Changing perceptions of the Finnish-Russian border in the post-Cold War context

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Introduction

Since 1995 the Finnish-Russian border has been the longest border shared by any European Union (EU) member state and the Russian Federation. Before then it had been the borderline between a Nordic state presumed to be neutral and a socialist superpower, symbolising the ideological and political division of the Cold War era. The border has a long history, and has been the scene of several wars and conflicts between the Swedish and Russian Empires – between West and East, as it has been often framed. Historically, the border has been fluid and relocated several times. Since Finnish independence in 1917 the border has been redrawn four times, most recently by the 1947 Treaty of Paris, which confirmed the incorporation of Karelia, Pechanga, and the eastern part of the Salla-Kuusamo region into the Soviet Union. Throughout history the border has been more or less permeable, and various forms of collaboration have developed across the borderland. After the Second World War, however, the border was virtually closed and heavily guarded, as a result of which crossing the border was highly restricted. Nevertheless, the official friendship policy shared by Finland and the Soviet Union allowed a limited number of visits across the border, as well as of outside official delegations (see e.g. Laine 2017a).

The present chapter draws on the premise that state borders are not merely the territorial lines of a state’s sovereignty, but also important building blocks of national identity and integrity (Häkli 2008). They both limit and define nation-states’ existence and manifest themselves tangibly both symbolically and mentally (Laine 2013: 55; 2016). In the last twenty-five years the concept of the (state) border has been broadened and redefined. The explosion of border studies in general suggests that the border as a notion is no longer restricted to political geography with its inherent territorial fixity, but that it can be conceptualised more broadly inter
as places, processes, practices, and symbols. The augmented diversity of the various applicable conceptualisations and understandings of borders expresses how the ‘border’ *per se* has been, and still is, one of the key concepts in contemporary political language.

Visions of deepening globalisation and a new postmodern – if not post-national – global order have suggested that the importance of nation-states and their respective borders may be fading. At the same time the rise of nationalism, seen especially in the post-Soviet/socialist states but also in the recent Eurosceptic and xenophobic reactions around Europe, indicates that the border still plays a central role as a contemporary marker of difference and identity. Indeed, while globalisation has certainly resulted in the institutional crumbling of borders, the compaction of cross-border social relations, increased interdependence and cross-border activities, and the intensification of flows, the scalar model of identity and society remains primarily anchored in national space (Laine 2016). State borders are continuously reconstructed and effectively utilised as markers of socio-political organisation. Although interdependence and globalisation processes have complicated the picture, the continuous (re)construction of borders based on forms of socio-political organisation and processes of nation-building remains a central question in border studies.

As with other political concepts the term ‘border’ is ambiguous, controversial, contested, and especially historical (Palonen 1997: 42). This chapter reflects contested attempts to politicise and reconceptualise the border in times of political shifts in the last twenty-five years. It seeks to explore how and by whom the border between Finland and Russia has been politicised and (re)conceptualised during three discursive events: 1. the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Bloc (1990–1991); 2. the enlargement of the EU and NATO (2004–2005); and 3. the beginning of the Ukrainian Crisis (2013–2014). The chapter then identifies the main conceptual families and border discourses as they appear in the texts of the leading Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS). Rather than reproducing the hegemonic discourses, this chapter illustrates the contested nature of the Finnish-Russian border, shedding light on its various, and occasionally contrasting, conceptualisations. It thus aims to contribute to the discussion of the politicisation and conceptualisation of state borders in the post-Cold War context, and more precisely in the context of post-Soviet borders and bordering.
Remarks on methodology

This chapter projects the Finnish-Russian border as a multidimensional, controversial, and fluid political concept that has been formed by struggles in which the actors involved have presented different meanings and definitions. The border is constantly changing; diverging meanings are attached to it; and it is used in many different ways as an argument or rhetorical strategy. Special attention is paid to analysing how the Finnish-Russian border has been used, politicised, and (re)conceptualised in political debate. The analysis focuses on identifying the actors, as well as their intention to use the border to argue for or against the status quo or the dominant understanding of a particular situation. As Skinner has suggested, innovative ideologists, actors who try to persuade or convince their listeners or readers to adopt some novel point of view (Skinner 2002: 149), are decisive for conceptual change. Through competing conceptualisations the chapter utilises this notion to reflect on the links between conceptual and political change. This is achieved not simply by investigating how the Finnish-Russian border has been used to reformulate the notion of the border per se, but also by identifying the impact the use of the border has had on reviewing foreign and security policy, as well as on national identity and the dominant narrative in the post-Cold War context.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the enlargement of the EU and NATO, and the Ukrainian Crisis are used as the key events that have signalled a significant change in the border discourse. The events represent waves of discussions, periods when the Finnish-Russian border has become highly politicised and has dominated the public debate. The discursive events represent formative moments, Mini-Sattelzeits to use Koselleck’s (1972) phrase when concepts and narratives have not only been reconstructed as part of a contextual shift but have been seen as having also constructed the shift of context itself. The waves are based on an initial screening of the Finnish newspapers, as well as on previous research which has examined the prominence of the border rhetoric in public debate in the context of major political events (Fingerroos 2012; Laine 2013; Laine and Tervonen 2015).

