Civil society organisations as drivers of cross-border interaction: On whose terms, for which purpose?

The paper summarizes the results of empirical research carried out as a part of the “EUdimensions” project. The project aimed at investigation of the implications of the EU rhetorical and institutional initiatives, such as Neighborhood Policy, for development of a wider political community at its borders. Cross-border cooperation of civil society actors and, more specifically, the role of the EU vis-à-vis other factors that could potentially influence the intensity and scope of cooperation was of a primary interest for a multinational team of researchers. The paper provides an analysis of the Finnish-Russian case.

This paper examines how the stark contrasts in the operational spaces between the two sides as well as the changing political contexts that govern co-operation have affected the development of the work in practice. Based on empirical interview material collected from both Finnish and Russian civil society actors involved in cross-border interaction, this paper reflects the actors’ perceptions of cooperation. It also raises the question of the EU role and influence in facilitation of cooperation through official policies. The findings suggest that, given their pragmatic approach, transnational CSOs can be seen as drivers of bottom-up integration, most of which function fairly separately from the current EU policies and broader geopolitical visions. As a result, CSOs in all their diversity have a crucial role to play in bringing the two sides closer to each other – a dimension of co-operation often overlooked in the grand scale policy proposals.

Introduction

It seems a little odd that research on Europeanisation has rarely crossed the borders, sometimes analytical ones and, what is even more fascinating and disappointing at the same time, physical. A number of publications on the influence of the EU on political systems, public policies and different actors have always been focusing on its members. Rare and modest attempts to stretch the concept over the EU neighbors have never found themselves in the limelight of on-going Europeanisation debates. In other words, what Olson called another “face” of Europeanisation, namely, “exporting forms of political organisation beyond the European territory” never attracted very much research attention (Olsen 2002). This seems a bit puzzling given that some neighbors have been massively exposed to the EU influence for a long time through various instruments, programmes and policy initiatives and that practices of cross-border cooperation between EU members and non-members have been actively developing for almost two decades. It goes without saying that there is much experience to reflect on.

The idea of the EUdimensions project which made it possible to collect and analyse some empirical data presented in this paper, was aimed at investigation of this particular “face” of Europeanisation although not directly drawing on any theoretical and methodological tools provided by this or adjacent concepts. Its major goal was to look at whether practices and discourses of cross-border cooperation at the EU borders contributed to

1 In 2010 the initiators of the EUdimension project, Ilkka Liikanen and James Scott, published an article in which they link cross-border cooperation with the Europeanisation debate (Scott and Liikanen 2010).
emergence of a wider political community\textsuperscript{2}, a desirable and sought-for effect of the European Neighborhood policy. It was going to reach this goal by putting the major focus on civil society and by looking at how their involvement in cross-border cooperation either contributes to emergence of a wider political community and whether the EU policies and policy instruments play a particular role in it. Heavy focus on civil society was justified not only by absence or weak character of any hard institutional frameworks and spaces within which EU-non-EU cooperation could potentially develop. The major interest was to test whether the idea that bottom-up process of cooperation will bring the EU and non-members closer to each other holds any water. Practices and experience of cross-border cooperation at the EU borders seemed to provide a lot of space for such an analysis.

The present paper attempts to present the research results on the Finnish-Russian case, one of nine cases under investigation. Qualitative interviews with representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) were carried out in both Finland and Russia to collect some empirical data. In Russia two particular regions (which are territorial-administrative regions within the Russian Federation) were selected: Leningrad oblast and the Republic of Karelia. This choice was justified by the fact that these regions are two most advanced in, first, practicing cross-border cooperation and, second, promoting it. In particular, the discourse of being a pilot region where new forms of cooperation with foreign partners are developed, probed and then transferred to other regions is what heavily populates the minds of public authorities in Karelia, thus, giving a way to their further advancement and improvement. Equally Saint-Petersburg, the capital of the Leningrad oblast, just like Karelia, has been heavily involved in cross-border cooperation at all levels and with participation of all possible actors. Finally, Finland has always been the biggest cooperation partner for both public authorities and especially for civil society organisations.

Empirical findings, although hardly put into any theoretical framework, demonstrate one striking trend: the EU has mainly failed to employ the potential of civil societies on both sides of the border for promoting any kinds of changes in border regions in both Finland and Russia. Cross-border cooperation between civil society organisations that started to develop right after the border between two countries had become more permeable was in no way used as a good experience through which the EU could promote any of its ideas, discourses and visions. Interviewed representatives of CSOs pointed out numerous times that the role of the EU has significantly decreased. Instead the EU emphasized top-down pattern of cross-border cooperation negotiating and launching massive financial instruments which render local and regional public authorities their main target groups and removing previously highlighted focus on civil society. However, the EU influence manifested itself rather indirectly through transfer of a particular discourse around civil society’s role in policy implementation and achieving greater efficiency. This vision, though, was internalized by the Russian CSOs through cross-border cooperation along bilateral lines and without any institutional influence on the part of the EU. The situation might look differently in a changed context of EU-Russia cooperation and complete restructuring of the EU Neighborhood policy towards Russia which is now being implemented through new policy instruments (European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument).

