Civil Society Cooperation in the Face of Territorial Adversity: The Estonian–Russian Case

GULNARA ROLL

Institute of Government and Politics, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

ABSTRACT The main objective of this paper is two-fold. In its first part, it gives a description of the main civil society actors of local and regional cross-border cooperation in the Estonian–Russian border area, which encompasses the Russian administrative regions of Pskov and Leningrad and the eastern Estonian counties of Ida-Virumaa, Jõgevamaa, Tartumaa and Põlvamaa. It analyses their motivations and the main factors that affect the dynamics of their cooperation. The second part of the paper addresses the perceptions of representatives of civil society organizations with regard to the role of the EU in promoting cross-border cooperation on the EU external border, its support for civil society organization (CSO) cooperation activities and its way of engaging CSOs in the implementation of its policies for cross-border cooperation.

KEY WORDS: Cross-border cooperation, civil society organizations, Estonian–Russian border area, European Neighbourhood Policy, cultural cooperation, environmental cooperation

Introduction

In May 2004, the Estonian–Russian border became an external border of the European Union and, in December 2007, Estonia joined the Schengen zone, a passport-free travel area that encompasses 24 European states. During the celebrations that accompanied the opening of Estonia’s borders with its European neighbours — Finland and Latvia — on 21 December 2007, Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves told his audience in the southern town of Valga, which borders Latvia: ‘This date, 21 December 2007 ... puts an end to talks about new and old Europe ... the abolition of border controls on the
internal borders of the European Union convinces us that Europe is united'.

As part of the celebrations, Ilves and his Latvian counterpart, president Valdis Zatlers, took part in a symbolic border-demolishing ceremony at Valga/Valka.

Prior to these festivities, considerable effort had been made to strengthen the EU’s external border with Russia by providing checkpoints with state-of-the-art equipment. A study conducted by the Stefan Batory Foundation (2008) concluded that the quality of the infrastructure at Estonian border-crossing points, as well as the services rendered by border guards and customs officers, were adequate. However, the study also stressed that there remained room for large improvements in terms of facilitating border crossing into Russia. According to respondents, these checkpoints lacked bars, cafés, sanitary installations and parking lots; in a word, they were foreboding.

This anecdotal snapshot from Estonia gives evidence of simultaneous processes of ‘softening’ and ‘hardening’ of the EU’s borders. As Paasi (1999, 7) has noted, borders ‘should be understood as historically and socially produced entities’. The degree to which they are open or closed largely depends on the history of intergovernmental relations between the countries concerned. For historical reasons, Estonia and Russia have developed fundamentally different foreign policy discourses about each other and relations between the two countries have remained tense (Kuus 2002). These divergent policies are reflected in and mutually reinforced by the Estonian and Russian mass media’s negative images. In recent years, the increasing self-confidence with which the Russian Federation is promoting its interests and influence in its ‘Near Abroad’, such as in Georgia and Ukraine, have led to a situation where an improvement in relations between Russia and its small Estonian neighbour is highly unlikely.

Before the re-establishment of an international border in the early 1990s, cooperation between the Russian and Estonian Soviet Republics was an important source of income for people living in the border area. There was, for instance, cooperation between manufacturing plants. Fishing on Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe, the fourth largest inland lake in Europe, was a major economic activity. Estonian farmers sold their produce to markets in St Petersburg, Russia; and many of the 300,000 inhabitants of Pskov, the largest town on the Russian side, made regular shopping and vacation trips to the city of Tartu, the largest town on the Estonian side, with a population of about 100,000. Since then, fishing on the lake, now divided by the international border, has become unprofitable. Russian custom tariffs on Estonian goods have doubled and border trade has lost its significance. At the same time, little economic activity has developed in the border area and high unemployment rates, particularly in the rural parts, have resulted in the exodus of most young people who, in the case of Estonia, have left not just for Tallinn but also for Finland, Norway or the UK.

