

Cross-border Regionalization and the Finnish-Swedish Border

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Abstract: In the modern system of nation-states, border regions represent peripheral and often problematic regions. European integration and increased border permeability have changed state-centric and differentiative development in many border regions, and there has been a shift toward cross-border networking and collaboration. The aim of this paper is to examine the changes that this 'cross-border regionalization' has brought on the Finnish-Swedish border landscape in the Tornio Valley region, and the motives for the development of cross-border enterprise.

National borders and cross-border regionalization

In the process of nation-building border regions have been integrated to national centre and cross-border connections have decreased, which have left these regions in a rather peripheral and marginal position. Especially in the case of low border permeability, there are often restricted possibilities to cooperate, and the infrastructure and industries in the border region are developed from a state-centric perspective. The differentiating influence of state borders can be seen even in border regions that historically have been culturally and ethnically coherent. Borders and boundaries become materialized in the cultural landscape, land use, and the development of infrastructures, as the internal social and economic processes of a state often change over time and reflect the spatial organization of border zones (Minghi & Julian 1991). Border infrastructure and restrictions are a direct manifestation of borders, but national borders also influence the social and cultural

practices of a border region. The process of 'spatial socialization', whereby people in border regions are integrated into their own nation and territory by means of education and other state institutions extends the border into the everyday practices and mindscape of people (Paasi 1996).

In many ways, the creation of 'the Europe of citizens' can be compared to a nation-building process, for in both of these political 'projects' politics and officials actively promote geographical and social integration (Shore 2004; see also McNeil 2004). It has been argued that the ongoing integration process embodies the political project, where the goal is to bring enterprise and decision making to the regional level and by this mean promote cooperation and regional competitiveness (McNeil 2004). This consists of the intersection of the elite-driven political project and the 'new regionalization', the exceeded bottom-up regionalism, and forms of governance where the sovereign state is no longer the primary anchor of political regulation. Instead, there is plurality of coexisting networks and partnership at diverse spatial scales (Jessop 1995; Keating 1998).

A cross-border region can be conceptualized as “a territorial unit that comprises contiguous sub-national units from two or more nation-states” (Perkmann & Sum 2002: 3). The cross-border regionalization process that is taking place in the European Union changes the functions and hierarchies of international borders and the spatial organization of border landscapes (see Häkli, 2004; Anderson & al. 2003; Bucken-Knapp 2003; O’Down 2003; Perkmann & Sum 2002). The cross-border regionalization process is not identical and simultaneous in all European cross-border regions, however research indicates that it takes comparable forms even in quite different border contexts. Neither is it identical in all layers of social processes (see Giaoutzi & al. 1993), but economic and political changes in these regions are often occurring faster than cultural and social identifications.

The cross-border regionalization process is mutual because it is both internally driven by regional authors and policy and externally driven through European integration policy. Either way it is ideologically legitimized as, in some ways, a return to an historical conception of Europe, whereby regions were principally political entities as opposed to modern nation-states (McNeil 2004; Paasi 2001; Applegate 1999; Anderson 1996). In the discourse of cross-border regionalization, regions are understood as more advantageous natural economic spaces than states. Legendijk (2005) identifies the leading stories of regionalization in terms of regional competitiveness, governance, sustainability and identity. Cross-border collaboration is understood as a means to increase regional competitiveness, sustainability and to strengthen regional identity. One indicator of such development

is cross-border cooperation projects that are directed not only at different branches of industries, but also towards cultural activities that help to mediate to alternative perceptions of the border landscape. Accordingly it has become common to use metaphors like ‘laboratory’ and ‘observatory’ when referring to European border regions, where new and varied regionalization and integration processes arise (see for example Knippenberg 2004; O’Dowd 2003; Kaplan & Häkli 2002; Bufon 1996).

On the other hand, as Jensen and Richardson (2004: 10) announce, pointing to the Öresund region and the infrastructure project that built a direct road and railway link across the Öresund Strait, linking Sweden and Denmark and Scandinavia and Europe: “We can build bridges, but bridges have different meanings, especially when they can bind new regions, cross borders, form key links in international networks, or simply allow a person to get to work in a previously inaccessible location.” European cross-border regionalization is not a simultaneous and monotonic process, but it takes different forms and meanings in different border regions and in different branches of industry. Moreover, it is not only state structures that shape border environments, for local people may contest and utilize border landscape in their own ways.

Research area and the aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to examine the transformation of the Finnish-Swedish border in the Tornio Valley and the motives for developing cross-border enterprise. The Tornio Valley cross-border region on

the Finnish-Swedish border (Figure 1) is an *ad hoc* region that is defined differently in different contexts, yet normally it is described as a peaceful region where boundaries are open (see Hansegård 1990: 9, Prokkola 2004). The region can be identified by considering two principles: first conceptualisation as a natural scientific region based on Tornio river water system and second as a historical linguistic-cultural region where Finnish has specific dialect varieties (Vaattovaara 2003). Usually, recent administrative districts assigned “Tornio Valley”, cover the border municipalities on both sides of the Finnish-Swedish border, but the name has been widely used in different projects covering the area from North Norway to Oulu in Finland and to Luleå in Sweden (Cross-border Tornedalen

2007). In this paper, the Tornio Valley region refers to the politically determined cross-border area in the context of the North Calotte INTERREG sub-program (Interreg IIIA Nord 2007).

