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**Estonia – Russia Cross-Border Cooperation
before and after the Political Crisis of 2014:
Drawbacks, Developments, and Transformations**

MA thesis

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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ABSTRACT

The topic of cross-border cooperation is increasing in its relevance. When it comes to cross-border cooperation, international relations become an important issue in the framing of transboundary activities and the process of implementation. The healthier and more harmonious is the international environment, the more successful cross-border activities are. Estonia and Russia share the largest transboundary water body in Europe which makes them highly dependent on common environmental problems with preservation of sustainable conditions of the lake, wildlife protection measures, and common fisheries management. However, international relations between Estonia and Russia have never been the easiest ones and stay under the influence of the general international environment.

The main aim of the proposed study is to find out if the political developments have a crucial influence on the environmental cooperation and partnership of the local actors, as well as their actions. The research is intended to find drawbacks or benefits of political tensions over environmental cooperation. It is framed as qualitative research based on the comparison of environmental cooperation developments before and after 2014 - a notable point of political disturbances and year of the Estonia-Russia Programme launch as an extension of Estonia-Latvia-Russia Programme. To answer the main question of the research – whether political crisis influence environmental cross-border cooperation – a comparative study of materials of Joint Operational Programs were conducted. Further, the interview with people directly involved in the transboundary cooperation was performed.

As a result, the study showed up the general problems of the region which are present there for a quite long time: discrepancies in legislations, poor monitoring and evaluation capabilities, low public visibility of the projects, lack of language knowledge, and the bureaucracy of managing actors. Interviewees gave a positive assessment to the regional cross-border cooperation. The most striking issues for representatives of NGOs were bureaucracy and tight frames of the Programme which “take a life out of the project”.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation, environment, lake Peipus

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CBC – Cross-Border Cooperation

EstLatRus Programme – Estonia-Latvia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme within European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument 2007-2013

EstRus Programme – Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020

LatRus Programme – Latvia- Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020

ENPI/ENI – European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument/ European Neighbourhood Instrument

EU – European Union

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

EUSBSR – European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

NGO – Non-governmental organization

Peipsi CTC – Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation (Tartu)

Chudskoye Project – Cross-border Cooperation Center “Lake Peipsi Project” (Pskov)

ESSR – Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic

RSFSR – Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the issue of cross-border cooperation is increasing in its relevance. In a time when borders are almost lost the function of the divider, the developments of transboundary regions are coming up by utilizing the competitive advantages of the area. When it comes to cross-border cooperation, international relations become an important issue in the framing of transboundary activities and the process of implementation. The healthier and more harmonious is the international environment, the more successful cross-border activities are. Nevertheless, political disturbances could have a negative impact on cooperation.

Cross-border cooperation, especially in the protection of the environment and sustainable development, requires persistent mutual effort from all regional actors. It was mentioned that environment, culture, and economy are not strictly connected with policy, and it is easier for them to overcome the political barriers¹. However, the importance of the economy in international relations could be affirmed by the introduction of sanctions and countersanctions as a method of influence on foreign policy; the Russian economy is very dependent on the internal policy executed² and used as leverage in the foreign affairs. Then, it could be assumed that there are two areas of transboundary cooperation – environment and culture – which should not be directly influenced by political developments and could overcome external disturbances with slight losses. The common border and people living there obliged both parties to develop cooperative projects on the border, especially in the cultural and environmental areas.

Environmental cooperation is transnational in its nature. This could be more evidently seen in the courses of the preservation of water and air resources. Most of the water

¹ Nielsen, K. L., Berg, E., & Roll, G. (2009). Undiscovered avenues? Estonian civil society organisations as agents of Europeanisation. *Trames*, 13(3).

² Makarychev, A., & Sergunin, A. (2017). Russia's role in regional cooperation and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). *Journal of Baltic Studies*.

bodies on the planet belong even to the more than three actors. It is important to underline that protective management should cover not only the ‘watercourse system’ but the whole ‘drainage basin’ including the whole ecosystem³. Moreover, an airshed is much larger than a watershed, and the toxic spills coming from economic activities should be under control in water, ground, and air. Furthermore, environmental cooperation requires uninterrupted work, since the minor delay in necessary action could cost even more in the future.

Estonia and Russia share the largest transboundary water body in Europe which makes them highly dependent on common environmental problems with preservation of sustainable conditions of the lake, wildlife protection measures, and common fisheries management. Lake Peipus drainage basin includes three states: Estonia, Latvia, Russia. At the same time, Lake Peipus is a part of the Baltic Sea catchment area that includes nine riparian states: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Sweden. Lake is connected to the Sea by the Narva River, which annual mean water discharge to the Gulf of Finland comprises approximately 50% of the average volume of Lake Peipus. Thus, the protection of the Lake environment and its sustainable development is an issue of the utmost interest of all Baltic Sea Region states. The multitude of actors creates a “network of networks” working under international and own state programs.

The Baltic Sea Region is a very developed region from the institutional point of view. All regional actors collaborate for the versatile development of the region: saving the sea, connecting the region and increasing prosperity. The first macro-regional Strategy was applied here in 2009. The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) aimed to foster comprehensive transboundary partnership, cooperation, and integration of climate and economy within and outside the EU borders. In 2007 the Estonia-Latvia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme (EstLatRus) was established within the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI/ENP) promoting joint development in the borderlands utilizing their potential and beneficial location. In 2014

³ Just, R. E., & Netanyahu, S. (1998). International water resource conflicts: experience and potential. In *Conflict and cooperation on trans-boundary water resources*. Springer, Boston, MA. P. 3.

the Programme was relaunched as two bilateral Programmes – Estonia-Russia (EstRus) and Latvia-Russia (LatRus) Cooperation Programme 2014 - 2020.

Environmental issues in the Baltic Sea catchment area are one of the most important questions addressed from different levels. First is a local level – regional administrative organs and non-governmental grassroots organizations working in the region. Second is an interstate/international level – including central administrative organs on both sides of the border. This level is the widest one because it will include national authorities of the states and international organizations dealing with environmental issues (HELCOM; Northern Dimension; ENP; EUSBSR). The most important level for this study is the first one – activities of the non-governmental and non-profit grassroots organizations (NGOs) in the region that are inseparable from the broader politics of the state and international actors. However, local municipalities and non-profit organizations are dependent on the national states and international actors that create a framework for regional cooperation.

Environmental cooperation at the Estonian-Russian border is an important issue for the regional actors – local authorities and non-governmental organizations of border regions: Ida-Virumaa, Jõgevamaa, Põlvamaa, Tartumaa, Võrumaa, Leningrad and Pskov regions. However, international relations between Estonia and Russia have never been the easiest one. Almost 30 years ago the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) brought Europe and the whole world to the “New political reality”⁴. Previously opened and unimpeded areas became an issue of territorial disputes of the countries. One of the most contested borderlands of the former USSR was the Estonian-Russian border that still continues to bring new challenges. Currently, mutual antipathy due to territorial disputes, Estonian narrative of the ‘otherness’ from Russia, lack of recognition of historical injustices towards Estonia, and nationalistic sentiments (Russian minority issue) used by both sides increased within a time. Then, international events (the EU Big-Bang Enlargement of 2004, Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, and the following introduction of mutual sanctions) interfered with many spheres of international relations between the EU and Russia.

⁴ Assmuth, L. (2005). To which state to belong? Ethnicity and citizenship at Russia's new EU-borders. In *Culture and Power at the Edges of the State: National Support and Subversion in European Border Regions*. p. 255.

The main **aim** of the proposed study is to find out if the political developments have a crucial influence on the environmental cooperation and partnership of the local actors, as well as their actions.

The main **question** of the research is how political tensions could influence environmental cross-border cooperation. To answer the major question we need to follow the sub-questions of the research: 1) what gave the ground for the cooperation and how it was structured initially (actors, factors, funding); 2) how cross-border cooperation was working and developing during the time; 3) how cross-border interactions modify under worsening political environment.

The survey is framed as qualitative research based on the comparison of environmental cooperation developments before and after 2014 - a notable point of political disturbances and year of the Programme extension launch.

The research intends to find out drawbacks or benefits in the transboundary cooperation development influenced by the policy actions of the countries. The author would trace Programmes and projects going in the Lake Peipus region since 2007 within the Joint Programmes of Estonia and Russia cross-border cooperation. The main presumption of the research is that political disturbances reduce possibilities of international cooperation.

CHAPTER 1: COOPERATION, BORDERLANDS, AND INTERNATIONAL CRISIS

The proposed study is centered around the concept of cooperation, idea of borderlands, and decline in international relations. This chapter will be devoted to the conceptualization of the main notions introduced in the research. At the end of the chapter, theoretical and methodological concepts are outlined.

1.1. Cooperation as a Phenomenon

The central concept of the work is *cooperation* that is commonly introduced as “the action or process of working together to the same end”⁵. This is true in general, but for the purpose of the work, the meaning should be more specified. In this study, cooperation is implied as a *continuous or recurring process* of two or more actors working together on a particular issue for the *mutual benefit*. It is important to emphasize cooperation as a continuous process since cooperative projects comprised a series of actions between parties, not a couple of touches. The mutual benefit also refers not simply to an immediate result by the abstract ending of the project, but to the result bringing profit for both sides in the long term.

Cooperation (and/or interaction) became an essential part of human society functioning because it is in human nature. Aristotle emphasized in “Politics” that “man is a more social (political) animal than the bees”⁶ and only social interaction makes possible development of the commonly accepted good human qualities – ability to think, speak, and express their thoughts, to take care of others, be truthful and cooperative for common good. Despite the development of sciences devoted to the human physiology of cooperation, it is still difficult to explain why it is in human nature.

Some scholars see it as a “third fundamental principle of evolution beside mutation and natural selection”⁷. Others see cooperation as a basic neural mechanism⁸. Recently the

⁵ Oxford University Press. [URL: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cooperation>]

⁶ Aristotle's Politics: A Treatise on Government, Book I, Chapter II.
[URL: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6762/6762-h/6762-h.htm#link2H_4_0115]

⁷ Nowak, M. A. (2006). Five rules for the evolution of cooperation, p. 1563.

⁸ Lashley, K. S. (1930). Basic neural mechanisms in behavior. Psychological review, 37(1), p. 1; Selye, H. (1956). The stress of life; Benkler, Y. (2011). The unselfish gene. Harvard business review, 89(7-8).

human behavior was reached out through cognitive psychology⁹ and neuroscience¹⁰. Finding the neuroscientific or psychological reason for international cooperation was not the purpose of this work, however, psychology could be helpful to get an understanding of the nature of cooperation its limits in a contested environment.

As the recurrence of the joint projects is seen as one of the indicators of successful cooperation, let's discuss the seven ways to foster cooperation outlined by Beugré¹¹, that will be used further as criteria for cooperation assessment: Communication, Framing, Empathy and Solidarity, Fairness and Morality, Reward and Punishment, Reciprocity, and Diversity.

Communication

Communication is commonly seen as locomotive and the basis of human interactions. Even though we said earlier that man is a social animal, “social” is paramount. Humans are wired to communicate in different ways. To be more precise, verbal messaging by means of words is an important distinction between humans and animals. If a man was granted such an important ability to talk, we should not leave it behind, because the good discussion could reduce the costs of the action as well as effectively promote cooperation. There could be distinguished two types of communication – internal (with partners, associates, and management) and external (i.e. with a targeted audience, media). This research is interested in the influence of political and social contexts on the internal communicative strategies.

Development and support of participatory communication are equally important for internal and external interactions. Both of them require support from another to raise the spill-over effect of the projects and comply with visibility requirements imposed. Communication is a process of information share between individuals or groups that promote cooperation and development in national and international governance, support civil society enhancement and personal engagement, generate transparency and increases responsiveness and accountability. Thus, equal access to information becomes an

⁹ Miller, G. A. (2003). The cognitive revolution: a historical perspective. Trends in cognitive sciences, 7(3).

¹⁰ Beugré, C. D. (2018). The Neuroscience of Organizational Behavior. Edward Elgar Publishing.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 127.

essential part of internal and external communication. Well-built communication allows people to feel their importance and empowers them to act. However, it requires *real freedoms* – “the capacity for people to participate in a diverse range of decisions that affect them”¹² complemented by a personal will to act. The information should follow the basic principles of transparency, accessibility, and quality. The qualitative content should be informative, impartial, and reflect different opinions. The sources of information should be distributed between different actors (governments and private sectors). These empower an ideal flow of information which creates a valuable social capital reflecting the strength of civil society and personal engagement of individuals¹³.