Given this difficult context of bilateral relations, civil society networks play an important role in promoting the interests of local communities separated by the borders as well as bringing together groups pursuing common agendas in the area of environmental protection, culture, economic
development and ethnic group rights. The experiences of civil society cooperation between EU member states and Russia indicate that when intergovernmental relations are at a standstill, cross-border interaction has been able to switch to alternative channels of communication, thus ensuring at least a minimum of openness between these neighbouring societies (Filtenborg, Gänzle, and Johansson 2002). In the Estonian–Russian border area, cooperation has shifted to a strictly local level and is being implemented mostly by civil society organizations (CSOs); cooperation has focused on ‘non-political’ issues, such as environmental protection, cultural exchange and education. CSOs as understood here define a broad range of organizations involved in economic, environmental or social activities; they include, for instance, local government associations and economic actors, such as chambers of commerce. The results of the research upon which this article is based indicate that CSOs are especially effective in alliance with international organizations. On the EU’s external border, the main international actor is undoubtedly the European Union itself, which supports cross-border cooperation through the implementation of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the EU–Russia Strategic Partnership Agreement. For the period 2007–2013, the European Union has earmarked more than 740 million for cooperation projects between Russia and neighbouring Estonia and Latvia. Support for CSO cross-border networks by the EU could significantly enhance their impact on cooperation and economic development in the border areas. Moreover, as Nielsen, Berg, and Roll (2009) have argued, these CSOs could become agents of ‘Europeanization’ at the EU external borders. Similarly to Raik (2006), I argue that civil society cooperation between Estonia and Russia avoids the discursive trap of ‘European values’, which conjures up the notion of a geopolitical and civilizational divide. At the same time, CSO networks between Estonia and Russia could open up potential areas of social development, thus transporting notions of a ‘social Europe’ (see Gstöhl 2009) by advocating political commitments to groups who have suffered most from neo-liberal economic reforms and restrictive border regimes. With time, these efforts could support the EU’s soft power approach of ‘milieu shaping’ through slow institutionalization. However, this paper also reiterates a theme common to other contributors to this journal issue — that the potential of CSOs is being neglected by the EU in its pursuit of security and other geopolitical priorities.

This article will explore informal mechanisms of local cross-border cooperation that are developing at the EU’s outer borders and will interrogate the ability of civil society actors to transcend political divides such as that presently between Russia and Estonia. This paper will also characterize the main civil society actors of cross-border cooperation in the Estonian–Russian border area, analysing motivations and main factors that affect cooperation dynamics. It also addresses the perceptions of representatives of civil society organizations with regard to the role of the EU in promoting cross-border cooperation on the EU external border, its support for CSO cooperation activities and its way of engaging CSOs in the implementation of its policies for cross-border cooperation.
Estonian–Russian Cross-border Cooperation: the Geopolitical Context

Belokurova (2010) and Liikanen and Virtanen (2006) have characterized Finnish–Russian cross-border cooperation in terms of pragmatism and cautious accommodation. This situation contrasts clearly with the complex relations that exist between Estonia and Russia — relations that reflect the more problematic aspects of EU–Russian relationships in general. They deserve specific mention here as they clearly affect civil society cooperation between the two countries: the dividing symbolism of the border, different understandings of history and ethno-linguistic tensions have made official contacts difficult. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia and the Russian Federation again became sovereign states and questions regarding territory, national identity and the citizenship rights of ethnic minorities resurfaced. In the nation-building processes of both Estonia and Russia border areas have been of extreme importance.

Unsurprisingly, the two states often tend to view the border differently. During the interwar period of 1920–1940, Estonia’s eastern border was defined and demarcated according to the Tartu Peace Treaty; this document served as a ‘birth certificate’ for the re-established Republic of Estonia in 1991. Post-Soviet Russia refused to recognize the validity of the treaty because it entailed a loss of territory and would have obliged Russia to resettle persons who had migrated to Estonia after World War II (i.e. they would have become ‘illegal immigrants’). Furthermore, Russia would have been required to compensate Estonia economically for damages incurred during the occupation (Zhuryari, Surgailis, and Prikulis 1994). Estonian policy during 1991–1994 called for a complete restoration of Estonian independence, including the full recognition of the Tartu Treaty borders. Russia, operating from a complex set of historical, ethnic and strategic considerations, proposed that border negotiations depart from the status quo and be based on an agreement on interstate relations signed in 1991. It was not until 1994 that Estonia gave up its claim for the ‘eastern territories’ and, in 1996, Estonia agreed not to demand mention of the Tartu Peace Treaty as a legal basis for mutual relations. Following Estonia’s accession to the EU, the eastern border of Estonia became an EU–Russian border. To date no border treaty has been signed between the two countries.