The main source of the material used in the present study derives from Helsingin Sanomat, the principal daily newspaper in Finland with a nationwide circulation. The material was collected and analysed between 1990 and 2015, thus forming a study period of twenty-five years. The texts were collected from the newspaper’s electronic archives with the help of keywords that allowed only the relevant texts to be chosen.
for further scrutiny. Every kind of text – news reports, investigative articles, opinion pieces, and editorials – was included in the analysis. Particular issues of the newspaper, when discussion of the border was especially prevalent, were also manually scanned to confirm the accuracy of the key-word search, and the articles thus found were added to the main textual corpus. On the basis of the textual analysis conducted the key discussions within the determined waves of politicisation were selected for in-depth analysis. These represent topical debates that clearly indicate an attempt to redefine the meaning of the border and the broader political context. In these cases, the textual corpus was supplemented by additional supportive material such as related speeches and statements by leading politicians published in other newspapers and other public forums. Using such broad yet cohesive material, it is believed, enabled a more accurate identification of the competing discourses without an overemphasis on intellectual or top-down conceptualisations (Laine and Tervonen 2015).

Re-framing Realpolitik and historical bordering

The location and position of Finland on the borderland has commonly been interpreted as a crucial element of Finnish national existence since the beginning of the nation-building process of the nineteenth century. The juggling act between the competing Russian and Swedish regimes laid the ground for the emerging nation-building and national identity, and has remained its cornerstone ever since. It was not until the ‘years of oppression’ in the early twentieth century that anti-Russian sentiment emerged, largely as a response to the policy of Russification, which aimed to limit Finnish freedoms (Laine 2015). Antagonistic attitudes became hatred when Finland gained its independence in 1917 and the former mother country became an enemy.

These developments created a geopolitically oriented framework for the discussion of the Finnish-Russian border which became dominant during the first decades of the twentieth century. In some debates Finland was categorised as a Baltic nation like Estonia or Latvia because of its location on the Russian borderland, but others sought actively to confirm Finland’s position and identity as a genuine Western European nation. In this process the newly formed international border became a manifestation of difference, crucial to Finnish national identity and pride, and strong anti-Russian feelings were instilled in Finns’ public consciousness in the mythic form of an eternal struggle between good and evil (Hakovirta 1975; Luostarinen 1989; Laine 2015).
A clear link between this othering and Finnish identity politics can thus be observed. The image of Finland as a European nation was deliberately constructed by othering Russians as an Eastern, barbaric nation, despite the long-shared history of Finns and Russians, especially in the Eastern borderland, Karelia (Harle and Moisio 2000; Browning and Lehti 2007). The hatred of the ‘Russkies’ was at its height between 1918 and 1944, when the otherness of Russians was deliberately exaggerated for political reasons. As Harle and Moisio (2000: 82) have explained, the Finnish national identity project was based on two underlying objectives: to find Finland’s rightful place among other nations; and to unify the nation against a common threat.

However, after the Second World War a remarkable change occurred as the main narrative was all but reversed by force of circumstance. Functional cooperation with the Soviet Union replaced the previously hostile imaginaries in the emphasis of the official Finnish rhetoric – and anti-Soviet references were largely censored in newspapers and other public forums. School textbooks and newspapers alike were required to comply with the Finnish security policy solution, which now depicted relations between the former enemies as friendly. The geopolitical risk had not vanished, yet, dictated by the 1948 Finno-Soviet Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, post-Second World War Finnish foreign policy towards the Soviet Union was based on the principle of ‘official friendship’, and further developed according to the Soviet doctrine of ‘peaceful coexistence’ (Laine 2015). Despite its lop-sidedness the treaty guaranteed the stability and security of the border, and confirmed the territorial integrity of both Finland and the Soviet Union. In the imaginations of many it thus helped to re-place Finland from the Baltic borderlands group to a position among the other neutral Nordic states (Browning and Lehti 2007: 701–703). During the Cold War years Finland stood between the east and west, staying outside the superpower conflicts, and adhering to its neutrality, which defined Finland’s place in the Cold War between the blocs and which was adopted as an integral constituent of the Finnish national narrative (Rainio-Niemi 2014).