“Communication and participation are essentially two sides of the same coin”¹⁴ which pay for cooperation. As coins are differing in their values, communication and participation are represented in many different types. Communicative strategies could be built in many different ways and set different goals – to inform, to educate, to engage, etc. Any forms could show its rationality in a particular case. However, it is important to note that constructive communication is not equal to simple message transmission through careful media management, top-down pronouncements, smart public relations or targeted advertising. But rather “effective communication emerges from a process of dialogue and discussion, from listening and responding”¹⁵ – so-called participatory communication that is working as a powerful agent of human cooperation. Such kind of communication increases the sense of ownership, engagement, and inclusion in the process of cooperation.

Framing

Proper *framing* is important due to the necessity to avoid the uncertainty that could undermine cooperation by challenging trust and feelings of control of the situation¹⁶. Actors should be clear on their intentions and provisions of the future of the project

¹² Wilson, M., & Warnock, K. (2007). At the heart of change: The role of communication in sustainable development. Panos. P. 7

¹³ Ibid. P. 15

¹⁴ Quarry W. & Ramírez R. (2004) Communication for development: A medium for innovation in natural resource management, IDRC & FAO, p. 4.

¹⁵ Wilson, M., & Warnock, K. (2007). At the heart of change: The role of communication in sustainable development. Panos. p.25

¹⁶ Van Lange, P. A., Balliet, D. P., Parks, C. D., & Van Vugt, M. (2014). Social dilemmas: Understanding human cooperation, p. 65.

because lack of the explicit description could trigger personal discontent and resistance to further cooperation due to different expectations.

Speaking about international cooperation, things turn to be more complicated. The international cooperation is often highly dependent on the central authorities and regional actors lose their power in decision making. Generally, international relations between two states define the regional prospects of cooperation¹⁷. Thus, if a region is located on the border of states, the future of regional developments will be generally decided in the capitals. At least the context of the cross-border interaction will be promoted by the central actors.

When parties involved are rational (i.e. base their decisions on economic cost-benefit criteria, and when no uncertainty prevails) an optimal development strategy can be worked out in a rather straightforward fashion. The situation is different if normal development may be interrupted at any given time as sudden changes in the political atmosphere bring non-economic considerations to the focus of attention”¹⁸.

Unfortunately, regional actors located on the national border are not allowed to act fully according to their will, and development strategies come from above or constrained by an official framework of relations between the states. Then, regional organizations should have enough enthusiasm and resources (people, money, knowledge, etc.) to continue working in a difficult atmosphere where decisions of the center militate against the successful performance of the regional actors.

Empathy and solidarity – some obvious concepts for cooperation among humans. Personal feeling of likelihood and sympathy are the best promoters of the cooperation. The physical attractiveness is the first thing to assess facing a partner irrelevant to the level of the meeting. Then the common interests and mutual support come to a ring. The more points of contact will emerge beside and on the very basics of the project proposals the more chances for productive and effective cooperation parties get.

¹⁷ Kurowska-Pysz, J., Castanho, R. A., & Naranjo Gómez, J. M. (2018). Cross-border cooperation—The barriers analysis and the recommendations. *Polish Journal of Management Studies*, 17, p. 136; Custred, G. (2011). The linguistic consequences of boundaries, borderlands, and frontiers. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 26(3), p. 273.

¹⁸ Tsur, Y., & Zemel, A. (1998). Trans-boundary water projects and political uncertainty. In *Conflict and Cooperation on Trans-boundary Water Resources*. Springer, Boston, MA. P. 277.

The problematic issue of the research is the sustainable development of the Lake Peipus catchment area. The most problematic thing there is the actors which are states with tensions between them and highly likely would act in their own interest according to the ambition and desire to annoy each other. Thus, the territory of the borderlands which should be the reason for cooperation becomes the bone of contention. Instead of becoming a rich and prosperous territory that benefits from the border position, the territory is under the constant stress suffered from the absence or diminution of any of the areas of cooperation and security”¹⁹. Actors should omit their selfish ambitions and sometimes sacrifice individual benefits for the mutual good.

Fairness and morality imply trustworthiness and social norms compliance. Trust and kindness are very important to establish lasting relationships as well as could reduce one’s costs for the project. Social (moral) norms commonly accepted could help to overcome the internal conflict between self and collective²⁰. Immortal concepts: “do onto others what others do to you” or contribute a fair share to the common good – could reinforce one’s willingness to be cooperative in the absence of external punishment. Trust, which understood as positive expectations of the second party’s behavior, is one of the key ingredients of cooperation which helps to benefit and contribute more to the public good. It does not mean that cooperation without trust is impossible, however, it could cost more for parties if they are low in trust.

Reward and punishment appeal to the physiological side of the person’s nature connected to the positive and negative emotions that people experience during the cooperation. Thus, you can cooperate because you want to get something desired or afraid to be punished because of your non-cooperativeness. The nature of the rewards and punishments are not so important – it could be some material or some kind of intangible. What is really important – motivation to cooperate based on personal expectations of something to happen or avoidance of possible negative outcomes. As an example, cooperation is associated with reward-based learning in neuroscience; basically, all cooperation is working because agents are interested in getting a reward – monetary or

¹⁹ Donnan, H., & Wilson, T. M. (2010). Ethnography, security and the ‘frontier effect’ in borderlands. *Borderlands. Ethnographic Approaches to Security, Power and Identity*, 1-21.

²⁰ Van Lange, P. A., Balliet, D. P., Parks, C. D., & Van Vugt, M. (2014). Social dilemmas: Understanding human cooperation, p. 87.

non-monetary (i.e. build the reputation) or have had a positive experience of cooperation during previous iterations. The previous positive experience is working as an extra stimulus for further interactions (“if others cooperate, I will do as well”). Obviously, this scheme is very specific and is not applicable to each and every case, but it worth to be kept in mind studying the non-profit sector.

Reciprocity has a direct or indirect influence on one’s behavior. The direct reciprocity could be explained by the Tit-for-Tat strategy which implies reflection of the partner’s actions. The indirect reciprocity is more connected with reputation getting according to one’s behavior – cooperative or non-cooperative²¹. “Indeed, people are more likely to cooperate with others who donated...”²².

The social capital considers being enabled through communication and interaction of individuals inside a social network sharing the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness²³. The principle of reciprocity is in the very nature of the cross-border cooperation: mutual concern about border region, co-financing of the projects, the involvement of actors of different levels (from central authorities to local citizens). The direct reciprocity of mutual dependence of the partner’s action is obvious due to the presence of an involuntary connector. Generally, it is easy to follow and reflect the partner’s behavior showing your interest in the common problems. This helps to have a good rapport between partners because similar verbal and non-verbal signs make people think that another person has similar intentions and attitude, and thus fosters cooperation. Therefore, direct reciprocity transfers to indirect which refers to reputational stuff.

Diversity in people’s behavior and its influence on cooperative strategies was just recently incorporated into studies of the evolution of cooperation. If earlier scholars pretend that parties are identical individuals “having access to the same portfolio of actions (a.k.a.strategies)”, now it becomes more obvious that “modern societies are grounded in

²¹ Milinski, M., Semmann, D., & Krambeck, H. (2002). Donors to charity gain in both indirect reciprocity and political reputation. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences*, 269(1494).

²² Tomasello, M., & Vaish, A. (2013). Origins of human cooperation and morality. *Annual review of psychology*, 64.

²³ Putnam R. (2000) *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

strongly diverse and heterogeneous networks of exchange and cooperation”²⁴. This diversity makes possible for individuals to play radically different roles depending on their social position and models, interaction patterns and personal preferences, strategic thinking and learning behavior.

Diversity will play an important role in international cooperation which inevitably implies many differences in approach connected to the local context behind the borderline. Historically cooperation referred to an interaction of identical individuals, however, “modern societies are grounded in strongly diverse and heterogeneous networks of exchange and cooperation”²⁵. This network of networks makes individuals play radically different roles depending on their social position, make different decisions, follow different strategies. Nowadays, it is widely accepted that this diversity is a driving force of cooperation and development, promoting and fostering it. Thinking of the behavior of another person and imagining possible outcomes, actors create better strategies, looking for better solutions, applying a wider knowledge base. Finally, changes and differentiations make cooperation to evolve.

Cross-border cooperation is a network of heterogeneous networks. At the same time, all parts or pinpoints of this network should perfectly match each other. This network includes actors of different levels (local inhabitants, non-profit and non-governmental organizations, local and state authorities, international organizations, etc.). Thus, best practices should be elaborated and implemented by active regional actors. One of the main difficulties in cross-border cooperation, in general, and environmental cooperation, in particular, is the regional specificity (cultural, educational, managerial). It is impossible to create one common scheme to govern the sustainable development of natural resources for all states and regions. Any instrument successfully working in one area, could fail in another. Some concepts could be borrowed from another successful project. However, all strategies replicated should be reviewed thoroughly before implementation.

Diversity stays in a close connection with information and communication. The more diverse actors are included in cooperation, the more reasons for communication they have

²⁴ Santos, F. C., Pinheiro, F. L., Lenaerts, T., & Pacheco, J. M. (2012). The role of diversity in the evolution of cooperation. *Journal of theoretical biology*, 299, p. 88.

²⁵ Ibid.

(share of experience) and the more developed communication strategies they need (more information, clearer framing). Thus, diversity becomes dependent on social context (which is inseparable from the political context) of the actor.

1.2.Environmental Cooperation

Environmental and natural resource management problems are transboundary in nature²⁶. Especially if the issue is connected with the water, air, and soil – main natural resources that people cannot live without. Thus, environmental cooperation is mostly connected to the inter-regional interactions (regional authorities, NGOs, and other caring persons), but at the same time, it involves higher-level actors (i.e. national states authorities and international organizations).

Mostly environmental cooperation, connected to the resource management, water and air pollution, covers a huge area and involves a sum of the actors often located on the different sides of the state border and living in the different sphere of ideas, politics, society, economy, and culture which could have drastic difference between them. At the same time, all regional stakeholders should work cooperatively, since all taken actions are interdependent and will have an impact on water resource availability to all or most of the parties linked to the unit²⁷.

For the international environmental cooperation, everything that is going on in the international politics and comprises international relations' atmosphere (political, economic, social, and cultural developments) has an immediate influence on the regional developments and cooperation. Thus general political context could make the flow of cooperation smoother or, on the contrary, create obstacles and different kinds of difficulties. The degree of cooperation is also influenced by hydro-geological, technological, economic, and political factors²⁸.

²⁶ Frisvold, G., & Schimmelpfennig, D. (1998). Potential for Sustainability and Self-Enforcement of Trans-Boundary Water Agreements. In *Conflict and Cooperation on Trans-Boundary Water Resources* (pp. 27-39). Springer, Boston, MA. P. 27.

²⁷ Just, R. E., & Netanyahu, S. (1998). International water resource conflicts: experience and potential. In *Conflict and cooperation on trans-boundary water resources* (pp. 1-26). Springer, Boston, MA. P.2.

²⁸ Netanyahu, S., Just, R. E., & Horowitz, J. K. (1998). Bargaining over shared aquifers: the case of Israel and the Palestinians. In *Conflict and cooperation on trans-boundary water resources* (pp. 41-60). Springer, Boston, MA.

The water bodies located between Estonia and Russia is a not only perfect natural border between the states, but an important source of water for a border region as well as an integral part of the Baltic Sea basin suffering from the pollution and eutrophication coming from tributaries.

The first presumption at the beginning of the research was that high politics should not influence regional environmental, cultural, and economic cooperation; and it is easier for them to overcome the political barriers²⁹. In the example, Makarychev and Sergunin advocated that the Russian economy is highly dependent on policy what makes it an unreliable economic partner. The importance of the economy in international relations could be also affirmed by the implementation of sanctions as a method of influence on foreign policy. Then, there are two areas of transboundary cooperation – environment and culture – which should not be directly influenced by political developments. However, it could be seen now that environmental cooperation is under a huge influence on the political actors and commonly used as political leverage. At the same time, political uncertainty introduced by international discrepancies could make projects longer to complete, less attractive for investments, and increase the abolition of the projects³⁰.

1.3. Border and Borderlands

The notion of the *border* could be reached out in two distinct ways. The first, the most traditional is to consider border (precisely, borderline) as a divider between states, their policies, values, ideas, power; and the second one is to explain it as a connector, which unites different views on politics, economy, society, and culture.

Donnan & Wilson conceptualized the border in two different ways. From one point of view, the border is a “marker of the limits of national; a physical manifestation of the sovereignty of the nation and the power and durability of the state”³¹; this definition is more applicable to the past when the border was showing a strict limit of the power relations. These times borders were not considered as something negotiable or flexible

²⁹ Nielsen, K. L., Berg, E., & Roll, G. (2009). Undiscovered avenues? Estonian civil society organisations as agents of Europeanisation. *Trames*, 13(3), 248-264.