Berg (2003), Kuus (2002) and Aalto (2003) have characterized Estonia’s geopolitical ambitions as a conflation of identity politics with a heightened desire for ‘security’, that is for strategic policies that would prevent ‘re-colonization’ by Russia and enhance Estonia’s national sovereignty through negating influences of the Soviet period. Estonia has become a member of NATO and the EU, political moves that have directly challenged Russia and its ambitions to maintain its regional influence. Identity conflicts culminated in the April 2007 incident between Estonia and Russia in connection with the removal of a bronze statue of a Soviet Soldier from Tallinn city centre, which served to publicize bilateral tensions on an international scale (Davydova 2008).

From the viewpoint of civil society interaction between Estonia and Russia, this geopolitical context has been particularly difficult in terms of everyday
cooperation practices. The abolition of the simplified border-crossing arrangements on 25 January 2000 and the introduction of a full visa regime between Estonia and Russia, in accordance with Schengen regulations, represented a severe blow (Berg 2002). A de facto (if not de jure) simplified border-crossing regulation devised in 1991 for the population of the twin cities of Narva (Estonia) and Ivangoord (Russia) and south-east Estonia thus ended and few compensating measures have been taken since (Berg, Boman, and Kolossov 2004). In addition, the establishment of the Schengen border in 2007 has made cross-border interaction more cumbersome and has severely affected border cities, such as Narva (on the Estonian side) and Ivangoord — formerly ‘twin cities’. This situation is clearly felt at the ‘microlevel’. In terms of the Estonian team’s experiences in the field, representatives of Russian-speaking NGOs are rather reticent to be interviewed, afraid to be criticized or being quoted saying something that could jeopardize their status within Estonia.

**Barriers to Cross-border Cooperation**

Given the above, it is not surprising that cross-border cooperation between Estonia and Russia is rather limited and mainly centred on politically uncontroversial activities that deal with cultural and environmental issues. Cultural cooperation with Finno-Ugric minorities in Russia, in particular, benefits from strong support from the Estonian government. Ethnic, linguistic and cultural affinities, together with shared economic and environmental interests, can therefore be considered the main motor of cross-border cooperation, which is favoured by personal contacts that go back to Soviet times as well as by support from Pan-European and Pan-Baltic networks and from governments in Nordic countries. These factors are, however, counterbalanced by the continuing tense relations between Estonia and Russia, which have remained a major barrier to cross-border cooperation. Thus, contacts between Estonian and Russian CSOs have decreased as a consequence of the April 2007 ‘Bronze Soldier incident’ in Tallinn. One CSO representative in St Petersburg (R 13) admitted that:

The April 2007 incident in Tallinn has had a negative impact on relationships between CSOs working in the Estonian–Russian border area. Right after the incident, some representatives of Estonian CSOs were afraid to participate in seminars at St. Petersburg because they were afraid of possible provocations. Similarly, representatives of local authorities from the Pskov oblast cancelled their participation in a workshop in southern Estonia that took part a week after the incident.

Obtaining visas for travelling from the EU to Russia and from Russia to the EU was supposed to become much easier after the adoption in May 2006 of an agreement between the Russian Federation and the European Union. However, according to Estonian respondents, the procedure has remained laborious and difficult, except for the rather expensive tourist
visas that can be obtained through travel agencies. A visa application made on behalf of a group of school children who were to travel from Tartu to St Petersburg, for instance, was refused just one day ahead of the planned journey. For Russian citizens from St Petersburg, the procedure appears to have become more time-consuming and uncertain since April 2007, with long waiting lines at the Estonian consulate and difficulties in obtaining the relevant information about visas by phone. Respondents in Moscow and Pskov, on the contrary, declared that visa processing had become easier with time. Before Estonia joined the Schengen zone, people living in the border area were allowed to cross the border with a special permit issued by local authorities in cooperation with the respective foreign ministries. When the Schengen regulations came into force, Estonia and Russia agreed to provide 4000 visas free-of-charge for the border population, and lists of eligible citizens were compiled by the local authorities. However, this agreement was cancelled in January 2009.

The tense relations between Estonia and Russia have also prevented the timely use of EU funds for cross-border cooperation. Thus, the government of the Russian Federation has yet refused a crucial signature that would make available funds earmarked for Estonian–Latvian–Russian Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) during the period 2007–2013. Its continuing refusal might well endanger the implementation of joint Estonian–Russian projects funded by the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) programme, the only framework within which such cooperation can be organized.