At the beginning of the 1990s the dissolution of the socialist bloc and the Soviet Union were fracturing the very foundations of Finland’s position. The east-west framework was abruptly losing its significance as the foundation of international relations and the underpinning of Finnish national existence and place. Texts about the border published in Helsingin Sanomat in 1990 and 1991 clearly demonstrate how rapidly the dominant border discourse of mutual friendship, with its underlying political cornerstones, came under
challenge. The new framework for the debate was provided by European integration, namely the European Community (EC), the European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA), and the European Economic Area (EEA), which soon came to dominate writings about the border in *Helsingin Sanomat*. Even in early 1990 HS reporters, notably Olli Kivinen and Erkki Pennanen, were raising the question of the EC. They represented the ‘Westernisers’, as Moisio (2003a: 168) has called them, a group of actors who actively supported Finnish membership of the European Community in political debate and emphasised membership of the EC as an important political identity choice.

They conceptualised Finland as a Western and European state which had been pushed into the grey zone between east and west because of international politics. They emphasised the dynamism of a Europe that was broadly identified with the EC and urged Finland to jump aboard this moving train as quickly as possible. The EC was conceptualised as the ‘most dynamic community in the world’,¹ ‘a core of the European development’,² and referred to as an open, communicative, and interdependent³ union that could provide an answer to the challenges of globalisation and all that followed from the apparent reconfiguration of international politics. On the one hand the significance of state borders in this new, transforming core Europe continued to be conceptualised as markers between independent nation-state subjects; on the other the weakening of the former ‘ideological fences’,⁴ together with the ‘demolishment of rivalry’,⁵ were predicted. In contrast with what the era’s most advanced globalisation rhetoric suggested, there was contentment with the fact that the state borders associated with territoriality, sovereignty, and nationality were not to disappear, because European integration was seen as the outcome of international – interstate, that is – cooperation between, above all else, independent states and nations.⁶

In the early years of the 1990s the EC debate was led by the HS reporters themselves. Occasionally the debate involved invited external discussants and policy experts, most notably the columnist and former diplomat Max Jakobson, who had been an instrumental figure in shaping Finland’s policy of neutrality during the Cold War and had since become deeply concerned about the re-division of Europe. What stood out in the debate was how little attention was actually paid to the possible economic and/or political impacts of EC membership. Instead the debate focused on re-mapping Finland by conceptualising it as a neutral state on the ‘edge’⁷ and on the ‘poor periphery of Europe’.⁸
The debate painted a somewhat back-and-white picture, as only two feasible options were presented: Finland could either integrate closely in the core of Europe or become an ‘isolated and peripheral’ state within the Russian hemisphere. Hopes for the ‘Europeanisation’ of Russia were voiced, but such conceptualisations were often tamed by simplistic suggestions that Russia as a political and cultural entity did not belong to Europe, or that if it ever had it had since actively distanced itself from it. Europe was conceptualised as a Western, modern, and democratic entity, and in this way a cultural and even a civilisational border between Europe and Russia was drawn. Such borderings reflect the historical, cultural, and political concept of the West, an image that is traceable to the division of the Roman Empire and Christianity. As an exclusive identification this Euro-Limes, as Nicolaidis (2014) describes it, pushes Russia to the edge of or even outside Europe.

This increasingly dominant Westernising discourse shifted Finland from the geopolitical grey zone to the core of European integration. In its aftermath the previous geopolitical framework began to be replaced by globalisation as the most crucial context for the mapping of Finland (Browning and Lehti 2007, 703–706). This Europe-oriented stance had certainly been notable in the debate since the early 1990s, but it had at its outset been overshadowed by more traditionalist accounts, as was clearly visible when the debates in Helsingin Sanomat in 1990 and 1991 were analysed. In addition to the pure Westernisers there were also ‘traditionalists’ and ‘West-favouring moderates’, who defended the status quo or were afraid to consider Finnish foreign policy without a thorough discussion and analysis of the possible future trajectories of European integration (Moisio 2003a: 168).