\textsuperscript{2} The notion “political community” is nearly never clarified in the project documents but one can possible infer that this term is drawing a lot on Karl Deuch’s idea of sharing common values, ideas and understandings across borders by political elites and ordinary citizens. Sometimes one can find a reference to regional partnerships at the EU borders uniting citizens from EU and neighbouring countries which are also regarded as political communities.
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1. Finnish-Russian case: how did cross-border cooperation come about and evolve?

Finland’s relationship to Russia, and the Soviet Union, has been shaped by common histories, pragmatism and lessons learned from armed conflict. In post-World War II geopolitical context, the Finnish-Soviet/Russian interaction has been a special one of pragmatism and mediation, even though one can hardly speak of “warm” bilateral relations in the period between 1945 and 1991. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, cross-border interaction between the countries was regulated by a tight visa-system and administered by a number of centralized bilateral agreements. An interesting element of this highly regulated co-operation was the role of Finnish voluntary associations and other civil society organizations (CSOs) which co-operated with official Soviet organizations under state-level bilateral agreements – and control. This peculiar and obviously asymmetric setting revealed both the privileged status of CSOs in Finland and the weakness of Soviet civil society, handicapped by the authoritarian structures of the Soviet regime. It was primarily Finnish organizations linked to the project of building Nordic-type welfare-state that became an important part of para-diplomatic cross-border co-operation (CBC) with official Soviet organizations. These policies of official delegations and joint communiqués came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After 1991, the border became more permeable, enabling more direct, local interaction between new emerging Russian voluntary associations and the Finnish CSOs. In 1992, the two countries signed the treaty on Good Neighborliness and Co-operation, which set forth guidelines for co-operation between the neighboring areas and retired the 1948 pact of Friendship, Co-operation, and Mutual Assistance and the special relations between the countries dictated by it. As stable social and economic development in Finland’s neighboring areas, especially the Republic of Karelia, the Leningrad and Murmansk oblasts and St. Petersburg, as well as prevention of soft security threats from these areas were seen as of high importance, co-operation with the neighboring areas was spurred on by granting financial assistance to various actors from the newly created Neighboring Area Co-operation funds of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other CSOs have played a key role in neighboring area co-operation since its very beginning. Yet, it cannot go unnoticed that especially in its initial form the neighboring area co-operation was designed clearly for a period of transition and technical assistance, rather than equal co-operation, has been a principal element of the activities.

Geographically, in the early 1990s most of the activities initiated by Finnish CSOs were directed towards St. Petersburg, a metropolis that boasts more citizens than Finland itself. The difference in scales became apparent also in the assessment of problems and needs, some of which were unheard of within the Finnish context. Practical operations revealed that the difference between the two countries was not only evident in scales or even in the methods and forms of activities, but also in the very systems through which the work had to be carried out. Soon after, activities began to spread largely to the small villages of nearby regions, most importantly the Republic of Karelia, where the presence of the Finnish CSOs has remained strong ever since. It should, however, be mentioned that the major form these early instances of cooperation took was humanitarian assistance when Finnish CSOs chose their Russian counterparts as channels through which this aid was reaching Russian public.

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3 The new agreement meant that Finland was at last free to move towards what was consider to be its “proper reference group”; only a few weeks after signing the new treaty, Finland applied for EU membership (Sutela 2001, 6–7).
When Finland joined the EU in 1995, conditions governing CBC faced a significant transformation yet again. On the one hand, the previously bilaterally-governed co-operation across the border became part of the broader dynamics of international politics and EU-Russia relations. However, on the other hand, regional and local actors also took an active role in international affairs by cooperating directly across the border (Liikanen 2004). The influence of the EU is, however, twofold by nature. Europeanization promotes co-operation by bringing well needed vigor, if not in the currency of ideas, at least in form of funding. However, it also tends to confirm the existing differences between EU and non-EU members. In addition, EU funding, most importantly through past TACIS and Interreg programmes, has made actions increasingly project-based. The role of the EU has become of the essence, as the level of cross-border interaction at the national and sub-national levels does not exist in a vacuum, but is still context dependent, i.e. restricted by the top-level policies and relations.