Finally, Estonia and Russia, as well as countries of Western Europe, have different agendas for cross-border cooperation, which CSOs find difficult to reconcile with their own interests. A rather critical civil society activist from the Russian city of Pskov complained that: ‘EU money goes into regional development projects. However, it is difficult to find common interests. While Swedes, Germans and Estonians wanted to do environmentally friendly (‘clean energy’) projects in Russia, in Russia interest [for that topic] is limited’.

The Major Actors in Estonian–Russian Cross-border Cooperation

Despite the difficulties discussed above, civil society cooperation between Russia and Estonia perseveres because of the flexible nature of networks that have been established below the level of ‘high politics’ and because of considerable support from third sources, such as the Swedish government and the EU. Within this context, Baltic regional networks in the area of environmental protection have played an essential role. As a result, a respectable number of CSOs still participate in cooperation. The main local actors in Estonian–Russian cross-border cooperation can be distinguished according to whether cooperation takes place along ethnic and cultural lines, promotes economic development or is centred on environmental issues. However, a number of organizations are active in several fields, and cultural cooperation often goes hand in hand with initiatives that promote local development.
Cultural Cooperation

Cross-border cooperation in cultural activities is supported by both the Estonian and the Russian government since it is considered to be non-political and uncontroversial. The majority of cultural associations were established in the 1980s. In Estonia the ‘Singing Revolution’ of 1988, which preceded national independence in 1991, resulted in a revival of Estonian cultural associations, gave people more confidence to promote the use of non-official languages, to preserve cultural traditions and to revive ties with regions to which they had cultural and historical affinities. Today the national government and local authorities provide support to these associations (cultural events, Sunday schools of teaching native languages), the first mainly through the Kindred Peoples Programme that promotes Samoyed and Finno-Ugric (other than Estonian) indigenous languages and cultures.

Some 40 out of the 120 nationalities represented in Estonia have their own cultural organizations, which are part of the Alliance of Nationalities of Estonia. The largest ethnic groups (more than a thousand individuals) are Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Finns, Tatars, Latvians, Jews, Lithuanians, Germans and Armenians. Other indigenous nationalities and minorities include Russian Old-Believers, who have lived in what is now Estonia since before the establishment of the First Estonian Republic, as well as nationalities of the former Soviet Union who have migrated to Estonia since the 1950s (university graduates, specially qualified people working in the new industrial sector etc.).

Cultural associations, of which there are more than 200 in Estonia alone, are key players in cross-border cooperation: they have direct contacts with people and organizations on the Russian side as well as a good understanding of how to work in Russia. Many of them are involved in cross-border projects, and it is usually they and not their Russian counterparts, who have been taking the initiative. Unfortunately, most of these organizations are only marginally involved in the implementation of EU programmes. The following are among the most important ones.

- Fenno-Ugria, an umbrella NGO established as early as 1927 during the First Estonian Republic, promotes cooperation with Finno-Ugric and Samoyed peoples living outside Estonia, mostly in central and northern Russia. One of their main activities is exchange programmes for students, partly funded by the Kindred Peoples Programme. Over a hundred young foreigners from Finno-Ugric minorities have attended Estonian universities and colleges.

- Other important actors of Estonian–Russian CBC are the Ingrian Finns who, in the seventeenth century, moved from Finland to present-day Leningrad oblast. It is estimated that some 50,000 Ingrian Finns were executed or deported during the years 1929–1931 and 1935–1938 (Laherand 2008, 4). During the Second World War, their area of settlement was occupied by Nazi Germany and, in 1944, Finland reached an agreement with the Soviet Union that allowed 63,000 Ingrian Finns to...
be evacuated to Finland through the Estonian port of Paldiski. After the war, 57,000 returned to Russia but were deported to the central regions of that country. It was only after Stalin’s death that Ingrian Finns were allowed to freely choose their place of residence. Many of them settled in Estonia or Karelia (Eesti Ingerisoomlaste Liit 2008, 1). Today, some 17,000 Ingrian Finns live in Estonia; several thousands of others have remained in regions to which their parents had been deported in Siberia and Central Asia. In 1990, the Finnish government offered Ingrian Finns (‘Finns abroad’) to resettle in Finland, an opportunity taken up by many of them living in Estonia or Russia. At present, the Ingrian Finns’ cross-border and transnational contacts extend to Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, as well as to Finland where most of them have relatives and friends. After independence, Ingrian Finns were granted the status of cultural autonomy by the Estonian government.

