting up some form of boundary between “Us” and those who are different, is normal; thus, in order for Finland to establish itself, it needed to create some distance and form boundaries to untie the close historical and cultural ties shared with both Sweden and Russia. By creating and upholding these boundaries, it is possible to maintain one’s identity (Oommen 1995).

The “Us and Them” construction has had a long and impactful history in Finnish-Russian relations, though no real consensus exists as to how it fits in these relations. Some have argued that the term “Russians” has been politicized and used as a pre-meditated tool in creating “Them” (Kangas 2011; Jerman 2004). Others believe that the “Us and Them” dichotomy originates from a God-complex-like attitude that the Finns have developed to come to terms with their proximity to Russia (Kangas 2011). Finally, there are those who tend to interpret the dichotomy as a convenient means of healing internal wounds caused by the civil war (Kirby 1979; Kangas 2011). Yet, regardless of the reasoning, there seems to be a consensus that the “Us and Them” construction exists and has existed long before Finland became independent.

The borders between “Us and Them” are as significant as physical borders in terms of how people understand themselves in relation to Others, and they also help people make sense of the world around them (García 2021). As mentioned earlier, Finland had to create an “Other”, yet this was not sufficient as it did not have an “Us”. Once Finland achieved independence in late 1917, the lack of a common identity became evident as a civil war erupted less than two months later (Modeen 1995). The war did not completely put an end to the divide, yet the winning side attempted to place as much distance between Finland and Russia as possible. When Finland was attacked by the Soviet Union in 1939, the nation had to put its differences aside and stand united to fend off the much larger enemy. Not only did this help to create a notion of an external enemy, but it also raised the national mood and established common ground based on a narrative of freedom that all could support. Having shared suffering and glory can be stronger than any physical border in bringing a nation together (Walker 2018).

Borderlands

The Finnish borders had been ill defined and fluctuating over centuries. Until independence in 1917, and to a lesser extent until the end of WWII, one can argue that both the Finnish (eastern) border and identity fluctuated and changed. Finland has been a part of Sweden and Russia, just as parts of Russia used to be part of an autonomous Finland. The changing borders mean that today, there are traces of Swedish culture in Finland, just as traces of Finnish culture are present in parts of Russia and vice versa.

This leads to a more complex picture of the border and underlines the idea of borders as indistinct, fluctuating, and overlapping constructions rather than permanent clear-cut lines on maps.

Scholars have long argued that the state and cultural borders do not always align. In his book *Dansk Grænselære* (Danish border teaching), Eskildsen (1936) used a variety of examples from architecture to eye colour to prove the existence of Danish culture in northern Germany and to claim that the Danish (cultural) border was effectively located south of the current state border. Although several arguments in Eskildsen's book do not translate well into current scientific standards, the idea of a difference in state and cultural borders persists (see, e.g. Rasmussen 2017) and is, in essence, a confirmation that border(land)s are wide and intertwined and have entangled identities.

Borders between "Us and Them"

Thomas (2016) argues that societies and states are products of borders, not the other way round. This implies that the concept of the Other is created by a border which is used to establish a divide between the people on either side of it by removing them physically and mentally from each other. It also indicates that if that border is removed, the Other would cease to exist. However, this does not occur instantaneously, and merely co-existing in the borderlands does not automatically create understanding and respect; rather, these must be built. The Iron Curtain is an example of how a border (the Berlin Wall) can create a divide where there did not use to be one. In Germany, it is still possible even 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to see and hear Germans speak about the differences between former East and West Germany. This highlights that the social and cultural effects of borders outlast the physical borders themselves (Khosravi 2019). Also, one should note that borders, much like identity, are reproduced and renegotiated, and constitute multi-layered, dynamic concepts that are constantly being challenged (Thomas 2016; Zimmerbauer 2011; Balibar 2002).