To better understand the role of the EU in shaping cross-border cooperation between CSOs, one should also have a closer look at how cooperation was already shaped when the EU arrived. As was already mentioned, the space for CSOs’ cooperation in both Saint-Petersburg and Karelia was largely shaped and structured by, first of all, bilateral contacts between Finnish and Russian CSOs endorsed solely by Finnish public authorities. It is clear that by the moment the EU arrived with its own initiatives it had to literally fight for the attention and participation of CSOs whose effort had already been channeled through other, predominantly bilateral, existing routes. Moreover, when compared to other Russian regions (at least in the North-West Russia), Karelia appears as a distinct case in a sense that it has been quite differently affected by international donors whose aim was to support emerging civil society, and this had also had its effect on cross-border cooperation and, what is more important, on future role of the EU.

One of the striking peculiarities of donors’ presence in the region was noticeable pluralism of organisations offering their financial assistance to emerging CSOs. Karelian CSOs were enjoying the privilege of relations with a plethora of foreign donors not limited to American Foundations like in neighbouring Novgorod or Pskov. Elena Belokurova and Maria Nozhenko argue, in this light, that unlike in other regions where development of civil society was largely channeled by several “big” donors who normally settled in the region and institutionalized their presence by opening an office through which they managed their programmes, Karelia was a territory which no big donor had ever claimed as the territory of its interest. The same was relevant for Saint-Petersburg. As a result, hypothesize they, this led to, first, high diversity and zero consolidation of civil society sector unlike in the regions where activities of CSOs were revolving around “big” center responsible for financial assistance. Either donors themselves or established resource centers for CSOs served this function of attraction. What can be added to this observation is that another implication of such pluralism of donor attention was initial abundance of resources for CSOs which made the EU with its programmes quite an unattractive donor and just one of many. If it could potentially become an alternative to existing “big players” in other regions it failed to appear as one in Karelia. This is the reason why by 2008, when “TACIS-cross-border cooperation” programme had already been functioning for about a decade in Karelia, only 5 projects were implemented by CSOs and only 5 projects have been implemented within the TACIS sub-programme “Civil society and local initiatives”. It goes without saying that

Thus, initial focus on bilateral cooperation with Finnish counterparts and quite visible presence of numerous other donors in the region significantly outshined for Russian CSOs opportunities and resources offered by the EU.
Moreover, soon the political context of the EU-Russian relations has also changed that had its own imprint on development of cross-border cooperation. Relations between the EU and Russia were marked by increasing tensions soon after the president Putin came to power. As a result, existing external framework for cross-border cooperation changed. So, for example, Russia, unlike all the other immediate EU neighbors either by land or sea, refused to be a part of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Instead, since 2003 the EU-Russian relations have been addressed within the framework of four long-term “common spaces”. In 2005, a single package of “Road Maps” was adopted to act as the short and medium-term instruments for the implementation of the Common Spaces. Tensions around Russia’s opinion about ENP were quite an important indicator of the Kremlin’s overall attitude towards cross-border cooperation in addition to its unwillingness to give a kick-start to the legislative process aimed at formalization of cross-border cooperation. Cross-border cooperation is an essential component of the ENP as it is provided through a single European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). ENPI does, *inter alia*, seek to support cross-border contacts and co-operation between local and regional actors and civil society actors and aims, thus, to enhance democratization and the role of CSOs in the neighboring countries. However, the potential of such a focus of the EU policy was for a long time blocked due to EU-Russia tensions as well as re-centralisation process initiated by the federal center after 2003. Its major justification was convergence of regional and federal legislation but one of the major results was re-taking of a number of important functions from the regions, including much of regional independence in structuring their international connections and ties. It is clear that this all was accompanied by corresponding discursive shifts in the regions when regional authorities echoed back federal discourses and rhetoric with regards to such things as the EU and civil society. For CSOs cross-border cooperation it had some effect on thematic priorities of cooperation within the ENP. They now had largely been defined by Brussels and Moscow rather that emerged as a result of analysis of local needs.

However, these bumpy relations with the EU were sometimes interrupted by important initiatives, like establishment of the Euroregion “Karelia” in 2000. The borderland of Karelia has been defined as an example of a new type of European cross-border region and it was the first Euregio to be established on the land-border between the Russian Federation and the EU. The idea was promoted most famously by a joint Finnish-Russian CBC programme that led to the establishment of Euroregion Karelia (EK) in order to facilitate CBC and better coordinate its financing on the Finnish-Russian border. From its beginning, the key figures behind the EK initiative promoted the new institutional structure as a new European model. The idea was that as the EU enlarged eastwards, joint administrative structures with Russian regional authorities would gain broader European significance. It was assumed that coordination of INTERREG and TACIS programmes for both countries on the regional level would be the core of the new administrative model. The benefits of EK for the EU were envisioned to comprise a more intensive and effective use of funds, which were available for both sides of the border, yet uncoordinatedly. The benefit for Russia was seen to lay in the increased co-operation across the border, which would later also imply more economic activities. On the Finnish side, in turn, EK would help in changing attitudes towards the border and removing the related historical burden.