³⁰ Tsur, Y., & Zemel, A. (1998). Trans-boundary water projects and political uncertainty. In *Conflict and Cooperation on Trans-boundary Water Resources*. Springer, Boston, MA. P. xix

³¹ Donnan, H., & Wilson, T. M. (2010). Ethnography, security and the ‘frontier effect’ in borderlands. *Borderlands. Ethnographic Approaches to Security. Power and Identity*. P. 2.

and were determined by a more powerful party. However, borders changed their meaning in a changing, developing and globalizing world. In the era of free global flows of goods and people, mixing of cultures, and the rule of international and supranational organizations, the border as a security guarantor is not relevant anymore. Therefore, national borders nowadays do not indicate a split, but a unity. Nevertheless, these implications are relevant for like-minded ‘politically healthy’ parties, on the stress-free borderlands³².

The perception itself is highly dependent on the point of view of the observer. While the realist mostly thinks about issues from the importance of the force and power relations, the border will have a negative connotation of divider between power, interests, and values of agents involved. Thus, the border demarcates and protects ‘one’ from ‘other’, traditionally foreign, contesting, having other values and interests. In the realist paradigm border is a boundary – linear dividing factor officially agreed, ratified, and commonly referred to by different agents.

Utilizing the constructivists’ angle of view, the border is something presenting shared values, interests, and culture - frontier³³. From this point of view, the borderline agreed in official documents is not a divider but on a contrary a perfect connector that promotes cooperation and practical de-bordering. Frontier is a dynamic, soft, and fluid border area characterized by high population diffusion.

The important issue is not only how do scholar sees the border, but also how do people working and living in the borderland see it – as joining or dividing thing. When international borders are contradictory things for states, it creates difference and incoherence within the symbolic area of interaction. For those who live in the borderlands, the border is seen as considerably more porous as state agents might expect³⁴. This could also explain some reluctance of Moscow towards the cooperation on the Estonian-Russian border since it located relatively far from the Russian capital and does not show

³² Donnan, H., & Wilson, T. M. (2010). Ethnography, security and the ‘frontier effect’ in borderlands. *Borderlands. Ethnographic Approaches to Security. Power and Identity*. P. 3.

³³ Jańczak, J. (2014). Borders and border dimensions in Europe. *Between Frontierisation and Boundarisation*; Scott, J. (2002). *Cross-border governance in the Baltic Sea Region. Regional & Federal Studies*, 12(4).

³⁴ Wilson, T. M., & Donnan, H. (2005). *Culture and Power at the Edges of the State: National support and subversion in European border regions (Vol. 3)*. LIT Verlag Münster.

immediate benefit for the central authorities, whereas regional authorities are highly interested in the cooperation but bounded by the central decisions which are not considering the local interests.

Estonian-Russian border is very multifaceted in its nature. On one hand, the official line between two states is a very important issue for both parties and there is no final point yet. On the other hand, the mix of cultures existing in the border area creates a huge porous space where people share the same values, speak several languages, and are open for cooperation and development of their homeland. Staying on the border between Estonia and Russia is worth to remember that this is not a simple boundary between two states; for many centuries the Baltic States were and still continue to be a part of the frontier between West and Russia, considering themselves as a last stronghold of the western culture. The cultural and social differences between Estonian “westernness” and Russian “easternness” were being articulated and counterposed each other within a time – in 1993 Lennart Meri noted that the Estonian border is the border of European values³⁵.

What we have then as a conclusion – border studies is a multidisciplinary field on the crossroads of all political theories, and most controversial collision would be between realists and constructivists, which have so much in common – interests, values, etc, but the only difference between them would be ‘mine and yours’ and ‘ours’.

1.4. Decline in Socio-Political Relations

Kurowska-Pysz et al. distinguish two groups of the negative factors influencing cross-border cooperation in the frames of regional partnership – internal and external³⁶. Internal factors are the specific features and circumstances of the region, and external comprise independent of regions and initial partners reasons related to the cross-border environment.

Looking from this perspective it could be outlined that Estonian-Russian cross-border cooperation has always been under the significant influence of both internal and external

³⁵ Nikiforova, E. (2005). Narrating ‘national’ at the margins: Seto and Cossack identity in the Russian-Estonian borderlands. *Culture and Power at the Edges of the State: National Support and Subversion in European Border Regions*, 3. P. 197.

³⁶ Kurowska-Pysz, J., Castanho, R. A., & Naranjo Gómez, J. M. (2018). Cross-border cooperation—The barriers analysis and the recommendations. *Polish Journal of Management Studies*, 17.

factors. Whether internal conflict has been articulated many times during the studies, official statements and media, the external factors were reduced to the influential supranational and international actors such as the EU and NATO. However, the external disturbances could stem not only from the huge (geo)political events but also from the regional events, seemingly having a little influence, which still could trigger an international crisis.

The *crisis* is introduced here as a time of political instability and disorientation which reveals old inconsistencies and can lead to negative consequences. In terms of international relations, the crisis could potentially happen when international actors consider that the actions of their parties do not match certain national interests, reputation, and ability to control internal political power.³⁷ The international political crisis could be short term, e.g. the Cuban missile crisis, but in other cases, it can continue longer, for example, the Berlin Blockade in 1948. In general, the crisis is referred to as an event triggered a peak pressure within a long-term threat, point of no return or critical decisive moment.

However, this study refers to a crisis as a continuous body, which can include several peak moments, despite the initial trigger situation. These single moments or events of political instability is not coming from and not going nowhere, but has specific background and continuation defined by historical, social, and political developments. An international crisis is also not something unexpected but on the contrary something inherent to the international relations that are part of general human communication activities.

Speaking about opportunities of communication and cooperation in borderlands, Blake and Donnan&Wilson introduced the idea of *stress-free borderland* as a territory where disputes over boundaries and territories are settled; regular and legal transboundary interaction between peoples from both sides of the borderline maintained; there is a secure border region, characterized by a rational and cooperative use of natural resources at and across the boundary.

³⁷ Lebow, R. N. (1984). *Between peace and war: The nature of international crisis*. Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 10

The local administration in tension-free borderlands is able to cooperate in major ways with their counterparts across the border, in such areas as crime fighting, infrastructural maintenance and development, combating pollution, and handling all sorts of border incidents. The 'health' of a political body provides the state with an opportunity of stable and equal multifaceted development of the region, especially border regions, which could serve as a litmus test for the international relations, "where the immediate consequences of declining goodwill between states may be first and perhaps most readily felt"³⁸.

However, Estonian-Russian cross-border governance is far from the ideal introduced by Donnan & Wilson. The borderlands between Estonia and Russia have always been under pressure. Even if the disputes about the territories and borderline seem to, the border treaty is still not ratified which introduces some feeling of understatement between the parties.

The contacts between Estonian and Russian public administration are fairly rare and far from being a regular one. Thus, the economic and social development of the region decelerates, especially on the Russian side where the special permit needed to visit the border region that also influences the low development of the territory from an economic and infrastructural angle of view. Finally, cooperative usage of one of the biggest water bodies in Europe is reduced to the mutual blames in pollution and lack of attention to this sensitive issue.

1.5. Methodology

Cooperation is worth to spell out as a process of regionalism which could be approached from two different angles. First – liberal institutionalism – concentrated on states' importance and the imposition of a regional idea from the top, reflecting the selfish aspiration of the actors. Second – new regionalism – shifts attention to informal actors and ideas coming from the bottom answering emerging challenges.

The former approach brings more a realistic viewpoint, while the latter will stay merely in a constructivist approach to the studies of international relations and cooperation. The

³⁸ Donnan, H., & Wilson, T. M. (2010). Ethnography, security and the 'frontier effect' in borderlands. *Borderlands. Ethnographic Approaches to Security, Power and Identity*. P. 3.

realist approach would give a possibility to reveal individual intentions, benefits, and gains, which are connected mainly to domestic developments. The constructivist theory would provide us with an understanding of how cooperation, partnership, and integration are positioned in the internal and external discourses of the political and social environment.

The realist approach to international relations displayed a fundamental unity of thought for more than 2,500 years. Starting from Thucydides coming up to N. Machiavelli and T. Hobbes, the politics has been widely considered as “providing a basis for the realist understanding of international relations”³⁹ – the concept of anarchy and conflict before the government.

A classical realist approach to foreign and domestic politics refers to the individual interests of men (or states) that have a great influence on the commonwealth, stability, and peace. And when fragile communal bonds become undermined, there is not any institution which can easily stabilize the situation, rather make it more harsh and violent. Realists advocate mainly for the material gain of the party in international relations, what is going along with Hobbes’s idea about animalistic, selfish, and self-interested passions of actors and “restless desire for power after power”⁴⁰. The only thing which is inherent in the nature of man (any actor) – “desire to preserve his own life and have a better life”⁴¹. This awareness of life and wellbeing makes actors seek for rules of coexistence, which do not harm its state of nature. The state (or any other organization, international as well) is created by men and for men to guarantee survival and a peaceful, better life.

The main opponent to the realist approach in international relations studies – constructivism – is one of the most recent additions to international relations theories, which advocates for spiritual values and norms of actors in the cooperation and integration processes, the importance of social environment, and collectively shared systems of meanings⁴². The pioneers of a constructivist theory proposed an idea of the

³⁹ Lebow R.N. (2010) Classical realism. *International relations theories: discipline and diversity*, 2, 59-76

⁴⁰ Nuri Yurdusev, A. (2006). Thomas Hobbes and international relations: from realism to rationalism. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 60(2).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Risse T. *Social Constructivism and European Integration*. (2004) *European Integration Theory*, Diez and Wiener (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

socially constructed character of international relations⁴³. Constructivists do not distinguish actors and structures, do not see the party's actions as their own rational choice, but rather speak about actions within a social system (which is based on a certain idea within specific discourse). It is not that actors are making rules for structures, but structures make them act within established categories. Further, constructivists outline the importance of the norms, rules, and values that create a meaningful world constructed by the meanings and actions of parties throughout history⁴⁴.

Working on the issues of the Estonian-Russian border it would be inevitably important to come back to the realistic perceptions of understanding of selfish interests and wellbeing of the actors. Constructivists' approach is seen as favorable for the case of environmental cooperation, because the environment and sustainable development are more suitable to the theory which is concentrated on the power of commonality and shared ideas and values.

Constructivism is more applicable for the border studies if the border area is seen as a frontier that involves different cultural and worldview perception of actors. On the contrary, the dividing nature of the border has to be drawn through realist lenses. Moreover, the reason for cooperation is determined by the natural and socially constructed circumstances – a lake is a natural object left in this area by a glacier, later concrete political actors made it a border between two states. Nowadays, people living in the Lake Peipus region should interact in accordance with structures that were build and transformed throughout history. Hence, this study proposes to discuss how political discourses could influence cooperation practices in the Estonian-Russian borderlands.

The main focus of the study is on the Joint Operational Programmes and project proposals of EstLatRus and EstRus Programmes. Joint Operational Programme is a framework agreement which outline the strategy, implementation structure and procedures of project realization. Project proposals provide the project summary, outline partners and budget, workplan, and expected results. The External Evaluation and Internal Overview of the EstLatRus Programme are utilized there to get an official assessment of the cross-border cooperation in the region and its prospects. Evaluation was carried out in the year 2017

⁴³ Onuf, N. (2012). Constructivism. In *World of Our Making* (pp. 47-77). Routledge.

⁴⁴ Fierke K.M. (2010) Constructivism. *International relations theories: discipline and diversity*, 2.

and provide assessment of effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of cross-border cooperation under the ENPI instrument. The preliminary period of the study 2007–2019 – the beginning of the chosen period refers to the start of the EstLatRus program. The end of the study period stated as 2019 since the joint projects are still at a run and the most recent news of them will be used. The chosen period covers the time of operation of the Joint Programmes and provides the grounds for consistent comparison of the influence of political fluctuations on transboundary cooperation.

To frame the possibilities and the course of cross-border activities through the ‘official lenses’, research implies the comparative study of the official documents framing the cross-border cooperation in the region: international agreements, programming documents of the joint projects, and results outlined in the official reports. During the analysis of the content of Programmes’ official documents (proposals, reports, etc), it is important to reveal the nature of the projects implemented, define main actors, and acquire an initial assessment of the transboundary cooperation according to the 7 principles outlined earlier: Communication, Framing, Empathy and Solidarity, Fairness and Morality, Reward and Punishment, Reciprocity, and Diversity. The results of the systematic reading of the documents are presented in Chapter 3.