The removal of borders is only the first step in demolishing the "Us and Them" rhetoric and (re)building an understanding that extends across the divide. However, in this lies a paradox, as borders simultaneously create safety and violence (Van de Vliert 2020; Jones 2012). This oxymoron can help explain why, following a period of extensive focus on globalisation and the 1990s idea of a borderless world, people are now experiencing the building of border walls and fences as a new norm across the world and on such a scale that it has reached an all-time high (Thomas 2016). Hard border rhetoric tends to

lead to alienation of the Other (Olsen 2014), not only because of the border itself but also due to the “spectacularisation of the border” (Brambilla 2021, 83), which simplifies its otherwise complex nature.

Brown (2008) argues that building walls along borders most often does not concern the prevention of, for example, smuggling or trafficking; rather, these walls are designed to demonstrate decisiveness and are part of domestic rather than international politics. There has been a change in the way people are approached and in how the border is described, which plays a large role in how those on the other side of the border are seen. Similarly, the meanings applied to others have changed (Nielsen 2020; Dear 2013). Borders are as dynamic as they are porous, and accompanying the constant alternations are changes in who and what can cross a border and when they can do so (Konrad 2015). Thomas (2016) calls this phenomenon a circular movement, indicating that different people associate different meanings with borders at various times, and in different spaces. The theorization of the concept of borders thus becomes elusive and subjective.

Borders help sharpen/create a gap between “Us and Them” (Van de Vliert 2020), but they also aid in creating a common identity. To label them as purely negative would be erroneous; they are multifaceted in nature. When the Soviet Union collapsed, many Russians found themselves in an identity vacuum where norms, culture, and rules were all open to interpretation, leading them to question who they were as individuals and as a people (Walker 2018). In contrast, the Estonians re-gained their independence and national identity not because the Soviet borders were dismantled but because a new border between Russia and Estonia was established. Although several factors can explain the void in Russian identity, one should recognize the change in the “Us and Them” rhetoric as having had a substantial impact. The “Us and Them” division was a part of a very large propaganda apparatus put in place to create a dichotomy between “Us” (the Soviets/communists) and “Them” (the Western world). In addition, the dichotomy was further strengthened, as creating a boundary to generate a feeling of identity, safety, and belonging is a natural human process (Van de Vliert 2020).

The challenge that remains is to balance the “Us and Them” dichotomy in such terms that people, on the one hand, do not create unnecessary, or even hostile, borders by building themselves up while putting the Other down and, on the other hand, are still able to uphold their identity. By leaning on Bauman’s (1990) idea regarding the differences between enemies and strangers, we can soften the rigid conceptualization of the Other as someone who is, by definition, against us. While an enemy is our counterpart,

a stranger is neither enemy nor friend; the concept of a stranger, thus, merely involves creating an Other who is not negative. When engaging with people with whom we do not necessarily share a common understanding or a so-called universal truth, we lack a platform that can facilitate understanding. Creating such a platform demands the ability to view matters from someone else's perspective, no matter how different this may be from one's own (Marker and Hendricks 2019). This is not the same as agreeing with someone, but it is an acknowledgement that different perspectives can exist in a given situation, just as a border has two sides.

METHODS

My article draws on two sets of data collected before the Russian-Ukrainian war in connection with and as an extension to the EuroCORECODE collaborative research project “(Un)familiarity as signs of European times: Scrutinizing historical representations of otherness and contemporary daily practices in border regions”. The first set consists of questionnaires collected among two groups of students from the University of Eastern Finland visiting Russia. The data were collected on a coach on the way to Russia and again on the coach when leaving Russia. While one group visited St Petersburg in conjunction with a course on Northwest Russia, the other group did so on a recreational trip organized by the student union at the University of Eastern Finland. The fact that the purposes of the two trips were different was not noticeable in the data.