- The Setos form a linguistic minority in south-eastern Estonia and north-western Russia. They speak a South Estonian dialect (or language), but do not identify themselves as a separate nationality. Some 3000 to 4000 Setos out of an estimated 10,000 to 13,000 Estonian Setos live in Setomaa, their historical area of origin, located in the southern part of the Russian–Estonian border region. Today, only some 100 Setos still live in Russia. All of Setomaa was part of the First Estonian Republic, whose borders were set during the Tartu Peace Treaty of 1920 between Soviet Russia and Estonia. This border formed the basis of bilateral relations between the two states until 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied and subsequently annexed Estonia. In 1945, as part of a major administrative reform, the Soviet Union changed the border line and the Estonian SSR lost a territory of 2300 km², including part of Setomaa. Attempts made by Estonia since independence to recover this territory have been unsuccessful. While most Setos have relocated to Estonia, graveyards and other symbolically important places are situated on the Russian side of the border. The Setomaa local government association as well as other organizations are active in EU CBC projects of cultural cooperation (e.g. music and traditional handicrafts), rural tourism, education, environmental protection and energy. These activities receive strong political support in Estonia, where the Setos have their own parliamentary group and excellent contacts with Estonia’s political establishment.

- The Society of Old Believer Culture and Development in Estonia represents some 15,000 ‘Old Believers’ (starovery). The majority of them live on the Estonian shore of Lake Peipsi, where their cultural heritage (churches, museums, local architecture, etc.) attract both local and foreign tourists. Their ancestors fled persecution in Russia in the late seventeenth century, after rejecting the reform of the Russian Orthodox Church introduced by Patriarch Nikon. The Society is mainly engaged in cultural cooperation with co-religionists in neighbouring Latvia and Russia, but also in North America.
Environmental Cooperation

Environmental cooperation involving Estonian and Russian CSOs almost exclusively concerns the Baltic Sea and Lake Peipsi. It relies mainly on well-established networks of environmental CSOs, scientists, officials and representatives of international organizations who work hand in hand to promote environmentally sustainable development in these two water basins. Estonian–Russian environmental cooperation has developed on the basis of personal contacts between environmental experts who had already worked together in Soviet times. New contacts between Estonian and Russian environmentalists have developed through Pan-Baltic and Pan-European networks of CSOs whose headquarters are usually located in Sweden and Finland, two European countries with strong civil societies. Examples of such networks are the Coalition Clean Baltic, the Worldwide Fund for Nature — WWF, the Taiga Rescue Network and Friends of the Earth. As an interviewee from an environmental CSO in Tartu, Estonia (E2), stated:

We started to work with CSOs in Russia through the international network of the Worldwide Fund for Nature that has its European office in Brussels and its Baltic office in Copenhagen. There is a WWF office in Moscow and there is another office (CSO Baltic Fund for Nature) for North-Western Russia in St Petersburg. These two offices agreed that the St Petersburg office would be the main partner for cooperative projects in the Baltic Sea area. Currently we are working with Russian partners on joint projects dealing with the prevention of oil pollution in Baltic Sea waters.

National environmental agencies from Nordic countries, such as the Swedish and Danish agencies for environmental protection and the Finnish Ministry for Environment, also play an important role in facilitating Estonian–Russian cooperation. As a CSO representative in St Petersburg (R 10) stated,

preferences in terms of international partnerships have been with CSOs located in Baltic Sea countries … Oftentimes government agencies from the Nordic countries have involved CSOs in Russia in order to promote development and the implementation of different European and/or Baltic Sea regional strategies. In such projects, implementation has been organized by Russian CSOs in cooperation with Nordic and local Russian state agencies.

An interesting example of Estonian–Russian environmental cooperation concerns the water management of Lake Peipsi and efforts to provide environmental education. Activities started in 1993 and were based on shared interests of environmental scientists, on the one hand, and of officials in Estonia and Russia, on the other. During Soviet times, these actors had worked together on environmental studies and monitoring but found it difficult to do so after the re-establishment of the international border. Until
the first Estonian–Russian transboundary water agreement (1997), there existed no legal basis for this kind of cooperation, nor was there any state funding for cross-border cooperation. Starting in 1993, the ‘Lake Peipsi Project’ (later renamed as Peipsi Centre for Transboundary Cooperation), which had offices in Tartu (Estonia) and Pskov (Russia), organized a series of meetings and conducted research projects with the help of the US government and private foundations; informal workshops and conferences were occasions where experts as well as officials could meet. When, in 1994, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency decided to start a project aiming to implement cross-border cooperation for the water management of the Lake Peipsi basin, it invited state agencies and regional administrations in Estonia and Russia to participate in this venture. However, in the absence of a legal framework, state agencies could not be officially involved. Cross-border cooperation was therefore facilitated by the Lake Peipsi Project until international agreements for cooperation at the intergovernmental level were signed and the Estonian–Russian transboundary water commission was established in 1997. Today a large number of environmental cooperation projects are being implemented in the Estonian–Russian border area. While municipalities and local firms are playing an increasing role, cooperation between CSOs has decreased because of the highly bureaucratic nature of EU projects.