Then, to reinforce or disprove the official picture, we need to look behind the curtain by asking people involved in the cross-border activities of their fears and believes, as well as about the difficulties they faced within their work. The decision was made to interview representatives of the non-governmental sector directly engaged in cross-border activities in the region. Therefore, project managers of Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation (Tartu) and Cross-border Cooperation Center “Lake Peipsi Project” (Pskov) were asked to comment on the environmental cooperation in the region. Their projects are addressing common challenges in the protection of the environment and sustainable development of the Lake Peipus: prevention and dealing with the pollution, raising awareness by the means of eco-education, nature tourism development, etc.

Interviews were done in the second half of 2019. The research was not aimed to gather opinions from each and every participant of the cross-border interactions, but rather conduct interviews with several people preferably managers of the projects who were

involved in the coordination of the projects and negotiations between parties. Interviews were used as an auxiliary means to complement the official picture.

The interviews took place during the visit of the Russian delegation to Tartu in the frames of the Green Mind project⁴⁵. Before the interview author attended a seminar where several presentations were made about the activities, limitations, and challenges in environmental projects (mainly educational) by project managers and teachers.

After the project's presentations, the interviews were done with project managers of NGOs to get a deeper understanding of the issue. In total two people were interviewed – one representative per each organization and several clarifying questions were asked from the general audience during the free time.

The preliminary questionnaire for interviews implied discussion of the main partners of the NGOs, problems of regional cross-border cooperation, influences of the general international environment on the local developments, etc. It was important to reveal if there are some more organizations that probably dealing with the transboundary projects in the shadow. Furthermore, one of the general purposes of the interview was to examine whether some problems and drawbacks of cross-border cooperation are staying behind the official reviews. Political challenges were another important issue to discuss – how do people involved in the regional activities reflect upon international disturbances.

Thus, the questionnaire was designed following the seven basics of cooperation outlined earlier at the beginning of the chapter: Communication (i.e. would you agree that communication is the main driver of CBC activities?), Framing, Empathy and Solidarity (i.e. do you think that it is important to have contacts with foreign colleagues besides the project work?), Fairness and Morality, Reward and Punishment (i.e. do you agree that previous positive experience influences further cooperation?), Reciprocity, Diversity (i.e. could you say that socio-economic developments are different from your and the opposite side of the border?).

Turning to the limitations of the study, firstly, the size of the organizational structure of the studied region. The research is reduced to the coastal areas of the Lake Peipus and

⁴⁵ Study visit of Russian teachers to Estonia [URL: <http://www.ctc.ee/uudised/pihkva-regiooni-haridustootajad-greenmind-projektiga-25-27-novembril-oppereisil-eeistis>]

territories having a direct environmental impact on the water condition. Even though the Lake catchment area is almost equal to the total area of Estonia, there are only two organizations regularly dealing with the environmental issues in the region – Peipsi CTC and Lake Peipsi Project.

Secondly, the possible bias of the interviewees is planned to be overreached by the exclusion of questions reflecting a personal attitude to the issue and address more formal limitations and difficulties. However, the long-standing partnership and the absence of alternatives could make respondents be unjustifiably friendly towards their colleagues.

Thirdly, the studied Programme EstRus was still at the implementation phase and did not allow to make a full assessment. Secondly, it is presumed that it could be difficult for interviewees to put aside their current feelings, recent experiences, and effects.

Thus, research is basically not limited to a certain period of time, even though it has a nominal timeframe. And interviews are supposed to transmit modern to its time developments and state of affairs. It would be difficult to reflect upon the influence of the crisis on different aspects of international relations, while it is currently ongoing, and it is not clear yet what will be the final outcome. However, it is important to look at immediate consequences.

Lastly, language limitations are minimal, while people engaged in international cooperation mostly speak Russian and English and sources and reading materials are presented in three languages English, Estonian, and Russian. The limited knowledge of Estonian language could be a problem to get the necessary information from official documents that are not translated to English, however, it is still enough to acquire materials of the news and Peipsi CTC websites which have the fullest coverage of projects in Estonian.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF ESTONIAN-RUSSIAN CROSS-BORDER RELATIONS

2.1. Estonian-Russian Border as a Frontier

The historical context of the region plays an important role in the whole understanding of the nature of local cross-border relations. The unique developments of every region throughout the time make happen exceptional things that are unusual for any other region. The specificity of the region affects cooperation and communication strategies adopted by the locals throughout the time. During the historical developments of the region, the boundaries of Estonia and Russia were constantly changing and the initial border between Estonian and Russian territorial entities was moving according to the existing political situation.

Modern border regions of the Estonian-Russian boundary were regarded as a frontier zone between the Russian state and Estonian/Livonian lands and played an important strategic and economic role for the states from both sides of the border. Throughout history, Estonia was mainly a part of other states (Danish, Swedish, Polish, Livonian, Russian, and Soviet), at the same time preserving its own culture and absorbing best practices of the western neighbors (German noblemen). In this paper, especially in geographical terms, the notion 'Estonia' refers to the lands inside the modern boundaries of the Estonian state, rather than a political entity.

Modern Pskov and Leningrad regions were last outposts of the Russian state up until the beginning of the XVIII century when the Baltic provinces were incorporated into the Russian Empire. From the year 1721 with an almost 20 year period of Estonian independence in the first half of XX century during the interwar period, Lake Peipus was an internal water body of the Russian empire and did not have the meaning of a natural border between states, however, still it was a boundary between Russian and Baltic cultures, "self" and "others".

Paradoxically, the territories of modern Estonia and Latvia were enjoying preferences and a certain level of independence while being a part of Russian (Estonian and Livonian Governorates) and Soviet (Estonian and Latvian SSR) empires. The Baltic governorates

(Estonia and Livonia) had preserved German noblemen in the XVII century⁴⁶ and abolished serfdom at the beginning of the XIX century (more than 40 years before the Emancipation Edict in 1861)⁴⁷. The *Baltics* in the Soviet Union had more ideological freedom to build a positive image of “other USSR” for foreigners during and after the short period of *Thaw*⁴⁸, Tallinn continued to hold Song and Dance Festivals, as well as had the single Jazz Festival in the Soviet Union in 1967.

The first official border between Estonia and Russia was established in 1920 by the Tartu Peace Treaty. In 1944 the border between Estonian (ESSR) and Russian Soviet Republics (RSFSR) was redrawn and determined by natural boundaries – lake and rivers, and former Estonian territories were moved under the RSFSR jurisdiction. This redraw of the borders is the reason for the border conflict that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union⁴⁹ since the border of the independent republic of Estonia in the interwar period differed from the borderline existed for half of the century.

After several ineffective attempts to get back to the last legal document defined the border between Estonia and Russia, in 1999 the border was agreed to leave as it is. However, the border treaty is still not ratified even if agreements of territorial claims absence were reached in 2014 and used as political leverage⁵⁰.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia had no experience and capabilities of soft power usage and failed to attract former Baltic Republics to a new union. Boundaries between Estonia and Russia changed their meaning and transformed into the EU’s easternmost edges in 2004. Then, even if during the 1990s the more flexible borderland identities, statuses, and practices that were once relatively commonplace in these borderlands, after the accession of the Baltic States to the EU and NATO, they were no longer encouraged

⁴⁶ Kappeller A. (2000) *Rossiia – mnogonatsionalnaya imperiya* [Russia as a multinational empire]. P. 58.

⁴⁷ *History of Estonia* / Mati Laur, Tõnis Lukas, Ain Mäesalu. Tallinn, 2000. P. 155.

⁴⁸ Zubkova E. (2009) “Drugoi SSSR”? Osobennosti realizatsii sovetskogo proekta v respublikakh Baltii (1950-1960s) [“A Different USSR”? Peculiarities of the Implementation of the Soviet Project in the Baltic States (1950s–1960s)]. In *Okupācijas rezimi Baltijas valstīs 1940-1991* (Vol. 25). Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds. P. 692.

⁴⁹ Vikiorova, J. (2006). Conflict Transformation the Estonian Way: The Estonian-Russian Border Conflict, European Integration and Shifts in Discursive Representation of the "Other". *Perspectives: Central European Review Of International Affairs*, 27. P. 46; Nikiforova, E. (2005). Narrating ‘national’ at the margins: Seto and Cossack identity in the Russian-Estonian borderlands. In *Culture and Power at the Edges of the State: National Support and Subversion in European Border Regions*, 3. P. 223.

⁵⁰ Merritt M. A. (2018) *Geopolitics of Identity: Drawing the Line Between Russia and Estonia*

by powerful outside agents “who want their new borders facing Russia to be efficiently controlled”⁵¹. Consequently, complicated mutual relations between the Baltic States and Russia became more distant from the friendly cooperative mode and more based on antagonistic state- and identity building”⁵², where “nationalistic sentiments are used, popularized and enhanced for political purposes by all sides”⁵³. The Estonian-Russian border could be an illustrative example showing relationships’ impairment after the emergence of powerful, in a way antagonistic to Russia, international organizations are able to cause stress in the borderlands.

On May 1, 2004, Estonia and 9 other candidate states became a fully-fledged member of the European Union (EU). This was the biggest single enlargement of the Union. However, Estonia had a long period of accession negotiations with the EU started officially from the year 1995 and finished in 2002 when states started active preparations for the accession⁵⁴. By 1994, Estonia signed the Free Trade Agreement with the EU and in 1995 it has been fully operated. In March 2004, a month earlier joining the EU, Estonia and the other Baltic States joined NATO that brought more stability in the region for the further transitional processes, but also caused tensions with Russia. Since December 2007, Estonia launched the implementation of the Schengen area requirements and is meant to introduce effective control of the external border of the EU and take responsibility for the inflow of people and goods into the Union. It also introduced new requirements for the Schengen visa and the necessity to change old agreements on the border crossing.

As Estonia and other post-soviet European countries, Russia and the European Union have had a long history of rapprochement even since the 1980s⁵⁵. Russia has been a significant part of European geopolitics. Initially, the EU provided technical assistance to Russia under the TACIS⁵⁶ Programme (1991-2006) which launched a number of

⁵¹ Wilson, T. M., & Donnan, H. (Eds.). (2005). *Culture and Power at the Edges of the State: National support and subversion in European border regions* (Vol. 3). LIT Verlag Münster. P. 22.

⁵² Vikiorova, J. (2006). *Conflict Transformation the Estonian Way: The Estonian-Russian Border Conflict, European Integration and Shifts in Discursive Representation of the "Other"*. P. 46.

⁵³ Assmuth, L. (2005). *To which state to belong? Ethnicity and citizenship at Russia's new EU-borders*. P. 259.

⁵⁴ Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009). *Estonian’s way to the European Union*.

⁵⁵ EU-Russia cooperation Programmes URL:https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia_en/721/EU-Russia%20cooperation%20Programmes

⁵⁶ Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States and Georgia

successful projects and Programmes in fields ranging from education to cross-border cooperation. Russia was the biggest receiver of TACIS assistance among the other 11 states of the program because the international community unanimously shared the idea of transitional help for Russia⁵⁷.

However, the Big-Bang Enlargement of the EU in 2004 made Russia frustrated by the political developments, and relations were steadily deteriorated. Voluntary implementation of the European values and accession of the Baltic States to the supranational unions and, consequently, expansion of NATO and EU to Russia's very border were easily framed as a betrayal of 'old friend'⁵⁸.

Since 2014 relations between the EU and Russia have been strained due to Russian intervention into Ukrainian internal political disorders and annexation of Crimea. Sanctions and counter-sanctions further distanced the most reluctant country in the Baltic Sea Region from the wider regional community⁵⁹ and led to the international crisis that influenced all spheres of communication and interaction (politics, international relations, and economy immediately, and society and culture implicitly). Most probably Russia and the West will continue to drift apart, and stagnation in official relations would impede human exchanges⁶⁰.

2.2. Borderlands under Stress

Following the Blake and Donnan&Wilson concept of the *stress-free borderlands*, it is needed to be acknowledged that the borderlands between Estonia and Russia have never been peaceful and stress-free; the crisis is a constant 'normal' state of affairs in the region. Going step by step through the concepts introduced above, we can conclude that Estonian-Russian borderland is 'under stress' because the border is still undefined and disputes are going; regular transboundary interaction is impossible due to the visa regime, as well as special borderland regime on the Russian side; illegal border crossings are something not

⁵⁷ Lainela, S., & Sutela, P. (2004). European Union, Russia, and TACIS.

⁵⁸ Găvăneci, M. (2016). Cross-border Cooperation through Mass Media Representation. The Case of Russia-Estonia Border. *Eurolimes*, 21(21).

⁵⁹ Makarychev, A., & Sergunin, A. (2017). Russia's role in regional cooperation and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 1-15.; Fact Sheets on the European Union: Russia URL: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/177/russia>

⁶⁰ Dobriansky, P., Olechowski, A., Satoh, Y., IJurgens, I. I. U., & Trilateral Commission,. (2014). *Engaging Russia: A return to containment? : a report to the Trilateral Commission*, p. 262.

uncommon; local administration is very limited in its actions; probably the only area where cooperation is steadily developing is environment and pollution control of the Lake Peipus drainage basin. However, even environmental cooperation sometimes is under the threat due to lack of freedom of NGOs, high centralization of the Russian state, and as a consequence, the impact of the international political situation over the seemingly invulnerable areas of transboundary action.