Although the Euroregion has become an integral part of the region’s identity as expressed by public authorities its significance for CSOs can be questioned: it has never been mentioned by

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4 Russia still has no legislative Act regulating cross-border cooperation, just the concept of it.
5 The words “and Partnership” in the title of the instrument reflects that the instrument will also fund the implementation of the Strategic Partnership with Russia (previously funded through the TACIS programme).
6 Official federal discourse on civil society also plays an important role in understanding how the role and potential influence of the EU on CSOs was decelerated and even held back. Elena Belokurova provides a convincing analysis of how discourse around civil society and CSOs in Russia has been reshaped so that CSOs got deprived of some of traditional visions of their role in a society (Belokurova 2010)
CSOs as a structure through which their relations with foreign counterparts have especially been strengthened or shaped.

This section presented very general developments that compose overall context of cross-border cooperation between Finnish and Russian CSOs. It is clear that once these practices had started after the collapse of the USSR they soon experienced impact of several factors such as presence of international donors in Russia and tense EU-Russia relations. As a result, the role of the EU, its programmes and discourses for civil societies in two regions has initially developed in quite a paradoxical way. Both in Karelia and Saint-Petersburg which, after Finland’s accession, became main Russian recipients of the EU aid, CSOs, nevertheless, used EU-related opportunities for cross-border cooperation, be it funding or administrative structures such as Euroregion, quite rarely. Cross-border cooperation lingered in the realm of bilateral Russia-Finland context.

The next section will address the issue of the EU role for Finnish civil society as well as cast a closer look at motivations and practices of cooperation between Russian and Finnish CSOs as well as its implications for the Russian CSOs.
2. Cooperation of CSOs across the border: practice vis-à-vis policy.

The major question that guided research endeavour of the EUdimensions project was the question of whether and how the EU interferes with practices of already existing cross-border cooperation. The working hypothesis was that by creating and institutional space of cooperation with Russia through launching certain programmes and policies and by incorporating civil society cooperation into their agenda the EU could, thus, Europeanise what had previously been a matter of exclusively bilateral links and relationships. However, this hypothesis has not been fully corroborated.

Finnish CSO activists, who were expected to be heavily affected by the EU efforts due to Finland’s being EU member, particularly at the local and regional level, see that the role of the EU in governing relations has in general terms increased, but remains still rather insignificant for their practical contacts and co-operation initiatives across the border. For many small CSOs, engagement in large EU-projects or even going through the weighty application procedures feel often too complicated or time consuming.

We have given up with these EU funding mechanisms already long time ago… I have a feeling that they [the EU] pay according to the text we provide, not the work we do. (Interview #29)

[T]he EU projects are really off-putting because of the administration, reporting, and budgeting they require are all so burdensome. The idea behind them is good, but to administer them just requires too much resources – there’s no resources left for the actual work… Many simply cannot afford that. (Interview #32)

Despite the recent strengthening of the role of the civil society dimension, EU policy frameworks for relations with its neighbors still seem to be directed towards economic and political matters at the expense of social issues, the domain of primary interest for CSOs. Even if important as such, it is perceived that these orientations have done little, particularly at the local and regional levels, to affect CSOs cross-border cooperation, enhance people-to-people contacts or bring neighbors closer in mental terms to the Union. A more broadened focus is perceived as needed in order for the EU to manage the transnational space, which now seemingly extends beyond its external borders. In this sense, the implementation of ENPI is hoped to ease the situation, but on the other hand there seems to exist a broad skepticism about what this fairly top-down instrument will actually be able deliver. For many local and regional level CSO actors, the grand scale goals of ENPI as well as the EU external policy in general sound overly broad and distant.

It seems to be widely understood that the civil society dimension is vital in order for the EU’s policies to boost links with its “ring of friends” and, thus, to deepen the integration between the Union and its neighbors. However, from the CSO actors’ perspective, top-down proposals for deeper integration should pay more attention to the dynamics from below, as ignoring these dynamics would prove to be short-sighted and hardly socially sustainable. Instead of trying to change Russian society as a whole or merely import European values to Russia and hope for the best, emphasis should be placed on people-to-people contacts and on more constructive dialogue between neighbors, which in turn is likely to result in more proposals of deeper integration. Finnish CSOs actors are of the opinion that civil society co-operation should focus more on supporting Russians as they themselves build better preconditions for the grand objectives to be fulfilled in the specific conditions that have emerged as a result of Russia’s own historical development.