Economic Cooperation

Economic interaction between Estonia and Russia is orientated towards the main transportation corridor between Tallinn and St Petersburg, and the Estonian–Russian border. Cooperation is particularly intense between the predominantly Russian-speaking Estonian municipalities of Narva and Kohtla–Järve and the Russian municipalities of St Petersburg, Ivangoord and Kingisepp. Good cross-border ties also exist between the Pskov Oblasti Chamber of Trade and Commerce, the Estonian Chamber of Trade and Commerce and the Estonian–Russian Chamber of Commerce. Generally, cooperation is driven by networks of Russian-speaking organizations. However, in comparison to cultural and environmental areas of cross-border cooperation, economic cooperation in terms of civil society involvement is at a distinct disadvantage. This is due to customs restrictions, high transaction costs of business across the border and bilateral tensions. The actual state of economic cooperation depends to a great extent on that of intergovernmental relations between Estonia and Russia as both national authorities often use it for leverage during negotiations. The most active players in economic cross-border cooperation are chambers of commerce and local entrepreneurs. Non-profit consulting companies or business support centres are also important actors.

As is the case for environmental cooperation, personal contacts established during Soviet times and the role of organizations from Nordic countries as facilitators have been crucial for successfully implementing economic cross-border cooperation. For instance, the only existing Euroregion, which comprises border municipalities from Estonia, Latvia and Russia, was established in 1996 with the support of the Swedish Association
of Local Authorities and Regions (SLK). According to the Estonian Director of the Pskov–Livonia Euregio: ‘The cooperation initially started thanks to contacts established during a workshop in Sweden in the mid-1990s; since then we have cooperated on a number of projects with those partners’.

Social Issues: An as yet Under-exploited Field of Cooperation

The area of social welfare and social equity, particularly for minorities and disadvantaged groups, represents a vast area of opportunity for civil society organizations in Eastern and Central Europe. Social policy is, in fact, one specific area where post-Soviet and post-socialist transformation has had devastating effects, with states drastically reducing welfare provisions and deferring new investment in social infrastructure. The origins of weak social policies in transformation countries, particularly in non-EU countries, such as Russia, are complex and cannot be discussed in detail here. It is important, however, to emphasize that CSOs have assumed the role of welfare provider in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and in several of the EU’s new member states; much of the financing of these activities comes from the EU and other international sources (Liikanen and Laine 2010). Cross-border cooperation in areas of social welfare has been documented for the Russian–Finnish, Polish–Ukrainian and Hungarian–Ukrainian borderlands, where they have in fact flourished (see Scott and Büchner 2009). The potentials for synergy effects in the Estonian–Russian case are, perhaps, even more pronounced due to Soviet era traditions of interaction and ‘cultural overlap’, particularly with regard to Russian-speaking communities. To an extent, Estonian–Russian cooperation has been able to improve the situation in border communities; however, the obstacles to more comprehensive and sustained cooperation in this field are considerable.

Although representatives of Russian CSOs active in the field of social welfare in Pskov have declared a great interest in cooperating with Estonian CSOs on this issue, there are very few cross-border activities at present. The main reasons for this appear to be differences in the respective welfare systems of Estonia and Russia, as well as the lack of personal contacts and of experience in the management of international projects. Russian humanitarian CSOs primarily receive support from CSOs and individuals based in Western Europe. Most of the Estonian humanitarian organizations receive funds to implement social projects in Estonia itself. In addition, Estonian CSOs focusing on economic development concentrate their efforts on economically less-developed countries, such as Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, which are a priority within the Estonian government’s development aid policy. Since Russia is not a recipient of EU development aid, funds are not available for cross-border cooperation with Russia.