Originally, 225 questionnaires were collected, half before and the other half after the trip. However, because the majority of the respondents turned out to be international exchange and degree students, and as the focus in this article is solely on the Finnish-Russian “Us and Them” dichotomy, only the 11 questionnaires completed by the Finnish students are utilized here. The questionnaire included closed, semi-open, and open-ended questions, though the data was subsequently condensed to focus on the semi-open and open-ended ones, that is, the qualitative part of the questionnaire. These questions concerned the students’ perceptions of the Other, the differences between Russians and Finns, and the reasoning for wanting to cross the border. The respondents, all students at the University of Eastern Finland, had diverse experiences of Russia. Some spoke Russian while others did not, and one had lived in Russia while another had never been there. The respondents were distributed evenly between the ages of 21 and 29, but there was an obvious gender imbalance, as an overwhelming proportion of the respondents were female. Only one respondent was male. This bias was deemed to have a minimal effect as no significant gender differences were found in the total sample of 225 respondents. The 11 Finnish students are referred to as “the students” in the following sections.

The second data set consists of nine semi-structured interviews conducted with agents of governmental, educational, and non-governmental organizations (NGO) engaged in cross-border cooperation with Russian partners. The interviews were approached in a manner which follows the conceptualization by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) of the research interview as a mining process in which the researcher chips away at the raw data to uncover the essence. Of the nine interviews, six were conducted with NGO agents, two with members of local government institutions in North Karelia, Finland, and one with a representative of an educational institution also located in North Karelia. In total, eight were from North Karelia and one from Southwest Finland (Turku). The interviews focused on differences in the respondents' perceptions, both in terms of the general perception of Russia and Russians and on a more personal/work-related level, in cross-border interaction/cooperation situations. The study also sought to clarify the reasons behind the interaction. Seven interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the remaining two had to be carried out online. As in the first data set, the interviewees had diverse backgrounds in terms of Russian language skills and experience in working on cross-border projects with Russian partners. Two-thirds of the interviewees were male. As the group comprised both governmental and non-governmental cross-border agents, they are referred to as "agents" in subsequent discussions to distinguish them from the students in the first data set. The last interview was conducted in late autumn of 2021, a few months before the Russian-Ukrainian war and before sanctions were imposed on Russia. In March 2022, all nine interviewees were contacted and asked to answer additional questions in light of the war. In total, five of the nine replied (via e-mail) to the questions, which focused on their current connection to their cross-border partners and willingness to resume cooperation if possible. One should note that at the time, there was a significant degree of uncertainty regarding how the war would develop and how long it would last. The replies should therefore be interpreted as a reflection of that particular time.

Combining questionnaire and interview data can cause the data to deviate, thus rendering it difficult to extract any profound conclusions. Therefore, the rationale behind combining these two sets has not been to compare results but to broaden the data pool so that it includes not only respondents who work professionally at cross-border cooperation but also those who made the deliberate choice to travel to Russia and meet the Other. Together, these two sets highlight the "Us and Them" rhetoric from a higher (local government) perspective and from a work, study, and personal (recreational) standpoint. The study also involves an individual-focused approach, which places