The role of cross-border cooperation in building social cohesion is also emphasized by many. Regardless of the public benefits to be realized by cross-border civil society cooperation, the most successful and enduring examples can be found when individual actors themselves feel
that also they benefit from co-operation. In this sense, it seems to be the positive experience of
civil society actors, rather than EU policies, which has made co-operation seem worthwhile and
beneficial.

Another interesting point that emerges from the opinions of Finnish CSO actors towards
EU policies is that there is neither a coherent European civil society nor is the EU a coherent
actor in relation to Russia. Policy frameworks that endeavor to capture “the entire picture” are
seen as destined to overlook country-specific issues and circumstances. Accordingly, it is often
expressed that for cross-border cooperation to be effective, projects receiving EU funds should
be derived from practical issues that emerge locally. Accordingly, a majority of Finnish CSOs
that have already managed to establish contacts with Russian CSOs work rather, if not
completely, independently from EU initiatives and polices. According to many, co-operation has
arisen from a general awareness of a common interest or problem, which has functioned as an
impetus for co-operative initiatives. It is these bottom-up initiatives that have mobilized the
people to take the first step across the border and engage in pragmatic and constructive forms of
co-operation.

The responses of Russian CSO representatives and other experts dealing with EU-sponsored financial programmes indicate that CSOs are not closely involved with the implementation of European projects. The majority of the respondents confirmed that they have tried to apply for funding within TACIS or Interreg programmes, but have discontinued the attempts after rejections of their applications. Among all the explanations given by respondents one confirms vividly the hypothesis of unwillingness to seek for financial assistance from European programmes: the process of applying for financial aid through these European initiatives seems to be too complicated in terms of technical procedures (the application process, language skills, lack of knowledge of project management etc.), absence or inability to find a partner which is required by every programme or lack of resources to implement a project if it is supported. Thus, bilateral co-operation with Finnish partners in projects supported by the Finnish Neighboring Area Co-operation funds is clearly seen as more flexible, straightforward and, thus, more favorable. These findings are relevant for CSOs from both Saint-Petersburg and Karelia who lean towards other international donors such as Nordic Council of Ministers, Council of the Baltic Sea States, Barents Euro-Arctic Council etc. in their attempts to financially support cooperation initiatives.

In the case of Russian CSOs, though, several specific aspects need to be clarified. First of
all, one can clearly see the implication of the EU requirement about partnership of regional/local
authorities for implementation of big EU projects financed by TACIS or any other programme.
Normally this results in building some sort of sustainable networks between these actors. This is
especially relevant for big and influential CSOs who possess plenty of organizational and
infrastructure resources. The uniqueness of the situation, however, is that these connections with
CSOs get regularly mobilized by public authorities as the least costly way to satisfy this EU
requirement of partnership. One of the serious implications of such an EU approach is,
undoubtedly, CSOs elitism and inflexibility of networks which unite the same circle of CSOs
and other but exclude many of those who can potentially offer something else for cross-border
cooperation.

Another implication of the presence of the EU (and one can also refer to this as a specific
side of Europeanisation) is rhetoric of the Russian CSOs towards the EU. What was especially
clearly seen in Karelia, less in Saint-Petersburg, but in striking contrast to the rhetoric of Finnish
CSOs was quite wide-spread positive discourse about the EU accompanied with positive
assessments of its role and initiatives. Respondents very positively assessed the EU’s project of
“Neighbourhood”, but remained quite skeptical about the potential development of the EU-
Russian relationships, thus successfully reproducing official federal discourse about EU-Russia
relations. Civil society in Karelia might seem to be extremely aware of the EU, knowledgeable
of its developments and instruments and quite positive about its presence and initiatives. At the same time CSOs underlined that overall EU influence on their work and, especially on cross-border cooperation is very minimal and erratic which again proves that none of the EU attempts to incorporate civil society dimension in its policies significantly affected civil society itself. However, one of the arguments of the paper is that against the backdrop of invisible direct influence of the EU through its policies and programmes, one can find one important indirect effect: entrenchment of a specific instrumental discourse about civil society’s role with an emphasis on efficiency and policy implementation. Transfer of this discourse, actively constructed by the EU itself, became possible due to already existing bilateral cross-border cooperation.