The EU and its Support for Civil Society Cooperation: the Local Actors’ View

As part of the fieldwork conducted on Estonian–Russian cooperation, representatives from CSOs were asked to evaluate their present and previous
experience with EU support for cross-border cooperation. Questions focused mainly on access to information about the EU’s CBC policies and funding as well as on involvement in EU-funded projects and other activities.

Members of Estonian CSOs have a growing understanding of EU policies and funding possibilities, receiving information through Pan-European and Pan-Baltic umbrella organizations, as well as the mass media. In addition, a small number of representatives of national CSOs are involved in expert groups within the Commission or other European institutions. While it is rare that Estonian CSO representatives cooperate directly with European institutions, involvement in working groups and meetings convened by the EU is frequent. However, Estonian CSO representatives also admit that they are seldom capable of critically discussing the EU’s international cooperation strategies, such as the ENP, in a ‘professional’ manner. Rather, they see themselves as involved in a long-term process of learning about EU politics and policies and their own potential influence at the European level.

Russian CSOs have a much more restricted access to information about EU policies, and their understanding of the EU remains limited. Russian CSO representatives have complained that important EU documents and materials are written in a bureaucratic style which is difficult to understand for persons who do not have access to regular information about EU policies. Russian partners in European projects receive most of their information about EU policies through their European counterparts. As one Russian interviewee (R13) from Pskov commented: ‘before the start of the INTERREG IIIA Programme that supported Estonian–Russian cooperation, our organization was among the very few that had experience of working on cross-border cooperation projects with Estonia. We are grateful to our Estonian partner for the know-how they provided’.

Cross-border cooperation in the Estonian–Russian border area very much depends on funding from the EU, as national or alternative international funds are not available for this purpose. When asked to assess their experiences of participating in EU-funded projects, CSO representatives generally stress bureaucratic hurdles, especially with regard to reporting and organizing audits. Only economic actors have a more positive view of their experience. According to an Estonian CSO informant (E 11): ‘Before Estonia joined the EU, major funding was coming from embassies, such as those of the US and Nordic governments. Now there are mainly European funds channelled through agencies managed in Estonia. Submitting applications and then reporting and organizing an audit is a time-consuming bureaucratic process. Small organizations are not capable of participating in large-scale projects’.

A CSO representative from the Estonian city of Tartu (E 9) concurred:

EU project reporting is very difficult. Other problematic issues are the fact that money is made available several months after project activities have been completed. Where would CSOs find the money? Usually a CSO which does not have property cannot borrow money from banks
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to pre-finance project activities. For CSOs this represents a huge risk, especially where we need to purchase equipment and in cases where the funding agency during the audit decides not to confirm the expenses. This can have a very negative impact for a CSO.

In terms of the implementation of EU policies, CSOs technically enjoy equal status with other actors, such as government agencies or local and regional authorities. However, participation in EU programmes, such as the ENPI, requires the use of administrative and financial professional staff not readily available to most CSOs, which are organized around projects and do not have stable funding. As one CSO representative in the Estonian city of Tartu (E 8) stated:

There should be special resources for CSOs. Brussels is not interested in supporting the CSO sector; the goal is to implement specific programmes and the EU often forgets about the importance of supporting CSOs, it prefers to support large EU projects where only large organizations can participate; small CSOs do not have the capacities to prepare and implement such projects.

Representatives of Russian CSOs stress the importance of the EU providing funding directly to CSOs because of the special status of CSOs in Russia, which is very different from that of their counterparts in democratic European countries. To quote a CSO representative from the Russian city of Pskov (R18):

I am very pessimistic concerning cooperation between the EU and Russia, especially with regard to involving Russian CSOs in cooperation. The EU focuses on its own interests, it behaves selfishly; we do not see that Europe is interested in cooperating and taking into account the needs and interests of Russian CSOs. Civil society is still very fragile in Russia and needs support. However, I do not see the EU being interested in promoting the development of civil society in Russia.

As a rule, it is government officials who draft official positions in EU member states and their partner countries. There is no official procedure for consulting CSOs during the preparation of EU policy documents. Again, the comments of civil society actors in Estonia and Russia are quite revealing. According to one informant in the Estonian capital city of Tallinn (E 3):

… cooperation with the ministry has become more active and also more open; there is more trust in the relationships between representatives of CSOs and government agencies. At the same time, CSOs are not being consulted during the preparation of Estonian strategies. How can CSOs be involved in the implementation of projects based upon these strategies if their ideas have not been taken into account while these strategies were developed?
His counterpart in Pskov (R 6) had this to say: ‘In shaping its support programmes, the EU takes into account interests of the authorities but not proposals made by CSOs since the latter are not involved in the preparation of the programmes to be funded. CSOs cannot adequately participate in EU programmes if they are not being consulted at the time when thematic priorities are defined’.