During the gradual rising of the tensions between the EU and Russia, borderlands suffer the most. In this case, we could regard the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) as borderlands of the European Union, and even countries themselves underline their importance as an outpost of EU and common European values⁶¹. With rising political tensions between the main actors in Europe, the reluctance of stakeholders increases, imbalances between the political and social developments become more obvious and countries have a little desire to work together for the improvements. Russian central authorities are not willing to broaden the competences of the local authorities especially in the borderlands, and Estonian actors working under European policies face social and legal imbalances that make projects difficult to work or even lead to a deadlock.

In a relative perspective, it could be noted that the border was always under the pressure which was gradually increased starting from the slight convergence of the 1990s. The relations between Estonia and Russia could be traced following the major dates of drastic falls. The sequence of the events occurred within the last 30 years causing tensions in the relations between Estonia and Russia and influencing borderlands' living and cross-border activities – dissolution of USSR, rapprochement of the Baltic States and the NATO, their admission to the EU (2004), Bronze Night (Apr. 2007), establishment of the Schengen zone (Dec. 2007), sanctions and countersanctions following Russian-Ukrainian conflict since 2014. These are the notable points of a steady decrease of Estonian-Russian interrelations marking the one drastic step-down. Between these notable points relations calmed down, but the states continuing to blame each other in different things in the international arena.

⁶¹ Nikiforova, E. (2005). Narrating 'national' at the margins: Seto and Cossack identity in the Russian-Estonian borderlands. *Culture and Power at the Edges of the State: National Support and Subversion in European Border Regions*, 3, p. 197.

Sanctions imposed following events on the Russian-Ukrainian border revealed a fundamental rupture in the Russia – West relations⁶² and led to the international political crisis. There is a belief that crisis in the interrelations of regional actors started already after the Big-Bang Enlargement of the EU in 2004 when Russia was building a negation on its neighbors' implementation of the European values and accused them of the *betrayal*⁶³. Moreover, the EU Eastern enlargement, as well as rapprochement of Ukraine and EU, collided with “the revival of the imperial ambitions of Russia” on the post-Soviet space⁶⁴.

Nowadays the region of the Estonian-Russian border is still ‘under the pressure’, experiencing the constant stress of the political, economic, social, and cultural asymmetries which have a great influence on the development of cross-border cooperative strategies. Cross-border projects on the Estonian-Russian border go very hard due to the ‘unhealthy atmosphere’ in a Russian political body. According to the Joint Operational Program of Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation for 2014-2020, the previous EstLatRus Program⁶⁵ revealed significant improvements that need to be made in an administrative capacity and specific financing-related issues (i.e. limited liability of local authorities in Russia). Some problems were identified in relation to Russian legislation and bureaucracy – the discrepancy between national legislation systems of EU and Russia was identified which lead to the development of a deadlock situation in public procurement⁶⁶.

The Estonian state also faces some difficulties during the joint development program, i.e. in the city of Narva and Ida-Viru region (Ida-Virumaa), where living predominantly

⁶² Makarychev, A., & Sergunin, A. (2017). Russia's role in regional cooperation and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). *Journal of Baltic Studies*; Dobriansky, P., Olechowski, A., Satoh, Y., Ürgens, I. I. U., & Trilateral Commission,. (2014). *Engaging Russia: A return to containment? A report to the Trilateral Commission*, p. 9.

⁶³ Găvăneci, M. (2016). Cross-border Cooperation through Mass Media Representation. The Case of Russia-Estonia Border. *Eurolimes*, 21(21).

⁶⁴ Jańczak J. (2015) The EU-Russian Border. Classical Concepts Revisited. In *Boundaries Revisited. A Conceptual Turn in European Border Practices*, Berlin: Logos Verlag. P. 146.

⁶⁵ Estonia – Latvia – Russia Cross Border Cooperation Programme. URL: <http://www.estlatrus.eu/>

⁶⁶ Joint Operational Programme of Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020. Legal Framework of Estonia – Russia Cross Border Cooperation Programme. URL: http://www.estoniarussia.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Estonia_Russia_CBC_JOP_FINAL_16012017.pdf

Russian-speaking population highly affected by the Russian media which makes them reluctant to the integration and development programs of Tallinn.

The border games throughout history let Estonia freely use its soft power in the borderlands. In the example, in Pechory district people are eligible to obtain the Estonian citizenship as a second one, without the obligatory procedure of the renunciation of citizenship of Russia and holding dual citizenship. The problem is that dual citizenship is illegal in both countries; however, the person acquired citizenship by birth could not be deprived of it. Thus, as the Citizenship Act put into force in 1992 proposed: “Every person who possessed or whose parents possessed Estonian citizenship before 16 June 1940—the day of the Soviet ultimatum followed by the annexation of Estonia—had a legal claim to Estonian citizenship”, - what gave an opportunity for almost 80 000 non-Estonians from Pechory district obtain Estonian citizenship⁶⁷, preserve Russian one, stay foreign for the Estonians, and become enemy for Russian authorities⁶⁸. The absence of the defined borderline provides extra support for the involvement of the Pechory district into Estonian political life, and let Estonia express an interest in the regional socio-economic development.

The region of Estonian-Russian borderlands has a long history of interactions both positive cooperative and negative contradictory. Firstly, the region of the Lake Peipus is regarded as remote from the centers and governmental authorities, with poor transport connections to the ‘mainland’. It is the most distant region from the states’ capitals (Tallinn and Moscow), but have very proximate regional centers (Narva, Pskov, St. Petersburg, Tartu). The region itself is surrounded by the major highways connecting big cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Riga), but only a network of smaller roads are available to reach out the surroundings of the Lake Peipus, except Narva, which is located on the St. Petersburg – Tallinn highway. Railroads are underdeveloped in the region. In total, Estonia connected with Russia through the 2 routes and with Latvia only by one railroad. Generally, the access to the distant coastal villages is cut off the big roads system, as well as do not obtain sufficient public transport connections; and moreover,

⁶⁷ Jarve, P., & Poleshchuk, V. (2010). Country Report: Estonia. p.4.

⁶⁸ Estonian passport holders at risk (2008). In Baltic Times. URL: <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/20492/>

the Russian coastal zone is highly secured and freedom of the movement in the area is limited.

Secondly, it has a relatively developed roadmap inside the region across administrative lines as a heritage of the Soviet times; thus, regional informal economic networks are developing, and the local population is taken advantage of neighbors. At the same time, the “New Political Reality” of the 1990s cut down the common regional routes for the local people. Thus some paradoxical things are happening in the borderlands when people living in the villages exactly on the border need to visit the relative consulate to obtain a visa to cross the border, moreover, there is a segment of the motor road which crosses the border and drivers are not eligible to stop on this territory (so-called “Saatse Boot”).

Thirdly, capitals showed little interest and commitment to the development of the border regions. Only after Estonia accessed the EU and got the opportunity to obtain structural funds for regional development. Tallinn started to pay serious attention to regional disparities and developments, while Moscow is still viewing the efforts to invent new kinds of cross-border co-operation with suspicion. More negative influence also has nationalistic sentiment used, popularized, and enhanced for political purposes by both sides⁶⁹.

Hence, the region of the Estonian-Russian border was and still is under the constant pressure of (geo)political developments of the region and international relations. The beginning of the 1990s was a difficult time to outlive for both Russia and the Baltic States⁷⁰. After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia was still regarding it's ‘Near Abroad’ as an exclusive sphere of influence and positioned itself as a major force in the post-Soviet space. Within a time, Russia’s international relations with new Baltic neighbors have stabilized and improved⁷¹.

However, the border region hit by the “New Political Reality” is still staying underdeveloped in socio-economic terms, sparsely inhabited with an ageing population⁷².

⁶⁹ Nikiiforova, E. (2005). Narrating ‘national’ at the margins: Seto and Cossack identity in the Russian-Estonian borderlands.. P. 259.

⁷⁰ Ibid P. 255.

⁷¹ Valuev, V. (2002). Russian Border Policies and Border Regions.

⁷² Cross-Border Cooperation. Strategy Paper 2007 – 2013 (2007). ENPI. P. 7. URL:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/neighbourhood/pdf/enpi_cbc_sp_ip_2007-2013_final_en.pdf

The thorough SWOT analysis of the Estonian-Latvian-Russian borderlands outlined the main strengths of the region, which should be fostered and utilized effectively; weaknesses to be addressed; apparent opportunities, as well as threats to overcome⁷³. Unfortunately, results obtained in 2007 are still valid for the socio-economic development of the region, that was approved by the analysis made before Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 was launched.

During the history, the region of Lake Peipus was divided and united several times. In 1991 the next period of division officially begun. Countries started to open new horizons of transboundary communication. Recognition of the common environmental problem of the Lake Peipus, as well as the inability to be isolated from the world trend of cooperativeness, made Estonia and Russia work together on the common challenges.

2.3. Cross-Border Cooperation Since the 1990s

Transboundary cooperation between Russia and Estonia has steadily developed since the 1990s and projects and organizations run. Both Agreements, on cultural cooperation of 2008 and on the natural environment protection of 1996, include articles on the fostering of bilateral partnership and possible support for the transboundary activities. The local authorities are inevitably and highly involved in the CBC activities on the border. At the same time, NGOs are a driving force of the interactions due to higher flexibility, openness, and readiness for cooperation with actors of different backgrounds. With a course of time asymmetries in economic and social development become more visible. The low economic development of Pskov oblast, lack of experience in international project implementation, as well as poor knowledge of languages lead to poor cooperation especially on the important environmental issues of the Lake Peipus.

The cooperation is regulated by the accords accepted by the parties – Agreement on Cultural Cooperation of 2008 and Agreement on the Natural Environment Protection of 1996.

⁷³ Estonia – Latvia – Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme within ENPI 2007 – 2013 (2012). P. 25. URL: [http://www.estlatrus.eu/uploaded_files/Publications/Ares\(2012\)551210%20%20COM%20Decision%20C2012_2664_modify%20CBC%20EE-LV-RU_JOP%20Annex_1_Revised.pdf](http://www.estlatrus.eu/uploaded_files/Publications/Ares(2012)551210%20%20COM%20Decision%20C2012_2664_modify%20CBC%20EE-LV-RU_JOP%20Annex_1_Revised.pdf)

Firstly, the cultural component of the cross-border interactions is connected to the Seto culture – small folks living in the current borderlands. The cultural capital of the Seto has always been Pechory (Petseri), currently situated on the Russian side of the border. Since 2000, the free of charge visas are issued mutually to the people divided by the state border, as visiting the next-of-kin and honoring the deceased has always been a very important part of Seto culture⁷⁴. In the Northern borderlands, cooperation faces more difficulties than in the Southern one. The historical developments in the Narva – Ivangorod area led to the unequal growth of the towns. The border demarcated by the Narva river literally “signed death sentences” for Ivangorod that immediately start to decline in the official economic and political bounds of Moscow. In the reality of Russia’s vast territory and highly centralized governance, Ivangorod became only one small spot among thousands of small places in Russia. That is why it did not have enough attention from authorities and investments in the town. Moreover, the border status limits the business investment opportunities and development of enterprises since every town visitor is obliged to have a pass from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation.

In the field of environmental cooperation and joint management of the transboundary water resources, people on the border started thinking of possible joint solutions to the common problems from the very beginning. Environmental transboundary cooperation between Russia and Estonia has steadily developed since the 1990s and projects and organizations run.

There are two main NGOs dealing with environmental issues in the region: Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation (Estonia) and NGO “Lake Peipsi Project, Pskov” (Russia). “Peipsi Centre for Transboundary cooperation” (Peipsi CTC), originally “Lake Peipsi Project”, is one of the oldest organizations working in the region for 20 years. Peipsi CTC is working in the two main areas – environmental awareness and development cooperation. The Centre has also twin NGO in Pskov called “Lake Peipsi Project, Pskov”, as well as a partner organization in St. Petersburg and several partners in other neighboring states. One particular feature of the region is that organizations develop projects in several areas at the same time, in the example Peipsi CTC which was originally

⁷⁴ Setomaa unique and genuine (2014). SA Seto Instituut, p. 44.

founded as an environmental project got also social and cultural components into its activities.