Even if cross-border civil society co-operation has certainly had its problems also in the Finnish-Russian case, in general terms a rather positive picture can be drawn based on practical experiences. From the CSO actors’ perspective, the key to success has been that instead of focusing directly on the big goals of civil society building and enhancing democracy, Finnish CSOs have channeled their efforts and funds into strengthening the prerequisites for individual citizens in Russia, in order for them to build better preconditions for their own well being. Accordingly, particularly social and health CSOs have been well represented in the formation of transnational civil society links. Given the nature of the situation, particularly in the early 1990s, interaction across the border was certainly closer to humanitarian work based on goodwill rather than co-operation between equal partners to the advance of both. However, as Russian civil society developed towards more institutional forms, Finnish CSOs began to engage also in the practical training of Russian actors that would help them to develop their own organizational skills and increase their effectiveness in the new, internationalizing environment. Now, co-operation is becoming a two-way process, in which both sides can learn from each other.

It is, however, essential to understand that the primary focus of most Finnish CSO activities lies on the Finnish side of the border. Engaging in cross-border co-operation, in turn, is usually something to be done if and when the resources and time allow. There seems to be a coherent understanding among CSO actors that cross-border cooperation could yield considerable benefits, but that it also involves substantial costs and risks. Any collaborative effort involves considerable transaction costs in terms of resources and time spent in negotiating and carrying out co-operative activities. These costs are increased dramatically by the border. In addition to the inconvenience of actual border crossings (e.g. due to visa procedures and poor cross-border infrastructures), the border poses a barrier as it signifies where one set of rules ends and another begins; crossing a border is a move out of one's own, familiar culture and into a different and unknown one. It is these differences together with general unpredictability that is being pushed into the foreground as an explanation for the lack of cross-border relations.

The role of networks is perceived as crucial for maintaining cross-border connections in many fields of civil society. Networks have enabled different actors and organizations to come together and share their knowledge. Perhaps even more importantly, networking has helped individual CSOs make the first steps across the border by providing the know-how and other resources that individual CSOs often lack. From a practical point of view, most of the problems that CSOs are dealing with are so complicated and large in scale that to solve them would be an overly enormous task for a single organization. In addition, networking has proven out to be a more efficient way to attract funding, and made the actual application procedures easier for an individual organization. All in all, without supportive networks, resources and time might have a better rate of return if invested internally or in a relationship with an organization on the same side of the border. Thus, in order for cross-border cooperation to thrive, it is essential that actors
themselves feel that it is not only a means to an end, but that there is added value to be gained in the process itself; i.e. through engagement in cross-border civil society co-operation and the creation of people-to-people contacts.

The CSOs operating across the Finnish-Russian border face now a rather different reality than they have in the past. The gradual and partial opening of the border as well as increased funding from the EU has brought about new kind of possibilities, even if grasping them has proven to be easier said than done. There has been a gradual growth of cross-border ties among civil society organizations, and civil society is, thus, becoming an important driver of integration and initiator of people-to-people contacts, but also representative of public interests from below. Even though the basic situation is a positive one, as scholars have brought up, in many cases the upsurge of co-operation between the Finnish and Russian CSOs has actually been closely suggestive of a love story in which two partners meet, fall in love, are disappointed and finally divorce. There are, however, a significant number of CSOs that have managed to keep up active co-operation across the border already for long – heedless of individual project time frames or funding periods. It is exactly this long-term co-operation that is perceived as most beneficial by the actors.

Even if short term projects, for which funding is often easier to find, may be efficient in avoiding endless debates of which principles should frame co-operation or focusing a particular issues or a problem, they often do not produce the broader and longer term objectives originally set out in the official strategies, neither do they contribute to any major extent to the creation of social capital and more constructive dialogue between the neighbors, which would in turn likely to create more proponents of deeper integration. More long-term co-operation certainly requires resilience, patience and flexibility; that is precisely what makes it rarer, though not nonexistent. All in all, it can be argued that cross-border interdependence has been created as the border became more permeable and people were finally able to interact with those to whom they were the closest geographically.

The activeness of Finnish CSOs especially in the Republic of Karelia, Russia, is clearly reflected in the answers of the Russian CSO representatives. In their vision CSOs are the main facilitators of cross-border co-operation and and the Republic of Karelia, in general, is seen as a “pilot region” in developing different and transferable practices of cross-border co-operation. This is closely connected with the overall positive evaluation of CSO development. Almost all the Karelian respondents assess the quality of the cross-border cooperation in a positive light mentioning that it was these very links with, and the know-how gained from, their foreign partners that allowed them to function and grow professionally in the first place. Moreover, in some cases cross-border was assessed as an activity that helped put specific issues on civil society agendas. For example, the Karelian women’s organizations stressed that it was their partners from Scandinavia that for the most part contributed to the spread of gender discourse in the Republic.