While most of the CSO representatives interviewed concur that EU resources are limited and that EU programmes are overly bureaucratic, upon hindsight these criticisms are rather general in nature — there has always been a relative ‘lack’ of funds for CBC activities. More serious is the accusation of exclusionary practices levelled at the EU and the charge that the EU does too little to politically support the activities of civil society within the ENP framework. What helps in this situation is the existence of Pan-European and Pan-Baltic networks of CSOs led by strong Western European organizations that have a strong institutional support base allowing them to concentrate on their own organizational missions and objectives. Through those networks, Russian CSOs also receive support, know-how and can develop their operational capacities.

Conclusions

In comparison to other border areas on the EU external border, such as the Finnish–Russian border area, cross-border cooperation between Estonia and Russia is mainly confined to cultural, environmental and economic issues, as intergovernmental relations between the two countries have become increasingly tense during the last two decades. Considerable support for bilateral cooperation has been provided by Pan-European and Pan-Baltic cooperative networks. This has taken the form not only of funding but also of the creation of opportunities to increase personal contacts between potential partners and technical know-how. In recent years, however, the EU’s funding programme for cross-border cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Russia has met a major obstacle in the Russian Federation’s refusal to sign the relevant documents for the years 2007–2013. Cultural cooperation has received some support from the Estonian government, but there exists no state funding for activities in other fields. With the exception of some funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers, sources for cross-border cooperation have thus remained scarce.

More particularly, civil society organizations working in the Estonian–Russian border area regret the EU’s failure to involve them in the implementation of CBC policies. As pointed out by Raik (2006, 20), there exists a gap between the rhetoric and practice of EU support to civil society in CBC. If at all, civil society organizations are rarely consulted during the elaboration of EU programmes which, therefore, do not take into account their needs and capacities for implementation. Social and cultural organizations, which are key players in cross-border cooperative activities, are largely unable to cope with the excessive bureaucracy and the administrative requirements that characterize EU projects. The EU does not treat CSOs as actors separate from
governmental and business organizations with whom they have to compete for resources. This has led to a situation where relations between CSOs and the authorities have deteriorated. Russian CSOs, in particular, have been exposed to political and ideological pressure from national authorities and their activities have remained under-funded, as the design of EU programmes are not conducive to their participation in cross-border cooperation. In their view, the EU favours large bureaucratic projects that are easier to administrate but exclude their own smaller projects. If this trend continues, the EU might well miss a chance of engaging local CSOs in cooperation activities that deal with key issues, such as social development, environmental protection and cultural ties, and of promoting them as ‘agents of Europeanization’ on the EU external border.

Notes
1. As reported in the Estonian online newspaper Postimees in its 21 December 2007 edition.
2. Empirical data were collected during a series of 60 interviews conducted between June 2007 and March 2008, mainly with representatives of Estonian and Russians CSOs active in cross-border cooperation in the border areas. Forty-eight interviewees were representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), six of business centres, chambers of commerce and trade etc., and another six of local government associations. Efforts were made to give equal importance to local/regional, national/binational and transnational actors as well as to political, socio-cultural, economic and environmental activities. The interviews were conducted in Narva, Jõhvi, Tallinn, Tartu and Sillamäe (Estonia) and Pechory, Ivangorod, Pskov and St Petersburg (Russia).
3. EU cooperation with the Russian Federation is regulated by the EU–Russia Strategic Partnership agreement and the ‘Four Common Spaces’ for cooperation that include: ‘Trade and Economic cooperation’, ‘Freedom, Security and Justice’, ‘External Security’ and ‘Research, Education and Culture’. The content of the EU–Russia Strategic Partnership reflects the common points of the cooperative areas addressed in the ENP. Since 2007, the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) has replaced previous programmes such as INTERREG (which funded activities on the territory of the EU member states) and TACIS (funding of activities on the territory of third countries located on the border with the EU).
4. See more about this issue in Berg and Oras (2000).
5. About the consequences of Estonia’s EU accession, see Ehin and Berg (2004), for example.
6. www.nationalities.ee
8. www.inkerii.ee

References
Gulnara Roll