emphasis on individuals' experiences. Interviews allow for richer and more detailed information, whereas questionnaires enable a larger sample. To bridge the gap, the questionnaires include both semi-open and open-ended questions. Furthermore, the questions were designed to resemble each other as much as was allowed by the different target groups. The study aimed to gain a better and a more holistic representation of Finns to reach more general conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, cross-border cooperation agents seem to view their engagement differently from the students, implying a difference in the two data sets. While NGO agents' approach to cooperation with Russia involved a sense of naturalness, the students seem to have made a more conscious choice. Rather than viewing the border as a hindrance, the agents see it as an opportunity, or they do not see it at all. The cooperation is, in many ways, a natural extension of the local area that would otherwise end the border. The students, for the most part, also view the cross-border engagement as an opportunity but appear to place more emphasis on Russia being different. This was typically expressed in their hopes that the trip could function as boosting their future career, without specifying what that career might be. For example, they simply stated that "...[Going to Russia is a good opportunity] because of my future profession." (Female, aged 29). They view travelling to Russia, and subsequently learning more about the country, as something different that will make them stand out from other students and job seekers. This difference is rather subtle, but it becomes more noticeable when compared to the views of the Joensuu Scouts, who, instead of seeing their links to Russia as international cooperation rather see it as cooperation with a neighbouring area. The scouts were among those organizations who started the cooperation as soon as it became possible. "Scouting restarted in Russia after [the] collapse of the Soviet Union... Finnish scouts went to start it..." (Joensuu Scouts). While the scouts were asked by Russians to meet them, other Finnish agents first took the initiative to propose cross-border cooperation. There was thus interest from both sides. The fact that there was no real hesitation to initiate cross-border cooperation is likely connected to the ability or willingness to look past old hostilities, especially the wars between Finland and Russia during WWII and the resentment that ensued. When asked directly whether the past or the geopolitical situation up until 2022 had affected the cooperation, the informants felt that the past or the current situation did not matter very much, if at all, and if it did, only in terms of framework considerations, such as funding for the cooperation, not in relation to personal interactions.

"Us" and "Them"

While the data sets show that Finns have an interest in Russia, it has to be acknowledged that the data is rather biased, given that only people interacting with Russia and Russians were included. Those Finns who have no interest in this regard are much less likely to work in positions where they would engage in cross-border cooperation with Russia, just as students who would not participate in a trip to Russia. Therefore, one must first assume that those with no or very little interest in Russia are not represented in the study. However, although some students displayed a very negative perception of Russia, they still wanted to visit the country and also pay a revisit, even if their perceptions remained unchanged after the trip. This suggests that interest does not automatically imply positive perceptions. Yet, more data is required, especially from those who have no plans to engage in cross-border interaction with Russia, before any clear conclusions can be drawn.

Most informants had both positive and negative statements to make about Russia and Russians, and several expressed mixed feelings towards both the country and the people. Nonetheless, an obvious difference was detected: the rhetoric of "Us and Them" seemed much more evident when the informants spoke about the Russian system and not about the people. "When I think of the authorities, etc., my impression is quite negative, but when I think about... 'common people' [Russians], it is positive." (Finnish female, aged 27). The most extreme descriptions were also the most negative. The most noticeable aspect about these informants was that they drew heavily on the "Us and Them" discourse by comparing the Finns and the Russians to claim that "People in Finland are friendlier... [and] smile more..." (Female, aged 22). The "Us and Them" rhetoric also involves more positive portrayals; thus, the distinction is not only related to negative conceptualisations.

One always have [sic] to keep in mind that a Russian is more suspicious, but as the cooperation evolves, the bond gets stronger. It [cooperation] pretty much leans on persons [personal relations]. (Joensuu Diabetes Association)

An adjective used to describe Russians was "superficial", which is particularly noteworthy and paradoxical as many of the remaining respondents, both students and agents, described Russians as slow to open up, but proving warm and generous once they did. "They are cold to outsiders; you don't get to know them easily but when you do, they are warm-hearted people... [who] never give up" (Female, aged 21) and "... when a Russian starts to trust... [(s)he] is a true friend...[with whom it is] possible to

have deep meaningful conversations... [and they] call problems by their real name" (Joensuu Diabetes Association). This makes one ask whether the superficiality lies in the description of Russians, rather than in the Russians themselves. Furthermore, the description of Russians as slow to smile and having few but close friends is similar to the way in which many foreigners living in Finland describe Finns. The description of Russians as a tenacious people has also been applied to Finns. The Finnish word "*sisu*" can be translated as "grit", but it has a more complex meaning given that it relates to Finnish national culture and the narrative of perseverance even under the most difficult of circumstances – be it extreme winter weather or facing what seems an overwhelming enemy. These are also qualities associated with Russians. In fact, Walker (2018) has identified a similar perseverance in how President Vladimir Putin has sought to rebuild Russian national coherence and pride.