The ‘traditionalists’ consisted mainly of politicians, but also included journalists and reporters such as the former HS editor-in-chief Simopekka Nortamo, who remained suspicious of the seemingly radical reformation of Finnish foreign policy. They emphasised that the border was primarily a matter of political stability between Finland and the Soviet Union, and that EC membership would present a negative challenge to it or even a risk to bilateral relations. Nortamo believed that the ‘fundamentals of the Finnish Eastern relations’ also needed to remain unchanged in the new Europe. The main reason for defending the Cold War status quo of Finnish foreign policy in the early 1990s seemed geopolitical in nature. The Soviet Union was apparently engaged in transformation, but it was anything but clear what would happen in the coming months
and years. The unpredictability of the Soviet Union/Russia has deep roots in Finnish national self-understanding, and in a time of political turmoil the border’s stability through the continuation of bilateral relations could be seen as serving as an important anchor for the maintenance of Finland’s national security.

There was also much anxiety about the stability of the border in the debate concerning the question of the return of the ceded territory of Karelia to Finland. Several authors, including reporters from HS, external experts, and other individuals emphasised that while the Karelia question was a very specific ‘Finnish-Russian problem’, it was also a historical one which made any attempt to redraw the border undesirable. They conceptualised the border first and foremost as a geopolitical, rather than a civilisational or identity-political, boundary. They did not see the border as a symbolic marker of difference, but as a symbol of the historically proven expansionist desire of the Russian leadership. The risks connected with this conception, however, were perceived as having been solved by the treaties signed after the Second World War and the agreed OSCE principles, which had neutralised the associated geopolitical risk. When the conceptualisations evident in the EC debates as they appear in HS are examined, it seems that Westphalian borders and geopolitics remained the key conceptualisations of the Finnish-Russian border during this period. The ‘Europeanisation’ of state borders and the widespread de-bordering within the new Europe did not fully apply to the Finnish-Russian situation where, despite the otherwise more Euroeanised rhetoric, the border continued to be conceptualised very much as a classic state border. Similarly, the EC was also seen more as an inter-state project than as a supranational union of collaboration.

Re-securitisation of state borders

The period from the beginning of the 1990s until the turn of the millennium can be regarded as an era of transition, integration, and optimism. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the entire Eastern Bloc brought many political changes and much turmoil around Europe. The political shifts in the former Soviet region were largely peaceful – especially when compared with the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia, which itself also posed further challenges to EU-Russia relations. There had been much optimism regarding these relations during the ‘formative years’ (Haukkala 2015: 2–3) of the first half of the 1990s, as the EC/EU was economically and politically in a very strong position vis-à-vis Russia. Many expected the EU’s soft power to
work its magic and Russia to democratise and Europeanise as it reformed itself from the ashes of the Soviet Empire and desperately sought its place in the architecture of post-Cold War security.

Although the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia was signed in 1997 and considerable progress had been made in developing joint cross-border cooperation programmes, tensions between the sides became increasingly evident towards the end of the decade. The expectations of reform and transition in earlier rhetoric were no longer evident but were replaced by a much more realistic tone. It was suggested that relations between the West and Russia had been based on mutual pretence – Russia pretended to be a democracy while the West pretended to believe in it – but now this pretence was simply deemed to be at an end. Indeed, it had become questionable whether it was at all possible for Russia and the major Western states to arrive at a real partnership or whether their intense competition would inevitably continue. Tensions were also caused by border and visa related matters, as well as by the ethno-national conflicts in the post-Soviet space, and especially in Chechnya. The war in Kosovo in 1999 also contributed to the further deterioration of EU-Russian relations (Eskelinen, Liikanen and Scott 2013: 1–2).

Notwithstanding these conflicts, the newly elected president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, gave a reassurance that Russia would support the process of European integration and wanted Russia to closely associate itself with the EU, both politically and economically. President Putin’s reform policies and his earlier connections with Finland were expected to open new possibilities for interaction. The weakened Russia’s publicly announced intention to promote its own national interests was interpreted, a little naively, as indicating that the country was seeking to create good economic relations with EU countries and aiming to attract foreign investment in Russia to boost the country’s economic growth (Laine 2013: 271). The leading idea of President Putin’s foreign policy was understood as showing the West that Russia wanted to be part of Europe and to establish the closest possible economic and political cooperation with the European Union, and preferably also with the United States.