Nevertheless, it seems that, as a rule, the Russian CSOs involved in cooperation with Finnish or other foreign partners do not often have any kind of a self defined strategy for CBC within their organizations, but that co-operation is either rather fortuitous or grounded heavily on the supporting structures and agenda of the foreign partners. The initial results from the interviews conducted in Vyborg and St. Petersburg seem to dovetail with this finding. Yet, nearly all the Russian respondents rejected the idea that the interests and preferences of the foreign partners would actually dominate the practical work, though some experienced CSO representatives admitted modifying their preferences and interests during the process of project development as a means to improve chances of obtaining funds.

Checking whether there is any transfer of agendas, values and objectives from European to Russian CSOs was another goal of the project. The main hypothesis here was that it is cross-border cooperation through what the EU could work as a normative power. Although, as was
mentioned above, the EU failed to render its programmes and policies fully opened to participation of CSOs, its influence manifested itself through de-politicised practices of cross-border cooperation when Finnish CSOs introduced their Russian colleagues to such ideas as gender equality, social welfare, transparent governance, minority rights etc. (Scott and Liikanen 2010) Agendas and objectives of the Russian CSOs turned out to bear some impact of their foreign colleagues, thus, being in line with the EU values without actually taking part in EU policies. Thus, the EU influence “extended itself rather through bottom-up processes of engagement within civil society networks” (Scott and Liikanen 2010: 431).

The thematic focus of cross-border cooperation, namely, its evolution throughout the whole period, may serve as an indicator of the above-mentioned transfer. Respondents notice that the thematic focus of co-operation has shifted in recent years. If the majority of the projects in 1990s was targeted at the professional growth of CSOs themselves and included mainly such components as education, experience exchange, transfer of skills and infrastructure, the present focus is primarily on social problems (health, unemployment, drug addiction, domestic violence, etc.) and deepening existing civil society/political networks in order to find innovative solutions to these problems. Scholars-participants of the EUdimensions project also underline that such ideas as social partnership and social problem-solving, ideas brought over by Finnish CSOs, soon have turned into a an important source of orientation for the Russian CSOs in defining their own agendas (Belokurova 2010). One may approach this process in constructivist terms by viewing it as a process of socialisation during which Russian CSOs adopted visions and agendas which were originally alien in their understandings of their own job but soon became the most important points of reference for self-identification.

Cross-border in this sense has had profound effects on overall rhetoric with regards to civil society and its role in the Russian regions. Normally always present in CSOs’ discourse idea of their being watchdogs and controllers of public authorities’ actions, the idea which originally served as the main marker and label of civil society, nearly totally disappeared from CSOs’ self-rhetoric and self-identification. Instead, the instrumental discourse of assistance to public authorities in policy implementation where government fails to address all the problems or has got insufficient resources, replaced “watchdogs” discourse and became the core of CSOs’ identity. In this respect, one will not have any difficulties in establishing a direct link to the EU vision of civil society’s role. Particular focus on policy implementation as domain where actions of civil society are needed most of all as well as an emphasis on efficiency as added-value it can bring distinguish the EU approach to civil society (Kohler-Koch 2009). This approach is one of many conceptualizations that co-exist and reproduced by the EU institutions. What looks as an extremely interesting finding of the analysis of CSOs cross-border cooperation practices in the Finnish-Russian case is that this approach got entrenched within Russian civil society as a result of long experience of cross-border cooperation though without this cooperation being arranged along the lines and within the space constructed by the EU itself, namely, within its policies and programmes.

Discussion and Conclusions

The paper has attempted to draw a general picture of evolution and practices of Finnish-Russian CSOs cross-border cooperation. The strong role of CSOs in the Finnish-Russian cross-border co-operation can be explained by two main factors. Firstly, CSOs have been important players in the Finnish society already for long. As the border became more permeable, it was seen that the CSOs had vast practical knowledge about a number of issues that were also seen as important concerning the cross-border cooperation. The strong role of CSOs in cross-border cooperation can thus be explained by the fact that the Finnish working model was simply stretched to cover also the cooperation with Russia – and this came about quite separately from...
ideological ambitions about Western democracy or civil society building promoted by foreign donors. Secondly, while business had clear difficulties adapting to the unfamiliar conditions in Russia and the jurisdiction of governments stopped at the political border as any action beyond that could have easily been taken as an intrusion, citizens and CSOs were less restricted from moving back and forth across the border and entering into cross-border cooperative relationships, breaking up the surprisingly persistent East-West divide. CSOs are seen to have a number of qualities which emphasize their aptitude for CBC. In relative terms, CSOs are fairly flexible, innovative, realist and, as a result, able to react local issues fast and effectively. CSOs tend also to be less bureaucratic as well as less constrained by long-term strategies than official governmental programs. In addition, CSOs are logically more suitable for promoting civil society as a foreign governmental promotion of civil society could easily be seen as involving an agenda of reshaping also the state institutions, making it less acceptable in recipient country.