Environmental and cultural transboundary cooperation in the EU is going mainly to the international, non-governmental, and civil society organizations. On the Estonian-Russian border, a multitude of projects was proposed from the Estonian side, which is a part of broader EU policies highly interesting in cross-border cooperation⁷⁵. Estonia is a homeland of the cultural cooperation organizations: Fenno-Ugria, Union of Setomaa Rural Municipalities, The Society of Old Believers Culture and Development. Moreover, in the year 2009, the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region was adopted which was aimed to foster comprehensive transboundary partnership, cooperation, and integration of climate and economy within and outside the EU borders.

From the other side, Russia tries to confirm its *great power* status by means of the western partnership⁷⁶. Moscow was always showing the lack of interest in the regional development itself and in a close relationship with regional actors; but border regions (Leningrad and Pskov Oblast) were highly involved in the cooperation due to the closeness and common problems – shared water basin, interconnected markets, and cultural affinity. People still living in the borderlands usually share the same culture, values, and interests.

Cultural ties are very tough, mainly, due to the domination of the Seto and Old-believers' culture in the Estonian-Russian borderlands, peacefully dealing with each other throughout the centuries. The presence of the buffer cultures between protestant Estonians and orthodox Russians makes the transition softer, thus making people more flexible in the border practices. During the centuries, both Estonians and Russians have seen Seto and Old-believers as strangers that have been kind neighbors sharing the same way of living, eating the same food, celebrating the same festive. The center of people's life here has always been nature and its integral part – Lake Peipus and its basin. The lake and

⁷⁵ Alkan, M. N. (2002). *Borders of Europe*. Zentrum für Europäische Integrationsforschung; Van Der Velde, M., & Van Houtum, H. (2003). *Communicating borders*.

⁷⁶ Tsygankov, A. P. (2016). *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*. Rowman & Littlefield.

rivers were the most important transport route for many distant villages and islands, as well as the most reliable source of water and food.

Since the border divided the land of Seto into two parts, officials were needed to manage the border constraints to make possible for people to visit their relatives and graves. It was agreed that about 8,000 persons can cross the border during church feast days visa-free on the basis of a list (i.e. St. Nicholas' Day on May 22 at Taeluva and the feast day of the Assumption of Mary on August 28 in Pechory). Since 2008, Izborsk museum conducting an ethnocultural festival in the Radaja (Sigovo) village called "Reunion of the Setomaa Families" that mainly attracts a crowd of visitors.

Cultural proximity of the region was also underlined by the building of the Euregio "Pskov-Livonia"⁷⁷ in 1996 aimed to promote cross-border cooperation projects as well as people-to-people contacts. The Euregio implies an association of local governments and other regional authorities of 4 counties in Estonia, 12 municipalities in Latvia, and 5 districts of Pskov region in Russia. Unfortunately, activities of this international association stay in the shadows of bigger, more effective initiatives of cross-border cooperation programs.

2.4. Environmental Cooperation on the Estonian-Russian Border

Environmental cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region is dwelling on the joint management of the transboundary water basin of the Baltic Sea that is a very important part of the economic development of the region. The Baltic Sea drainage basin comprises the total catchment area of almost 1 million km² and includes 14 international river basins; four of them have Russia as a stakeholder: Kemijoki River, Vuoksi River, Neva River, and Narva River/Lake Peipus⁷⁸. Latter is shared between Russia (63%), Estonia (31%), and Latvia (6%), while the first three are part of the Finnish-Russian transboundary cooperation concerning inter-border water resources usage.

The joint management of the Lake Peipus – the largest transboundary lake in Europe is an essential part of the environmental cooperation on the Estonian-Russian border that

⁷⁷ Euregio "Pskov-Livonia" <http://www.pskov-livonia.net/new/index.php/en/>

⁷⁸Nilsson, S. (2006). International river basins in the Baltic Sea Region. BSR INTERREG III B Programme Project Report, 14.

makes states highly dependent on common environmental problems with preservation of sustainable condition of the lake, wildlife protection measures in lake's drainage basin, and common fisheries management.

According to Just & Netanyahu, transboundary water management could be defined by the identification of “the participating players, the sources of conflict, and the potential domain for cooperation”⁷⁹. If we implement this notion to the Estonian-Russian transboundary region, it is seen that three basic elements of transboundary cooperation are present here. We can simply identify main actors, conflictual zones and great potential for cross-border activities.

Despite the fact that the transboundary water body provides great potential as a basis for cooperation, Estonian-Russian cross-border cooperation is not developed to the highest degrees possible, and frankly speaking, it is on the very low level. Just & Netanyahu introduced two main categories of problems arising in the transboundary cooperation process: firstly, it is asymmetric information and scientific gaps; secondly, emphasized sovereignty, enforcement limitations, conflicting national interests, asymmetric country characteristics.

Actually, problems of both categories are present at the Estonian-Russian borderlands – lack of willingness between parties to share information and constant mutual accusations; asymmetry in political and social developments (centralization, cooperation within broader projects of macro-region); political confrontation; legal disparity, etc.

Moreover, environmental cooperation is highly dependent on the desire of regional parties to take part in cooperative projects, while agreement on transboundary environmental management is signed by sovereign entities, international agreements have non-binding character; and consequently, the fundamental problem of ‘free-riding’ arise⁸⁰. At the same time, it is obvious that riparian states are interdependent and any

⁷⁹ Just, R. E., & Netanyahu, S. (1998). International water resource conflicts: experience and potential. In *Conflict and cooperation on trans-boundary water resources*. Springer, Boston, MA.. P. 2.

⁸⁰ Frisvold, G., & Schimmelpfennig, D. (1998). Potential for Sustainability and Self-Enforcement of Trans-Boundary Water Agreements. In *Conflict and Cooperation on Trans-Boundary Water Resources*. Springer, Boston, MA. P. 27.

action taken by any party will have an impact on water resources' availability to all or most of the agents linked to the unit⁸¹.

Started in the 1990s, environmental NGOs are working on the improvement of the environment of the region. There are two main organizations developing international environmental cooperation: Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation⁸² (Estonia, Tartu) and Cross-border Cooperation Center "Lake Peipsi Project"⁸³ (Russia, Pskov). They obtained a 20 years' experience in the development of cross-border interaction mechanisms and facilitation of cross-border cooperation in the Estonian – Russian border area, promote cross-border cooperation in border regions between different sectors; organize annual events (summer schools, conferences), round tables for state, regional and local officials, NGOs, educational institutions and international organizations. Peipsi CTC and "Lake Peipsi Project" participate in the development and coordinate the partial implementation of the Lake Peipsi Management Programme for the Estonian-Russian transboundary water basin as a part of National Policy Dialogues on integrated water resource management launched by UNECE in 2002.

In the middle of 1990s, the informal network of environmental activists encouraged officials to reinforce protection of the borderlands nature and environment by the signing on May 4, 1995, the Agreement on the Protection and Regulation of the Use of Fish Resources of Lake Peipsi, Lake Lämmi and Lake Pihkva and in January 1996 Agreement on cooperation in the field of environmental protection. These two documents are still the basis for the activities in the region. According to the Agreement on cooperation in the field of environmental protection, a special Joint Commission for the cooperation was established in 1997 that defines the framework for the cooperation (directions and forms of the cooperation).

Over time, organizations, initially working on the environmental issues, have developed further their sphere of acting and nowadays work not only on the environmental improvements but also on the developmental projects (making towns more attractive and accessible for disabled people and people with small children). These developments are

⁸¹ Just, R. E., & Netanyahu, S. (1998). International water resource conflicts: experience and potential. P. 2.

⁸² Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation. URL: <http://www.ctc.ee/en>

⁸³ Cross-border Cooperation Center "Lake Peipsi Project". URL: <http://cbc-center.org/about/>

mainly going under the EU launched policies on its boundaries, especially external. Projects in the Lake Peipsi region are currently developing under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). In the frames of ENPI cross border cooperation program and with the support of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme, preservation of the Lake Peipus catchment area had become a part of Joint Estonia-Latvia-Russia cooperation Programme⁸⁴, which from the year 2014 is divided into two bilateral projects of Estonia-Russia⁸⁵ and Latvia-Russia⁸⁶ cross-border Programme.

Estonian-Russian border is very interesting and at the same time a difficult case. A common past of the two countries makes its borderlands interesting and attractive in its uniqueness. Since Estonia and Russia were the part of the Russian Empire (USSR) during the centuries, Estonian-Russian borderlands became a good example of the “space of flaws”⁸⁷. Estonia was and still is included in trade connections. Well developed transport routes make it highly connected to the former metropolis, dependent on it. A good example is Estonian railroads which are connected to the St. Petersburg and Moscow and, at the same time, stayed out of convenient connections with its proximate the EU neighbors, following the main rule for the colony-center relations. Furthermore, Estonia is a small state on the outskirts of the European Union and Russia is the biggest state in Europe (even in the World) and the inheritor of the USSR’s empire; thus Russia is not ready to omit its metropolitan ambitions and still did not reconcile with Soviet Union’s dissolution⁸⁸. All these cause a huge pile of discrepancies in the small territory.

⁸⁴ Estonia – Latvia – Russia Cross Border Cooperation Programme. URL: <http://www.estlatrus.eu/>

⁸⁵ Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme. URL: <https://www.estoniarussia.eu/>

⁸⁶ Latvia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme. URL: <http://latruscbc.eu/>

⁸⁷ Toal, G. (2017). *Near abroad: Putin, the west, and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. Oxford University Press. P. 39.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* P. 9.

CHAPTER 3: INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMMING AND ITS OUTCOME

The analysis includes the comparison of the content of EstLatRus and EstRus Joint Operational Programmes, annual and final reports of the projects, and press-releases with the opinion of managers of transboundary projects at involved non-governmental organizations. The analysis will follow seven indicators of successful cooperation outlined earlier: Communication, Framing, Empathy and Solidarity, Fairness and Morality, Reward and Punishment, Reciprocity, and Diversity. It was decided to group these factors into three blocks:

- the first one is dedicated to diversity which is regarded as basics for cooperation strategies development.
- the second one is devoted to communication and framing since these are categories connected to verbal and audio-visual communication.
- the third one concentrates on reciprocity that will include concepts of empathy and solidarity, fairness and morality, and reward and punishment, i.e. this part will be connected to intangible, psychological issues of cooperation connected to the mutuality and reputation.

3.1. Diversity

One could say that it causes many problems for cooperation, another will argue at the same time works for its improvements. Generally, the cooperation of like-minded actors should be easier and smoother. At the same time, it deprives cooperation from advancement and modernization. On the contrary, diversity gives an impetus to the regional improvements, allows to implement different strategies, build heterogeneous networks. In this instance the diversity referred to a background differences which comprise the general environment of cooperation. Personal differences in rationality are also important, however, it will be constructed by the context person act in.

It was outlined that historically Estonian-Russian boundary is controversial in many ways (language, culture, religion, socio-economic and political development). But in closer examination, it comes out that the average portrait of the regions in the Programme area are even more similar than it might seem. A strategic assessment made before the

Programme launch showed that the common past left more similarities for the region rather than differences.

All regions in the Programme area share the same problems already for 20 years:

Socio-economic issues: outward migration, ageing population, low birth rates, and average life expectancy with tangibly low men's life expectancy (70 years for men and 80 years for women). Regional centers attract the younger population, thus rural areas are populated predominantly with elderly people and capital and workforce concentrate in urban areas, and people remaining in the rural areas and small towns do not meet employment requirements due to insufficient education, experience, and employment culture. Almost 70% of the population of the Programme region is concentrated in major cities Saint Petersburg (comprise 50% of the total population of the region), Tallinn, Pskov, and Tartu. Big cities have also numerous higher education institutions that influence the increase of migration to urban areas. Big cities became also the center of business development and innovation, while small towns and rural areas have a lack of entrepreneurial culture and free capital, face administrative barriers, and do not get enough support. On both sides of the border, a number of instruments and programmes devoted to the support of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME), however, economic activity is still quite low. The development of SMEs is also an integral part of the Programmes. tourism is seen as the main driving force for SME development in rural areas. The region of Lake Peipus has a great touristic potential which is purely used. Firstly, the flow of tourists is affected by border regulations. Secondly, tourism potential and area branding are not developed enough. The Programmes were intended to improve tourist products to increase the potential of the region.

Dense road and railroad network which is hindered by visa and custom control on the Estonian-Russian border. Due to weak border crossing infrastructure, complex bureaucracy, and low capacity of border-crossing points (BCP), it takes a long time to cross the border. Thus, among the main goals of both Programmes are the modernization of the BCP and simplification of the border-crossing process.

GDP share between three sectors of the economy is also almost equal in both countries. The biggest share has tertiary sector (service) – around 70%, while extraction and

manufacturing make a low share of GDP. At the same time, services are well-developed only in big cities, while rural areas obtain low-quality services, do not have sufficient health and social care or need to spend more time and money to get qualitative service.