However, this period of optimism was relatively short. By 2004, with the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine, a counter-reaction arose in Russia. Instead of the earlier commitments to democratise, President Putin now focused on strengthening his power and pressing ahead with further centralisation, in the process distancing himself from the ‘European values’ inherent in EU policies. During the ‘formative years’ the
fundamentals of Finnish foreign policy changed and were comprehensively reviewed. Finland recognised the Russian Federation as the Soviet Union’s successor and was quick to draft bilateral treaties with it. Finland became the first country outside the former Soviet Union to sign a new political agreement built on the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) principles of working directly with Russia (Laine 2013: 40). However, the treaty allowed Finland to make the move towards what was considered to be its ‘right reference group’ (Sutela 2001: 6–7): in March 1992, only a few weeks after signing the new cooperation treaty with the Russian Federation, the Government of Finland, with the support of Parliament, decided to follow the Swedish example and apply for EU membership.

This decision can be understood as fundamentally about seeking recognition of its own Western Europeanness and showing others that ‘the story we told about our country’s place among the nations’ was indeed true (Moisio 2003b). This was considered essential, because the international Finlandisation debate had questioned the story the Finns had told themselves, and instead situated Finland in the ‘wrong place’, from which Finland aspired to escape with the help of EU membership (Ibid.). The three Cold War neutrals, Austria, Finland, and Sweden, all joined the EU relatively quickly. Membership of the EU, together with new western links in security and defence policy, altered Finland’s perception of its location in the geopolitical imagination (Paasi 1999: 670). Finland now sought to prove its ‘cooperation abilities with other nations it deemed as good’, so that all the speculation and explanation about Finland’s position would become redundant (Moisio 2003b).

The Finnish Government, led by Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, underlined that Finland needed not only to participate in the process of European integration, but also to strive to engage with and become an active player at the very core of the EU. Finland’s location as a Northern borderland was reconstrued and now used to reconstruct a new Finnish self-understanding based on its Russian expertise and its potential role as a bridge-builder between the EU and Russia. As the only EU member state sharing a border with Russia, Finland had a unique opportunity to profile itself in such terms, which was unchallenged until 2004, when Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland joined the EU. On the Russian side, however, President Putin’s own political thinking and Russian foreign policy in general were increasingly affected by a more Eurasianist vision and logic, which caused a deterioration in relations between Russia and NATO (Rachwald 2011: 120–121). The re-securitisation of (state) borders after the 9/11 terror attacks was also prominent in the debates of 2004 and
2005. The enlargement of the EU shifted the permeable, ‘European’ borders eastwards, and the question of new member states’ capacity to control their external borders came under scrutiny, while the enlargement of NATO was seen as either stabilising or destabilising from a Finnish perspective.

The enlargements of both the EU and NATO in 2004 challenged the post-Cold War security balance in Northern Europe according to the discussion of these events in *Helsingin Sanomat*. Almost half the border-related texts focused on the NATO or security-political matters more generally. This is in parallel with texts published in *Suomen Kuvalehti*, an investigative Finnish weekly news magazine, in which there was a peak of NATO-related debate in 2005 (Laine and Tervonen 2015). In HS the debate was already heated by 2004, resonating with the more general increase in public and political discussion around the topic in Finland since 2003 (see Rahkonen 2006). The question of whether Finland should join NATO was inherently linked with the assessment of the Finnish relationship with Russia, military non-alignment, and prospects for further ‘Westernisation’. The question was seen to be about the geopolitical orientation of Finland, as clearly and forcefully presented in the HS debate, while the unpredictable, even expansive, nature of Russia was now broadly emphasised.

The writers involved in the NATO debate included respected foreign and security policy experts and HS reporters, but individual authors also participated. Political voices, however, were represented mainly in actual news articles and interviews rather than in guest columns. Similarly, where other previously sensitive questions such as the future of Karelia or EU membership were concerned, politicians avoided taking an active role in the debate itself. However, the geopolitical perspective and relations with Russia played a key role in the arguments made by various expert writers. Max Jakobson noted that the entire NATO question was fundamentally a question about Russia.12 Likewise, Paavo Rantanen, a long-serving official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argued that Russia was the most important factor in the NATO debate, yet acknowledged that there were also several others which required consideration.13 Most texts reflected on the possible trajectories of Russian foreign policy and evaluated the possibility of Finnish NATO membership in this context, without much attempt to envisage how NATO itself would develop in the post-enlargement era. The idea of Russia as a geopolitical risk factor, which conceptualised the border as inherently vulnerable and unstable, was
increasingly prevalent. Both NATO membership and military non-alignment were presented as competing tools for dealing with this fundamental border dilemma.