There seems to be a tacit “Western” understanding that a strong civil society not only promotes public interests but that it is a necessary precondition for democracy. Many Western governments, non-profit organizations and various international organizations have provided funding for the support of civil society in Russia, with the assumption that this is a crucial aspect of the transition to and consolidation of democracy. However, to the disappointment of many, these good intentions have often resulted in unintended outcomes (Sperling 1999; Mendelson & Glenn 2000; Henderson 2002; Bae 2005). The very core of the problem has been that the concept of civil society is inherently seen in Russia as a “product of the West” (Kocka 2004, 76). As scholars often point out: “all which is ‘Western’ planted onto our [Russian] soil bears fruits which differ considerably from the seed, and, what is most important, from the expected result” (Alapuro 2005: 8).

Interestingly, the dynamics across the Finnish-Russian border can be characterized as more pragmatic. From the Finnish perspective, the utmost aim of co-operation has been to solve practical problems, provide help and support Russians as they themselves build better preconditions to confront the specific conditions that have emerged as a result of Russia’s own historical development. This is in line with the Russian reading, according to which co-operation with foreign partners has been beneficial as it has provided Russian CSOs with valuable know-how and expertise.

The most successful examples of cross-border cooperation can be found when the actors themselves feel that co-operation is not only a means to an end, but that there is added value to be gained in the process itself. However, given the vast differences in the operational spaces, but also in the problems and needs, between the two sides the findings indicate that the successfulness of co-operation is also dependent on key network actors that can bridge differences across the border. An asymmetric relationship between border regions determines also the quality and scope of cross-border activities. Even if the regional cross-border cooperation has clearly developed from the pure forms of assistance and aid towards mutually beneficial co-operation, in many cases it is still the Finnish side that usually initiates contacts and defines the agenda, even thought the practical work is carried out on the Russian side. It is, however, understood that albeit the short term benefits of the joint projects would remain in Russia, the general development of the neighboring areas and created contacts will be exceedingly beneficial for Finland in the long run.

*The starting point today is that this is not development co-operation, but the idea is that the border is only a titular one... we need to co-operate with our closest neighbor at all possible levels.*

(Interview #46)

Even thought surprisingly irrelevant for many, the role of the EU is generally being evaluated in positive terms by both sides. As the EU is fundamentally based on economic and more recently political concerns as well, relations across its external borders have been characterized by parallel leanings. However, given its origins are also closely linked to concerns
about democracy, human rights and international conflict, these issues have now been taken as a part of updated EU external policies. The EU now offers Russia a privileged partnership, building upon a mutual commitment to common goals and values – at least as long as they are “European” values. Even if the enhancement of democracy, human rights, rule of law, etc. are certainly goals worth fighting for, experience has already shown that simply transplanting from their “original” setting to a rather different one is likely to face serious problems. For the Finnish and Russian CSO actors, these grand ideas seem fairly detached from their practical work. Given the internal political development in Russia and the current stand of the EU-Russian relations, it might just be the pragmatic Finnish approach that will turn out to be the most efficient in the future.

The more direct role of the EU on CSOs and cross-border cooperation between them might become more prominent in the future. A closer look at the design of the Neighbourhood Policy Instrument allows one to capture one important peculiarity: implementation mode of the policy almost entirely replicates the one of the cohesion policy with its focus on partnership between public authorities and civil society in allocation of the Funds (Bache 2010; Batory and Cartwright 2011; Bache and Olsson 2001; Bauer 2002). Given that the decisions on what cross-border projects should be funded are taken by joint committees and groups composed of public authorities and representatives of civil society from both EU member states and Russia, one can expect that this mode will soon have its effects on, first of all, cooperation across borders and, second of all, on participants of cooperation.

What opens up a big room for further research on direct effects of the EU on CSOs is that inclusion of civil society into the implementation process is now a requirement. How will it change existing practices of cross-border cooperation? Will the EU gradually replace and embrace bilateral cross-border contacts between CSOs by incorporating their agendas and practices into its own instruments and policies? Will it in any way universalize cross-border cooperation between Russian and European CSOs along its borders by means of its massive institutional presence? One could expect it to replace, for example, existing instruments and programmes of the Finnish state. Moreover, will it be successful in imposing governance modes and practices (or some of their elements) which are inherently EU-born and EU-alike in such countries as Russia through channeling cross-border cooperation within its policies and programmes?

It seems it is not the time yet to answer these questions due to short period of functioning of such instruments as Neighbourhood Policy but it is definitely time to ask them.


