The window to Europe is edging shut

A touch of frost at the border

Territorial proximity to the European Union has significantly changed the way of life as well as the cultural, political and economic reality of several Russian regions over the last 25 years. Most notable in this regard are Saint Petersburg, Kaliningrad, the Leningrad Oblast and, to a lesser extent, the Murmansk Oblast and the Republic of Karelia. They share a number of common features associated with their proximity to the EU border.

Due to the liberalization of the visa regime, citizens of these regions can travel around Europe, study in neighboring EU states, go shopping there, and consequently, draw comparisons between living standards more freely than other Russians. Joint EU infrastructure projects have been implemented in these regions: upgrades of border crossings, restoration of cultural sites and highway construction. Investments of varying degrees are sought more actively there. Local cultural figures, journalists, scientists and even officials have developed and maintain international contact networks.

Relations between border regions and neighboring states have deteriorated slower than they did at inter-governmental level following the annexation of Crimea, the imposition of sanctions against Russia and the
retaliatory food embargo. A landmark event occurred in August 2016: Poland decided not to renew local border traffic agreements with the Kaliningrad Oblast and areas of the country closest to the Russian enclave. This mode of traffic allowed locals to travel to Poland without a Schengen visa and applied to an area which stretched several hundred kilometers from the border. Warsaw introduced restrictions on Russians prior to the July NATO Summit and the World Youth Day in Cracow. The Russian Foreign Ministry responded by implementing “symmetrical” measures against Poles in line with recent trends. The reason for the tightening of security measures is already a thing of the past. However, none of the parties are in a hurry to reinstate simplified procedures.

Moscow and Warsaw agreed on the cross-border movement mode during the last months of the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev in December 2011. Residents of the Kaliningrad Oblast appreciated this measure: up to 50% of all border crossings between Russia and Poland were permitted under the special mode. Relations between the two countries have never been easy but this mode did offer something in the way of mutual trust between the neighbors at the very least.

**The way the vector has changed**

Nearly five years on Kaliningrad is primarily a military outpost and not an economic one. One of the two Russian “allies” – the Baltic Fleet – is deployed there. Yevgeny Zinichev, Putin’s former bodyguard, was appointed governor of the region by Vladimir Putin in late July. He had previously been the head of the regional branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB) since 2015. The first act of the new governor-silovik was to appoint a 29-year-old technocrat Anton Alikhanov, popular among Kaliningrad businessmen, as the chairman of the regional government. Zinichev will likely report to Putin on Kaliningrad, strategically important militarily, and Alikhanov will develop it into a special economic zone and transit center. To what extent these two projects are compatible given the present situation is another question.

The impact of governor-bodyguard on the investment climate and relations with neighbors can be traced back to Saint Petersburg. The city had been governed by the Lieutenant-General of the tax police Georgy Poltavchenko since 2011. In his day, relations with foreigners were built based on the principle: “we do not interfere in the best case scenario but we do not help them either”. His predecessor, Matviyenko, a former ambassador to Greece and experienced politician, in contrast, showed her worth during the period of rapid economic growth when investors were drawn to the region.

A high-speed train link “Allegro” connecting Saint Petersburg and Helsinki – the brainchild of Russian Railways and the Finnish firm VR – was launched in late 2011 as part of the rapprochement vector. The importance of the project was underlined by the fact that presidents Vladimir Putin and Tarja Halonen were among those onboard the train during its maiden journey. Following the collapse of the ruble in late 2014, the Allegro often runs half-empty but it continues to depart four times a day as a symbol of good neighborly relations between Russia and Finland. For comparison, Estonian Railways cancelled its express train to Tallinn immediately following a drop in demand.

Saint Petersburg is the subject of huge EU projects connected to two issues: high-speed transportation and the environmental protection of the Baltic Sea. The European Union helped the city construct sewage treatment facilities. Finns and Estonians were interested in these endeavors. The authorities in Saint Petersburg were interested in the experience of neighbors as regards the development of public transportation and snow removal. One everyday Finnish solution – the replacement of salt used during ice-slicks in winter by granite chips – is slowly being introduced in Saint Petersburg.