The pro-NATO rhetoric highlighted Russia’s divergence from Europe and its retreat from its journey towards becoming a democratic society. It was said that the door to NATO was open because of enlargement, and Finland should now grasp this opportunity before it was too late. NATO membership was also seen as affecting Finland’s role in the wider geopolitical and security context of Northern Europe. The former ambassador, Leif Blomqvist, directly stated that NATO was the only stable institution that could produce security in Europe, and its enlargement would neutralise the apparent insecurity along most of Russia’s western border zone. He continued that should Finland exclude itself from this responsibility, it would produce security only for Sweden by functioning as a buffer zone against Russia. Others, however, questioned Blomqvist’s logic, emphasising instead the importance of military non-alignment as a stabilising factor in the post-enlargement context. Non-alignment was also conceptualised as a continuum for neutrality and Finland’s place as a mediator state with functional relationships with all its neighbours and the superpowers. A narrative of Finland as a reliable neighbour and/or an east-west borderland state appeared in many letters from those who opposed NATO membership. They maintained that the best guarantee for Finland’s security had been and would always be its ability to remain outside international conflicts.

During the summer of 2004 new, softer security threats came to the fore. In the enlarged EU Finland was seen increasingly as the gatekeeper of Schengen Europe. The need to continue to carefully control the border with Russia was especially emphasised after the spring of 2005, when the Finnish Border Guard seized a group of Georgian women suspected to be victims of human trafficking. It was soon revealed that dozens of buses carrying women had been able to travel through Finland to Sweden and beyond in previous years. Both the Finnish government and the Border Guard were thus heavily criticised for being naïve and for not taking such new threats seriously. In response the then Minister of the Interior, Kari Rajamäki, promised more resources to control the Russian border and underlined the significance of Finland as the EU’s gatekeeper.

These new threats consisted of human trafficking, illegal migration, and organised crime emanating from the post-Soviet countries. Russia was no longer seen as a threat, as had been the case in the geopolitical
rhetoric of the past, but rather as a risk because it was perceived to be incapable of controlling its southern borders. In the writings discussing the NATO option more precisely the new threats also included terrorism and, increasingly, networked and organised crime in the global world. The realisation that the contemporary security scene had moved away from mere state security and was now characterised by a pronounced unpredictability as well as a complex combination of traditional geopolitical challenges and new security threats which were not necessarily connected to inter-state relations prompted experts to seek alternative ways of managing the situation. It was advocated that a wider understanding of security was needed as borders could not extinguish these new threats, and more intensive global cooperation was instead needed to combat them. It was also noted that cross-border and other forms of international cooperation should not be limited to state actors but should also involve the private sector.

Although several broader global security threats were identified and debated, the actual reactions and future scenarios envisioned continued to be very much based on traditional state-oriented politics, reflecting the broader re-securitisation developments of the post-9/11 era. Accordingly, the Finnish-Russian border continued to be seen above all as a line between two sovereign states. It had certainly become more porous and permeable, as the increasing numbers of border crossings suggested, but for many its role as a protective buffer zone for the EU and the Schengen area remained strong. Although Finland remained outside NATO, the border was seen as a geopolitical boundary between the Euro-Atlantic alliance and Russia, and it was considered important that Finland choose to be on the right side of it.

A return of the east-west division?

The beginning of the Maidan demonstrations in Ukraine in November 2013 restarted the international relations board game. Russia’s illegal annexation of the Crimea in March 2014 finally broke the fragile trust between the EU and Russia. The long erosion in relations culminated in an annexation that was broadly perceived not only as an open assault on international law but also on the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Concepts such as the ‘East’, ‘West’, and ‘spheres of influence’ rapidly returned to everyday vocabulary. In the political discourse such Cold War era concepts were again used in a seemingly unproblematic way, at times with simplistic references to a return of the Cold War, if not the beginning of a
new one. The deterioration in relations had of course already been apparent for a long time, but as Browning and Joenniemi (2005; Korosteleva 2011), suggest, post-Cold War optimism and faith in the stabilising and neutralising effect of economic cooperation had perhaps prevented politicians, researchers, and the public at large from noticing the expansion of conflicts and inconsistencies between the EU and Russia, for example, where the EU’s border and neighbourhood policies were concerned.