The informants who had negative perceptions were not the only ones to describe differences between themselves and Russians. Without being very specific and without including an "Us and Them" rhetoric, the agents and some students recognized a difference that sometimes complicates cooperation. This difference pertains to how certain matters are conducted instead of being targeted at Russians themselves. The difference thus appears to be more related to the legal and bureaucratic issues of cooperation efforts, the working culture, and institutional structures rather than personal differences.

I think Russian partners trust the Finnish partners very much, and Finnish partners have very good attitude[s] towards the Russians...Finnish experts, working in Finland, got used to the Finnish context, and sometimes they just forget that it might work a little differently in other countries. So, I think there is also a very important learning process on the Finnish side in these projects.
(Baltic Region Healthy Cities Association)

Close to home

After their visit to Russia, the students seemed to find a common thread. Both student trips were made to St Petersburg, yet many of the students wrote that they did not consider this city a good example of Russia or that it somehow presented a distorted picture of Russia. In this regard, the image of St Petersburg is seen to be at odds with the image of the rest of the country. And yet, while St Petersburg does differ in many respects from other parts and cities in Russia, it remains just as much a part of Russia as Vladivostok, Petrozavodsk, and other places, if not more, based on its cultural and historical importance and the sheer number of inhabitants.

For the agents, most of the cooperation takes place with partners in the adjacent areas ceded to the Soviet Union after WWII. Sharing a positive attachment to the area or its cultural traits is notably a factor that shakes the “Us and Them” perspective. In some cases, the agents showed a distinct affection when speaking about Russian Karelia and how traces of Finland were still visible in some places. Furthermore, descriptions of how some foods are similar but eaten in a different way also contributed to bonding moments and established common ground.

Cross-border cooperation in a new geopolitical world

When President Putin gave the order to attack Ukraine, he expanded the divide that had been building between Russia and the EU (and others) to the point where cross-border cooperation became impossible. The (mis)information war that Jacobsen (2022) had mentioned just weeks before the actual war broke out became clear to all. As a result, the “Us and Them” dichotomy has never been more distinct since the Cold War.

In Finland, the view on Russia has shifted significantly. Previously, Russia was perhaps viewed as a difficult neighbour, but few would argue that it posed a military threat to Finnish sovereignty. The sentiments have since changed: polls show that 84% of Finns now consider Russia a military threat, an increase of 24 percentage points in less than one year (Haavisto 2022). A year ago, the numbers were some 25 percentage points higher than in the previous poll (Vänttinen 2021b). Still, the polls also show that the majority of Finns continue to regard Russians as pleasant people (Haavisto 2022). It is the view of Russia as a military threat that has led to so far unseen action: more than 80% of Finns now support membership in NATO (YLE 2022A). This is a dramatic shift from 2017, the year of the last poll before the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In 2017, only 21% of Finns were in favour of NATO membership (YLE 2022B), but the subsequent developments have led Finland to apply for membership. For decades, Russia has warned Finland against joining NATO whenever the subject was aired, but since it became clear that Finland was more likely than not to join NATO, Russia apparently had a change of heart and claimed that it no longer saw this as a threat (YLE 2022C).

In the first few months of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the NGOs were ready to continue cross-border cooperation when it was again possible. Although the course of the war may change this attitude, it does reflect the findings of the polls that most Finns still have a positive attitude towards Russians if not towards the Russian government, a source of much concern. This is in line with findings from previous research (see, e.g., Nielsen 2019).