The Leningrad Oblast, adjacent to the metropolis, applied for EU funds for the development and expansion of border crossing points. The EU also planned to build new highways in the border areas. Back in 2013, the authorities appealed to the presidents of Russia and Finland for help with this issue. It is difficult to say for sure, but Finnish attitudes have seemingly changed recently. The border between the two countries (the longest in the EU) is now primarily a line of defense with cooperation now seen as being of secondary importance and dependent on the nature of the operational environment. Work on the projects that commenced before sanctions were imposed is now being completed. No additional funds from the World Bank or Brussels are expected.
Dormant divides

Frankly speaking, the authorities of the Russian border regions and their European interlocutors did not really understand each other prior to 2014 when the Kremlin leadership threw caution to the wind. This is especially noticeable in Saint Petersburg which pursues the status of “second capital”. It proved impossible to fence off good neighborly relations from the impact of domestic policy and the quest for internal and external enemies.

Value-based differences in relations between the officials in Saint Petersburg and Helsinki have been bubbling on the surface since at least 2012 when the regional authorities passed the law on “the protection of minors from homosexual propaganda”. Deputy Vitaly Milonov’s document was signed by Georgy Poltavchenko. This raised concerns among Finns. The Saint Petersburg norms were deemed discriminatory and unacceptable by the deputy of the Helsinki City Council Thomas Valgren in particular. He called for the severance of ties with “homophobic” Saint Petersburg. However, Jussi Pajunen, the mayor of the Finnish capital, explained to the author of those lines with typical Scandinavian calmness that laws passed in Saint Petersburg do not affect mutual relations between the two twin cities.

Finns refrained from asking their neighbors unpleasant questions. However, relations (the economic situation also played a role here) have gradually been reduced to reserved greetings at official receptions and forums. The increased aloofness of the administration of Saint Petersburg and constant personnel changes have not aided the development of relations either. A senior official at the Helsinki City Hall confessed to me in the fall of 2014 that he did not know with whom he should engage in dialogue or whether his Russian colleague would remain in office for long.

As representatives of Russian-Finnish organizations claim during private conversations, the Russian party in particular did not seek communication. Piotr Marciniak, the Consul General of Poland shared a similar view in summer 2015: “Officials believe that Russia can live independently and that nothing can be gained by having partners. There are a number of events of an international nature happening in Saint Petersburg but one cannot help but suspect that there are no real proposals for cooperation behind them”.

The new situation of “non-friendship” with the West was recorded by the participants of the European Biennial of Contemporary Art “Manifesto-10”, among others. It was first established in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and was hosted by Saint Petersburg in 2014. The authorities limited themselves to official words of welcome although they were main project partners. The main Biennial program coincided with the escalation of hostilities in the Donbas and soured relations were conceptualized by the installation of the Estonian artist Flo Kasearu – war planes from rusty corrugated iron on the Neva wharf.

The ambivalent situation

The regional authorities have ultimately failed to present Saint Petersburg and Kaliningrad as part of greater Europe, having corresponding economic and transport potential. In the case of Kaliningrad, it is not only about relations with the EU but also with Moscow. The Kaliningrad elite has long insisted on the adoption of a law on the special status of the region which would document the intermediary status of the region including its customs privileges.

Officially, Saint Petersburg is part of the Scandinavian logistic corridor Stockholm-Turku-Helsinki. However, infrastructure on the Russian side is not of European standard and transportation levels have dropped over the last two years and prospects of a resurgence are currently rather slim.

The Rail Baltica project of the rail corridor which will link Helsinki, Warsaw and Berlin is critical for the Baltic region. It has been discussed without any Russian involvement. Admittedly, rail transport between North-West Russia and the EU had been enjoying period of high activity prior to the 2014 crisis. However, Saint Petersburg’s Pulkovo airport has not been turned into an international hub even against the backdrop of the actively promoted “turn to the East” project. Helsinki airport is the transshipment terminal between Europe and Asia. Riga and not Kaliningrad has become a relatively large aviation hub on the route from Central Europe to Scandinavia and Russia.

As of August 2016, relations between European countries and their Russian partners in border regions have been put on standby. Representatives of the elite try to maintain personal relationships and attempt to avoid
antagonizing each other whenever possible. At the same time, no party is prepared to seriously discuss new projects or resume frozen projects until such time that sanctions are lifted and international relations are normalized.

Tags
Poland
Finland
Baltic
sankt peterburg
EU
Category
Russia / Europe

© Intersection - for republishing rights, please contact the editorial team at intersection@intersectionproject.eu