In *Helsingin Sanomat* articles a serious clash between Russia and the EU, and the West more generally, was now apparent. The concept of the Finnish-Russian border was again increasingly politicised, and Finland’s place came under increased scrutiny. One of the key discourses during this period consisted of deliberations about whether the Finnish border with Russia would present a threat or an opportunity in the future. The debate gathered momentum following the annexation of Crimea, because it catalysed the concern that Russia might violate the territorial integrity of other border states, including Finland. The hypothetical geopolitical risk deriving from Finland’s location on the borderland had thus suddenly become much more concrete. Accordingly, the border discourse and the securitisation it implied shifted from the earlier idea of Finland as a barrier against soft threats towards a new focus on military defence. In addition to the NATO debate speculation about the need for deepening defence cooperation between the Nordic states began to surface.

The return of the east-west juxtaposition thus became the most obvious trend in how the border was conceptualised during 2014. The crisis in Ukraine not only reflected the clash between the EU and Russian policies, but more broadly the clash between Russia and the West.24 In the related rhetoric Finland was depicted as a Western state, clearly distinguished from the ‘Eastern’ Russia, which nonetheless, because of its history, possessed much expertise that could be harnessed to better manage the Finnish-Russian border as the east-west juxtaposition was amplified. Several writers proposed that Finland should join NATO not only because of the changed security situation but also to strengthen its Western identity. Others confessed that they were afraid of living in the Russian neighbourhood and therefore urged Finland to look properly to the West and join NATO.25 It was noted that Finland had already in fact been on the NATO borderline for a long time, and the crucial question was now whether NATO’s future border would be ‘on the eastern or western side of us’ – i.e. whether Finland would be ‘among the Western democracies or the Eastern dictatorships’.26 It is clear that NATO not only represented merely a military alliance for many but was also symbolic of Western civilisation,
values, and democracy. Russia, in contrast, was generally conceptualised as an Eastern dictatorship with values unfamiliar to ‘us’. Such wording was especially apparent in the letters to the editor, many of which conceptualised the Finnish-Russian border as a value-based, civilisational boundary.

The uncritical use of the concept of the West illustrates the bordering and othering of Russia as outside Europe on the basis of geopolitical actorness and diverging values. While the concepts used are similar, their meaning differs from the Cold War ideological juxtaposition. In recent debate the West has been depicted as representing a modern, post-geopolitical, and even postmodern take on international relations, and the EU and the United States are commonly presented as political units respecting and safeguarding the associated values. Their political actorness is presented as being based on respect for territorial sovereignty, the promotion of international cooperation, and adherence to negotiation as the basis of international relations. Russia, in contrast, is characterised as a superpower representing old-school geopolitics, expansionism, and disrespect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of independent states. Such conceptualisations serve to confirm that the clash is indeed not only political, but also civilisational, reflecting the conflicting values and world views of the West and Russia.

The Ukraine Crisis had a major impact on the security-political debate in Finland. Finnish-Swedish cooperation was placed on the agenda as an alternative to the earlier NATO and militarily non-aligned options. There was little change in the core argumentation and the debate in other respects. Various historical interpretations were presented and the traditions of Finnish-Russian cooperation were repeatedly discussed. It was stated that non-alignment had a long history in Finland and had thus become part of its national identity – instead of taking sides, Finland should continue to play its part as a mediator. In contrast the supporters of the NATO options argued that non-alignment had become an outdated solution informed by the dynamics of the Cold War and was more than anything emblematic of the extent to which Finnish security policy was mired in its past.

In the debate about the sanctions on Russia a kind of neo-neutrality discourse returned to political language. The apparent importance of Russian trade and border-crossing tourism for the Finnish economy meant that severe concerns about the impact of the sanctions were voiced. While a majority of the population endorsed the government’s decision to take the unprecedented step of condemning Russia’s actions in Ukraine
and to participate actively in the EU’s anti-Russian economic sanctions, others approached these decisions with great caution, as such a direct and open confrontation with Russia was unquestionably a state of affairs that had traditionally gone beyond Finns’ customary comfort zone (Laine 2017b). The sanctions also augmented a more general dissatisfaction with EU policy that had been building since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. The then opposition leader, Juha Sipilä (the current prime minister), and Timo Soini were among others criticising the sanctions in the summer of 2014. The main rationale behind the anti-sanctions stand relied on the idea of the historical benefits of Finnish-Russian relations, which were seen as the basis of current trade relations and other business links. Although Finland participated in the sanctions, its mediating role was not forgotten. President Niinistö led the way in this respect when he initiated a meeting, even if it had no significant results, with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and President Putin to discuss options for ending the crisis. Niinistö himself explained that he was seeking to serve the EU as well as Finland. Unsurprisingly, after his visit to Russia more traditional interpretations of President Niinistö’s visit were voiced which underlined the significance of the long-standing bilateral relations between Finland and Russia. If Finland cared about the maintenance of these relations, it was noted, it should stay out of any military alliances.