In addition to applying for NATO membership, Finland has also been discussing building a border fence along parts of its 1300-kilometre-long border with Russia (YLE 2022D). While the majority in the Finnish parliament seem to support this suggestion, building a border fence can be viewed as a step to further escalate a tense situation. Several scholars have argued that building walls along borders to prevent violence and hate often backfires and may ultimately invite the very factors against which they intended to protect people (Brown 2010; Eghigian 2008). Furthermore, a fence along the border will not offer any real protection against an invading army, as modern warfare is notably more advanced than the requirements to deal with such a simple structure. What it will do is add to the spectacularization of an otherwise peaceful border. Building border fences also involves constructing negative narratives about the border and the people on the other side, as it conveys the message that the neighbouring people are dangerous to the extent that one needs protecting from them (Brown 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study has addressed the following questions: how has the “Us and Them” dichotomy been expressed in the cross-border interaction between Finns and Russians, and has it changed because of the Russian-Ukrainian war? One of the questionnaire respondents who was not Finnish and thus not eligible for this study, wrote down that no matter where one comes from, people are essentially the same. This corresponds to Thomas (2016) argument that borders create societies rather than the other way round. However, people do not live in a borderless world but in societies with multi-layered borders (Müller-Funk 2021). These societies influence and change people, sometimes to the extreme where they create a persistent rhetoric of “Us and Them”, but this is not the case herein.

The “Us and Them” dichotomy between Finns and Russians in this study is closer to Bauman’s (1990) conceptualization of the Stranger rather than that of the Enemy, someone who is different but not necessarily in a negative way. Russia(ns) has certainly played the role of the enemy in the past (see e.g., Apunen 2008; Kangas 2011), and the border has notably created two very different societies. Nonetheless, this study found that positive memories of Russian Karelia outweigh the negative feelings of losing the area nowadays. The area has become, in a sense, a phantom limb for many Finns. Though it is no longer a part of the Finnish state, an emotional and cultural connection remains. Rather than representing an issue in Finnish-Russian relations, it creates common ground to promote understanding and to narrow the gap between “Us” and “Them”. While examples of a sharp “Us and Them” rhetoric exist, the case in this study represents an exception,

and overall, there does not seem to be any need to distinguish oneself from the Other. While Russia has been used in the past as an Other to help form the Finnish identity, this is no longer necessary. However, this study only accounts for those who have chosen to engage in cross-border interactions. In the wider Finnish society, one cannot rule out the presence of groups of people who perpetuate a strong “Us vs Them” rhetoric, even though the majority of Finns continue to have a positive perspective on Russians.

The largest gap between “Us” and “Them” emerged in areas concerning legal, economic, and political structures, and although all had encountered them, none had been discouraged by them. Undoubtedly, the cultural exchange that takes place in these cross-border interactions –whether-business related, through scouts, or purely touristic in nature – is a powerful tool in establishing positive and long-term relations (Valenza and Bossuyt 2019). In this regard, one can see a change in the “Us and Them” relations. The rhetoric has been stronger in the past but has softened over time. It also confirms the findings of other studies that have shown similar results after the opening of a border (see e.g., Olsen 2014). However, the Russian-Ukrainian war poses a significant challenge to cross-border relations. With the perception of Russia rapidly declining, which was also evident prior to the war, one might see a generation of Finns growing up with a border fence as the norm and fewer opportunities to interact across the border. For example, scouts’ cooperation and educational cooperation may halt or become severely limited. Time and space play a key role: if the war persists longer and spreads to, for example, Moldova or central Asia, it can affect the willingness and possibility to cooperate and interact.

There has been a willingness on both sides of the border to establish common ground. This willingness has been stronger than a mindset focusing on how the Other is different. It is a common factor that perhaps speaks to the determination that both sides possess and is an example of their similarity. Considering that this was evident against a very tense supranational political backdrop sets the Finnish-Russian border apart from Russia’s other borders. Together with the Finnish NGOs’ willingness to resume cooperative efforts, it suggests that although long-lasting cross-border cooperation has generally been rare and difficult to establish (O’Dowd 2002), this border area might constitute one of those rare cases. Finally, the perception of Russia seems to be changing rapidly. While the majority of Finns have remained positive towards Russians and although the NGOs said they were willing to resume their cooperation after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it would be premature to conclude that the war has not changed the “Us and Them” rhetoric. That will be for further research to ascertain.

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