Environmental issues: untreated wastewaters from agriculture and industry and deteriorating sewage facilities in rural areas, – these are common problems for both countries.

At the same time, regions have some differences which have an important influence on sustainable development and cross-border cooperation:

Language differences: the main language of the Programmes is English. However, a big share of people is able to communicate in Russian and it is used as the main language during the project meetings. At the same time, a lack of English language knowledge was outlined in reports and evaluations of the first EstLatRus Programme. Participants always require translation to a native language that comes to extra spending for the translation services. Moreover, knowledge of the Estonian language is very limited for Russian participants. As well as knowledge of the Russian language makes the attraction of younger people for Estonian partner NGO problematic since youth more often have a good knowledge of English but do not speak Russian. Thus, the problem of staff scarcity reveals – cooperation is continuously supported by the same people working in CBC projects from the very beginning in the 1990s.

Cultural differences: border region is a place of meeting of different cultures – Estonians, Old-believers, Russians, and Seto – all people are living together for centuries. Speaking different languages and preserving different cultural heritage. This could give a reason for experience share and different interaction strategies development.

Socio-economic factors: Estonian regions possess a better socio-economic environment while having fully operational electronic document processing. Thus, it is easier for SMEs and other actors to operate and work on local initiatives. Furthermore, the new EstRus Joint Operational Programme has described the “lessons learned from previous experiences in Cross Border Programmes”. In this part of the new Programme, financing-related issues have been outlined, e.g. the limited ability of the local authorities to provide sufficient funding for the Programme objects. Moreover, some discrepancies between

national legislation of the countries were identified and needed to be carefully addressed to avoid deadlock situations in the future.

Legal discrepancies: the Programmes should comply with requirements/frameworks of its main actors – legal, economic, ideological, etc. Most of the time within the Programme timeframe devoted to the technical corrections. Final amendments to the Joint Operational Programmes were made even in the final years of the Programme. The complex legal and regulatory frameworks cause a delay in the agreements signing, slow ratification, and prolongation of the implementation period⁸⁹. As an example, the Grant Contracts for EstLatRus Programme 2007-2013 were signed in 2011. And for EstRus Programme 2014-2020, Agreement on Financing and Implementation was signed only in 2018 – more than half of the Programmes’ period is devoted to the bureaucratic work of technical corrections. That is why some projects were finished only in 2016.

Even though diversity is highly underlined by different actors, the Programme area is generally homogeneous, sharing similar socio-economic environment and historical and cultural heritage. Minor differences rather create small obstacles that could be overreached with minor efforts in communication strategies and proper framing of the projects.

Positive diversity is a good base for cooperation development while it gives an impetus to the experience and idea share. Unfortunately, negative diversity – discourse of otherness, national and political antipathy adds deteriorating sentiments to the cooperation.

3.2. Communication and framing

Improvements in communication networks are among the main goals of all priority areas outlined in both Programmes: development of business contacts and networks, promotion of networking, improvement of transport infrastructure and services, establishment and

⁸⁹ Ex-post Evaluation of 2007-2013 ENPI CBC Programmes (2018). P.21.
[URL:https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/volume_i_main_report.pdf]

promotion of people-to-people networking and common information space. In general, all the priority areas are centered around the network development.

The Priority Area I “Socio-economic development” is dedicated to the region’s competitiveness enhancement by business and entrepreneurship encouragement, development of the transport connections and logistics, improvement of communication solutions, and promotion of the tourist routes. Projects under this priority area covered reconstruction of border crossing points and historical buildings, maintenance of the roads and river promenades. All measures are targeted to support the small and medium entrepreneurship in the border areas, an increase of the tourist flows, and improvement of the traffic and border crossing possibilities.

The Priority Area II “Common challenges” address environmental issues and is aimed to foster the joint actions for the solution of common problems. The area of mutual interest includes the protection of the environment and natural resources, improvement of the water assets quality, promotion of renewable energy sources, and increase of environmental awareness among local people. Several measures had been undertaken by the officials with the substantial contribution of regional NGOs until that time.

However, the environmental awareness of the common people and their involvement in the activities of non-state actors is very low. Thus, the main target of the Priority Area II is to increase people’s consciousness of the regional environment and nature preservation of the Lake Peipus catchment area; as well as environmental studies, monitoring, and management and improvement of the small-scale environmental infrastructure. In addition, projects of Priority Area II are working on the intensification of the people-to-people interactions in the region.

The Priority Area III “Promotion of People to People Cooperation” is focusing on small scale activities aimed at the improvement of regional cooperation supporting a wide range of activities performed by regional and local municipalities and various non-state actors. The projects are aimed to foster local initiative and cooperation between regional actors in different spheres (culture, sport, education, health, etc.). The analysis of past project activities underlined that people-to-people element of the previous iteration of the Programme remains an integral part of its continuation. According to this fact, it could be

assumed that previous projects aimed to foster people-to-people interaction and increase the involvement of the people into the joint activities did not give a fruitful result and need to be developed more deeply in the future.

Overall, the Priority Areas outlined in the Programmes are interconnected by the principle of community development. Projects of one Priority Area often cover issues of another. As an example, the project “Economically and Environmentally Sustainable Lake Peipus” is a part of Priority Area II and devoted to the improvement of the environmental and economic situation of the lake Peipsi basin. These improvements are concerned with the old technical base of the fleet, harbors, and wastewater management facilities which do not meet the environmental requirements as well as decrease the possibilities of the effective fishery. It is important to note that fisheries and agriculture are the main activities of the local population. Thus, the enhancement of these spheres with modern, effective, productive, and environmentally friendly facilities will lead to the socio-economic development of the region that is the initial goal of the Priority Area I.

The main actors of the cross-border cooperation in lake Peipus region are the long-standing partners working in close cooperation for the sustainable development of the region (since the 1990s). Peipsi CTC and Chudskoye Project are the only operative non-governmental participants of transborder activities in the region. long help to withstand the influence of external disturbances such as political crises, international relations disruptions, etc. Organizations stay in close contact due to involvement in project activities in the region. Thus, communication happens on a regular basis (during meetings, study visits, events). The Programme itself supposes regular meetings of different levels: seminars and individual consultations with participants, forums, meetings of management bodies, meetings of national authorities, etc. Then, every project is expected to maintain regular meetings and information exchange. Communication as a main driver of cooperation underlined both interviewees. Moreover, this issue was raised several times during the seminar organized for participants of the “Green Mind” project.

Communication is the process of information share that supports a solid network of networks. However, the flawless scheme of information flow is not working in the region properly. Transparency and impartiality face the state censorship, self-censorship, lack of pluralism of ownership and diversity that disturb and constraint access to the information

for citizens, create narrow limits for journalists (and other content producers), especially on the Russian side.

In general, Russian media is not “free” according to Freedom House Report “Freedom and the Media”⁹⁰. In 2019, Reporters without borders (RWB) ranked Russia⁹¹ at the end of World Press Freedom Index and scored 50.31 points out of 100, acquiring 149 rank out of 180.

This situation is connected with recurring attempts of authorities to block independent media and even messengers (as it happened to Telegram). On the contrary, Estonia was ranked among the best by Freedom House and at 11th rank by RWB (the best score among post-soviet states).

Even though Russia has low scores, there are independent or neutral media in the Pskov region. They are represented by the “Civil Press” holding which includes Pskov News Feed and the “Echo of Moscow” in Pskov. These media are positioned as independent platforms representing different opinions. The highest trust rate has Pskov News Feed, these are also the most popular media resources among people of the middle age⁹². There is also one independent newspaper “Pskov Gubernia” which is positioned as an oppositional resource. It is a relatively small newspaper suffering from state persecution due to materials published on the resource.

Media resources are more targeted to internal political and social events and developments rather than cross-border cooperation. Information about international projects is represented in a reporting character – telling of what has been done or which agreement was signed. Moreover, all publications miss useful links to the websites of organizations and Programmes. Thus, these press-releases do not fulfill the function of raising awareness and increase in people’s interest in the subject.

The media coverage of the Programme and projects goes to web pages of participating organizations (NGOs and official resources of authorities). However, paid promotion is not used by the agents even though every project has a budget allocated for visibility

⁹⁰ Freedom and the Media 2019: A Downward Spiral. URL: [<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-media/freedom-media-2019>]

⁹¹ 2019 World Press Freedom Index. URL: [<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>]

⁹² Media Rating in Pskov Region. URL: [<https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/regional/6855/>]

improvement. Then, websites of both organizations are predominantly active in their native languages (Estonian for Peipsi CTC and Russian for Chudskoye Project).

This is fully justifiable since the targeted audience of the organizations is their fellow citizens and there is no need for them to duplicate information in other languages. Moreover, the main page of the Programmes is in English since it is the common language on the Programme level and all “project proposals should be submitted in English, contracts shall be concluded in English, all official documentation and communication related to Programme implementation should be in English”. In addition, interpretation and translation costs could be included in a project budget⁹³.

The choice of social networks is questionable. Social networks are used to broaden the audience that could be reached out through the Internet. Both organizations have a Facebook page to cover their activities. In Estonia, it is reasonable since FB is the most popular social media website. However, for Russia FB could be used as an extra channel while people in Russia prefer to use Vkontakte. Anyway, pages of both organizations are rather unpopular and have a small number of followers (252 for Peipsi CTC and 89 for Chudskoye project). Moreover, they do not use promotional tools (even unpaid).

External information flow could suffer from the lack of free media. The media which are freely accessible to everyone in the region are belonging to the state holdings and controlled by authorities. Thus, we come to the framing of cross-border cooperation imposed by central actors in cohesion with the general framework of the state. And the framing of the projects itself becomes a prisoner of this top-bottom framing. This is also outlined in Russian federal law “On the Legal Basis for Cross-border Cooperation”⁹⁴. It says that cross-border cooperation should be framed by international relations of the Russian Federation with the partner state. While from the EU side the importance of mutual accountability and shared commitment is underlined⁹⁵.

Full explicit description of the project, as well as reporting during its implementation, are important requirements of the Programme itself. Thus, proper framing could be achieved

⁹³ Joint Operational Programme of Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020p. 68

⁹⁴ Federal law of 26.06.2017 No 179 “On the Legal Basis for Cross-border Cooperation”. URL: [\[http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201707260027\]](http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201707260027)

⁹⁵ Regulation (EU) No 232/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 establishing a European Neighbourhood Instrument.

by simple adherence to the rules and requirements. Strict rules of framing decelerate project implementation. i.e. last modifications to the Joint operational Programme of EstLatRus CBC Programme 2007-2013 were applied in 2012. However, requirements still could not cover wholly all possible cases, thus it provides just a general skeleton. In the example, Visibility Guidelines of the Programmes include special regulations for press releases and conferences, audiovisual productions and promotional items, public events and visits. The main problem of this manual is very specific requirements for visual representation (colors, sizes, positions of logos), but only general information on the content. The regularity of the messages and communication is also staying behind the official regulations.

Among the positive issues, project managers from both sides of the border noted the supportiveness of the local authorities. Highly interested in regional development they are ready to provide any support and advice to the local NGOs. It was outlined that it is important to have personal contact with the representatives of local government: “We are working together for many years, we know each other and are able to reach each other through phone” – said one of the interviewees⁹⁶. Further, he claimed that local authorities are more responsive and favorable when they see a complete proposal that outlines the required amount of time, money, and energy to be spent on the project. Local government is more likely to refuse the project if the project proposal misses important aspects of the project and does not provide the whole picture of its’ outcomes and limitations.

The most important discovery was that among general problems of non-governmental and non-profit activities, such as insufficient funding or little voluntary involvement of the target audience, both organizations noticed unreasonable bureaucracy of the Programmes – strict frames, lack of flexibility during the project implementation, numerous reports to the multiple supervisory authorities. The lack of truth inside the Programme itself creates an interesting effect of a project *made of glass*. “On the one hand, glass is very transparent and simple, on the other hand, it is not flexible, hard, and cold material. Whereas the project is very alive and constantly changing organism that could hardly survive in such strict frames”. Besides, interviewees mentioned that

⁹⁶ Interview 2. November 26, 2019.

nowadays their project work is mainly centered around the huge amount of reports rather than immediate project work.

These constraints are the typical problems of modern programs and particularly EstLatRus and EstRus. One interviewee was very nostalgic for the first international programs which came to the region in the 1990s (Interreg III Priority North, TACIS): “these Programmes were “user-friendly” and allowed to be more flexible towards timing, spending, and reporting”⁹⁷. But, at the same time, that causes major drawbacks – lack of transparency and visibility. Nowadays EstRus Programme is the only channel supporting transboundary cooperation in the region and actors work hard to overcome all barriers and comply with the set requirements.