In all, the peak in discussion in 2013 and 2014 reveals the extent to which Finland’s place had again come under scrutiny. Finland was on the one hand forcefully mapped as belonging to the West, among the states respecting ‘Western values’ such as democracy and tolerance, but the contradiction between EU-Finland and the nation-state Finland was also more visible than it had been. Geopolitical factors and increasing realism returned to the debate in *Helsingin Sanomat*, and the prevalent conceptualisation of the Finnish border with Russia was therefore embedded with geopolitical notions.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has attempted to present the key conceptualisations and politicisations of the Finnish-Russian border during three waves of discussion, 1990–1991, 2004–2005, and 2013–2014 as they appeared in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest national newspaper in Finland. Based on the analysis of the debate, several observations concerning the academic and political discussion of post-Cold War borders can be made.
Firstly, the Finnish-Russian border is a post-Soviet border. The parallels are most evident in the debate about Karelia, given the way in which the region was conceptualised as an object of dispute similar to the Baltic-Russian borders or the Kuril Islands. The Finnish-Russian border cannot in this sense, therefore, be considered a unique or individual case; rather, it plays a role in a much broader debate concerning the legitimacy of borders based on Soviet annexations in the Second World War. Unlike the cases of the Estonian-Russian border or Transnistria, the issue of the location of the Finnish-Russian border could be discussed officially only after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, the Karelian question, the debate about Finland’s potential re-acquisition of ceded territories, and potential borderline adjustment never gained majority support—whether among politicians or the general public.

Secondly, the use of the border in an identity-political sense has clearly been significant. This was one of the key discourses in the EC debate, in which the discussants sought to relocate Finland in the newly imagined map of Europe. The role of Russia was to be the significant Other, an unpredictable and even expansive Eastern state which had been, and was also deemed, a future threat to its neighbours. At a time of international or global crisis the border’s othering function was rapidly rehearsed in public debate. There is, however, no reason to exaggerate the othering of Russia or to encourage any stereotypes or clashes of civilisations between Russia and Finland. On the contrary, by identifying how the border has been used for the othering of Russia from Europe, new alternative imaginaries might be brought into the debate. This is very much needed, especially in the current geopolitical situation, which has re-nurtured the conceptualisation of border as a political barrier between nations and states, thus overshadowing the role of borders as places of encounter and cooperation.

Thirdly, the Finnish-Russian border seems to have become part of Fortress EU rather than Wider Europe. The postmodern imaginaries of borders as permeable and thin rather than thick and enclosed was scarcely reflected in Helsingin Sanomat. In the early 1990s there were optimistic attempts to reconceptualise state borders and re-envision Karelia as a place of encounter, with the ultimate aim of reincorporating the area into Finland by a process of de-bordering and by diminishing the traditional understandings of state borders, yet the voices remained in the margins and were eventually replaced by more realistic notions. Similarly, the growing debate about and demands for global cooperation in the early twenty-first century remained prominent
as individual contributions were insufficient to challenge the status quo and bring about a reconceptualisation of the border.

The Finnish-Russian border has continued to be conceptualised in terms of sovereignty and territoriality throughout the post-Cold War period, and this has also affected the more general understanding of borders. Nation-states have unquestionably lost elements of their former sovereignty, yet this chapter suggests that the Finnish-Russian border has not been conceptualised only as a post-territorial border of encounter and cooperation, as Browning and Joenniemi (2015) argue, but even in the post-Cold War era continues to represent a forceful territorial concept of the border as having a dividing function. Despite the increased permeability of the border and the growth in border crossings, the border continues to be associated with territorial fixity, the nation-state-centric order, and sovereignty in debate. The same concepts are commonly used in the current debate concerning the European Union’s future trajectories, and are given even further significance by the rise of Eurosceptic and even xenophobic nationalism, as well as the increased appeal to national advantage in politics, which cannot but be taken as signs that nation-states and their respective borders still play an important role for many.

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