3.3. Reciprocity and Reward

The principle of reciprocity is in the very nature of the transboundary cooperation programmes: mutual concern about border region, co-financing of the projects, the involvement of actors from different levels (central authorities, local municipalities, non-profit organizations, and local citizens). Reciprocity brings us to the psychological issues of empathy and solidarity and fairness and morality. These are tricky concepts to apply in this study. It is not worthy to talk about the personal likelihood and physical attractiveness of the person. First of all, due to the small number of people working in the area, and as a consequence, the necessity to work with one partner throughout the years. At the same time, people involved in cross-border cooperation have the same interests and understand, that mutual support and solidarity in actions are important criteria for effective cooperation. There was no evidence of unreliable behavior with all sides. All parties appreciate the contribution of their colleagues to the common good. Unfortunately, it was outlined that trust is undermined in the studied region by the central state authorities and their narratives⁹⁸. However, all interviewees underlined the cooperativeness and kindness of their colleagues. Thus, it is possible to conclude that representatives from both sides of the border have a cooperative reputation in the eyes of their colleagues of all levels.

⁹⁷ Interview 2. November 26, 2019.

⁹⁸ Interview 1. November 26, 2019.

At the same time, talking about the lake as a connector or divider both sides agreed that it is a divider for a greater extent or involuntary connector. Interestingly, people working on projects which are entitled to make cooperation more intense, to create regional community, increase awareness of the region and its problems – see one of the important drivers of cooperation as a divider. Discussion of this issue revealed that this perception arose from the inability to share natural resources of the lake equally between the parties on a national level (i.e. fish stock). Furthermore, mutual blaming in the usage of polluting industries and agriculture is still present, which probably, shows the lack of mutual trust between the parties.

Trustworthiness, mutual support, share of common interests and values, work for the collective good – all these bring us to the reputation building. Overall, people involved in CBC activities of the region have positive emotions towards the cooperation that could be seen as a reward. And it is not about material gains, obviously, there are no direct monetary benefits since the projects were co-financed by countries and the money was allocated as a long-term investment to the region. It is worthy to check indirect benefits such as reputation building, the involvement of new partners and associates, increase of trust level in the region, especially for the non-governmental and non-profit sectors. Clear air, water, sustainability, animal species diversity – these are something intangible but are still vital for every person living in the region. Success in environmental cooperation is improving the ecological situation in the region and make an investment in sustainable development.

All proposed initiatives were successfully implemented and gave immediate results for nature preservation. These initiatives triggered the increase in people's awareness of the different problems. Unfortunately, the drawbacks and difficulties of the partnership are not explicitly articulated. Only the annual report of the final year (2014) emphasized that interim reports revealed a few common mistakes: inaccuracies in the currency exchange rate and accountancy printouts. Moreover, these reports had inconsistencies in the application of visibility requirements and difficulties in describing various aspects of project implementation in a satisfactory manner, etc.

Interviewees from both sides of the border gave a rather positive personal assessment of the cross-border activities in the region. This positive attitude of the actors could be

explained by a long-lasting partnership of Peipsi CTC and Lake Peipsi Project which already became an integral part of the organizations' activities. People are already getting used to each other habits, style of work, dialogue structure. Communication strategies are tested in all possible ways and do not leave a space for misunderstanding. It was not possible to ask explicitly about empathy and solidarity during the interview. At the same time, throughout the interviews, the general cautiousness towards the foreign colleagues felt. Even if interviewees did not say it explicitly, general tension was present during the answers to the questions concerning CBC flow assessment. However, they were saying that try to preserve personal connections with the partners besides the work, because "it is important for the exchange of different experience and point of view, as well as new project ideas development". At the same time, this long-standing partnership has a negative effect as well – cross-border cooperation is in stagnation. The project proposals outline the same problems and solutions from one Programme to another with minor changes. It could be concluded that regional cooperation lacks new ideas, fresh minds, and generation change.

3.4. Discussion

Although official channels of information outline success stories, there are many omissions staying behind the reports. This we can find out from the official reports, as well as talking to the people directly involved in the process. Official documents are always introducing cold, hard facts that don't reflect the personal contribution of real people. Unfortunately, resources of the non-governmental organizations Peipsi CTC and Chudskoye Project (websites and Facebook pages) are also full of reports and press-releases describing passed activities and hardly engage people to join.

Regional cooperation lacks important cooperation drivers, such as common language, mutual trust, fresh minds, and ideas, etc. Involuntary connected by an important environmental issue – protection, preservation, and sustainable development of the lake which is able to influence the environmental state of the Baltic Sea Region – regional NGOs and local authorities are doing their best for versatile development of the region in a difficult and stressful international atmosphere.

In January 2018, the European Commission issued “Ex-post Evaluation of 2007-2013 ENPI CBC Programmes”⁹⁹ which assesses the Programme performance and reviews existing practices of implementation and monitoring of CBC projects of ENPI 2007-2013. The Estonia-Latvia-Russia CBC Programme as a part of this framework was also included in it.

The interpretation of the impact of the ENPI 2007-2013 is difficult to assess due to several unforeseen exogenous factors that emerged during the Programme implementation. These factors were triggered by international events that had changed the socio-economic and political circumstances in Europe: world economic downturn in 2008, European debt crisis in 2010, Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014 and European migrant crisis in 2015. Thus, a multitude of projects ran in the unfavorable economic and geopolitical conditions.

The report supports one of the main presumptions of this work – political tensions intensified after the Russian military intervention in Ukraine damaged the cooperation with Russia in CBC programs, but it is not limited to it. However, the involved parties demonstrated a strong will to preserve CBC projects due to its importance for all stakeholders. The Programme authorities lobbied the CBC programs involving Russia “not to be affected by the EU sanctions”¹⁰⁰ when they were put at risk.

Overall, the core findings of the ex-post evaluation reflected the positive and negative outcomes of the CBC Programmes that are applicable to the Estonia-Latvia-Russia CBC. First of all, the CBC increases the degree of regional cooperation and strength the regional stakeholders’ capacity under the common European instruments by building the basis for future CBC projects beyond the instrument.

Secondly, the joint projects within the EU framework facilitate the mutual trust of parties, eliminate regional/internal inconsistencies and soften the negative effects of the existing boundaries.

Finally, the particularly important issue for EU-Russia cooperation: co-financing of projects helps to increase partners’ commitment. The review of the projects revealed that

⁹⁹ Ex-post Evaluation of 2007-2013 ENPI CBC Programmes (2018). [URL https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/volume_i_main_report.pdf]

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. P.29.

this was a case of Russian participation in the projects, the co-financing induced Russia to continue work on the projects to obtain sufficient return of the money spent.

At the same time, the successful implementation of projects under this Programme expanded the horizons of the cross-border initiatives and revealed major problems impeding the smooth development of the border area. Part of these problems is endogenous factors that can have enormous influence creating an unfavorable political and economic environment but are difficult to predict.

Talking about the politics interviewees noted that border regions are in a hostage situation created by high politics. Border (and Estonian-Russian border particularly) have always been somewhere on the periphery and socio-economic development of the region was and still is the issue of the utmost interest of local communities. However, high politics, which is not directly connected to the small problem of the time region (in their perspective), could have a significant influence on regional development both negatively and positively.

For example, tensions between states create a base for prejudices elaboration towards foreign nations and culture. Unfortunately, now negativity prevails in media and the Internet, which creates extra pressure on regional cooperation. Unfavorable international environment influences regional cooperation by the reduction of transboundary possibilities: i.e. limited channels of communication, imbalanced visa issue, mutual negative storytelling, etc.

It is easier to leave the prejudices if you are long-standing partners working in close cooperation for many years. But 'newcomers' sometimes are not ready to omit their assumptions built on propagandistic materials and negative storytelling. From the other side, the younger generation could easier overcome prejudices due to access to a bigger variety of informational sources. Unfortunately, the Lake Peipus region is inhabited mostly with an aging population that is limited with informational access and sometimes even interest to acquire information from different sources.

CONCLUSION

The cross-border cooperation in the Lake Peipus area is continuously developing for more than 20 years, however, regional actors struggle with the changing political reality at the Estonian-Russian border. Multiple changes and reframing of the state international strategies influencing the transboundary relations in the Lake Peipus area.

The Lake is an involuntary core of the regional network. The economy, policy, and culture of the region have been centered around the Lake for many centuries. Nowadays the importance of the Lake is noted on a bigger regional scale going beyond the Estonian-Russian border to the whole Baltic Sea Region, while Lake Peipus is a significant part of the Baltic Sea catchment area. Thus, the success of cooperation on the environmental preservation and sustainable development of the Lake has a direct influence on the Sea which is suffering from numerous environmental problems. And consequently, it could have an influence on all riparian states of the Baltic Sea region.

The aim of this study was to reveal the possible influence of the political environment onto environmental cross-border cooperation. It was presumed that environmental issues are staying beyond the high politics and not influenced by international relations crisis. The year 2014 was specified as a peak point of the crisis which is present at the Estonian-Russian border for many years.

To answer the main question of the research – whether political crisis influence environmental cross-border cooperation – a comparative study of materials of EstLatRus and EstRus Joint Operational Programs were conducted. Further, the interview with people directly involved in the transboundary cooperation was arranged.

As a result, the study showed up the general problems of the region which are present there for a quite long time: discrepancies in legislations, poor monitoring and evaluation capabilities, low public visibility of the projects, lack of language knowledge, and the bureaucracy of managing actors.

At the same time, these problems were seen as a challenge for developments of the next Programme, because the first trilateral EstLatRus Programme has proved its effectiveness by regional cooperation facilitation and successful completion of proposed projects. The next bilateral EstRus Programme was designed as a continuation of the previous iteration.

Interviews reinforced the findings of official reviews. Despite the fact that both managers gave a positive assessment to the regional CBC, they are still worrying about disruptive “political games” of central actors. The most striking issues for representatives of NGOs were bureaucracy and tight frames of the Programme which “take a life out of the project”.

The hypothesis that politics matters the most and could easily break the local cross-border relations did not find the evidence. Environmental cooperation between Estonia and Russia continued after the imposition of sanctions. The Programme was able to prove its effectiveness continue to operate. But at the same time, the adverse international environment hinders the flawless cooperation by scaling a negative narrative.

The research was limited due to Estonia-Russia Programme that was still in the active phase of implementation. Therefore, a full comparison of both Programmes was incomplete since external assessment of the EstRus Programme was not available. For further studies, it would be interesting to get back to this issue around the year 2025 when all projects planned should be finished, review, and assessed by regional actors and Programme analysts. Further the geographical limits of the research could be broadened to the whole Lake Peipus, Narva River, and the Gulf of Finland to get a more extensive understanding of CBC between Estonia and Russia.

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ANNEX I. QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Please tell me about yourself – which organization you are working for, for how long?
2. How do you assess cross-border cooperation (CBC) activities of your organization?
 - a. Excellent. All projects are successfully implemented, have a positive effect, and are visible.
 - b. Positive. Most of the projects are successful, effective, and visible.
 - c. Neutral. Half of the projects launched are successful, effective, and visible.
 - d. Negative. Mostly our projects are invisible and non-effective.
 - e. Bad. All of the projects give dissatisfactory results.
 - f. Is there something more to be done?
3. Who are your main partners in CBC activities?
 - a. Other non-governmental organizations (specify)
 - b. Local governments
 - c. International organizations (specify)
 - d. Other state actors (specify)
4. Which problems do you typically face with starting/implementing CBC projects?
 - a. Insufficient funding.
 - b. Low interest of the targeted audience/local population.
 - c. The difference of opinions/misunderstanding with partners.
 - d. Lack of mutual trust.
 - e. Lack of knowledge.

- f. Other (specify)
5. How do you perceive Lake Peipus?
- a. Divider/Connector
6. Will you agree or disagree with the following statements (from 1-no to 5-yes):
- a. Environmental cooperation in the Lake Peipus region is a local issue and does not have a wider meaning.
 - b. There were many problems arising during the project's implementation that were successfully resolved.
 - c. General international environment influences local CBC activities.
 - d. Trilateral EstLatRus and bilateral EstRus Programmes give an extra driving force for CBC activities in the region.
 - e. Socio-economic developments are different from mine and the opposite side of the border.
 - f. Sometimes environmental CBC activities face a negative attitude from local government (or any other state authority).
 - g. Previous positive experience influences further cooperation.
 - h. Communication is the main driver of CBC activities.
 - i. Selfish ambitions have a negative effect on CBC.
7. Do you have contacts with foreign colleagues besides the project work?
- a. Do you think it is important/unimportant? Why?
8. Do you think that environmental cooperation for sustainable development of Lake Peipus is successful in general? Or something more should be done?
9. How actively local inhabitants participate in CBC projects?
- a. Does the number increase or decrease?

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