The examination is based on policy documents and regional literature. The policy documents and reports selected were connected with cross-border enterprise especially with INTERREG projects. Selected established and on ongoing co-operation projects between Finnish and Swedish actors in the Tornio Valley are governed under the INTERREG IIIA Nord – program (see Interreg IIIA Nord 2007). The analysis of these policy documents focuses on the discourse of cross-border collaboration and its motives in the Tornio Valley region.

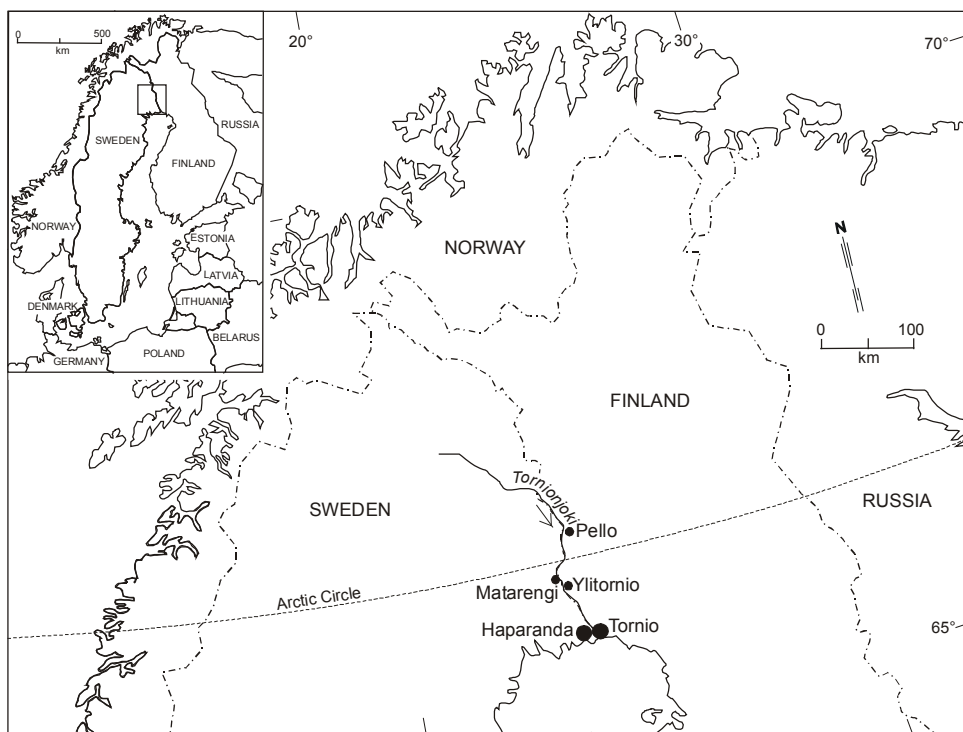


Figure 1. The Finnish-Swedish border and the Tornio Valley region

The demand for cross-border enterprise in the Tornio Valley region

There has always been habitual interaction across the Finnish-Swedish border in the Tornio Valley region, but ambitions and possibilities for wide-ranging official co-operation have been rather low. However there has been some official collaboration in the context of the North Calotte Commission and even between local municipalities since late 1960s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and after Finland and Sweden joined the European Union in 1995, differing national images of the border have gradually dissolved and the level of institutional cross-border co-operation has increased. The last hindrances to mobility across the border were removed after the Schengen Agreement came into force in 2001. After border control was removed both local people and tourists could move from one country to another without any restrictions, and the national border is now understood not as hindrance, but as a resource.

Cross-border co-operation on the Finnish-Swedish border has been intensified and institutionalised since both countries became members of the European Union. Cross-border co-operation has become networked at the European level, and there are several border-related institutions that create new operational environments and generate discussion about the development of border regions (see Wastl-Walter & Kofler 2000). Since international borders are now considered to be a hindrance for social and economic development both in the European integration discourse, and at the local level, it has become an important goal to revitalize the old historical

connections and to reorganize the political landscape of the region. In this regard the available INTERREG- project funding from the European Structural Funds motivates officials and other local activists to search for partnerships across the border and to develop cross border infrastructure. Project initiatives are made by regional developers, entrepreneurs and many other activists. On the other hand governmental institutions (the Regional Council of Lapland, Norrbotten County Council) determine the principles for development, e.g. when creating project indicators of various kinds (see INTERREG III A 2002).

The development of cross-border regions is often linked with different forms of cross-border cooperation and involves the simultaneous combination of different factors. The further development of the Tornio Valley cross-border region in the context of the European union can be understood, following Jessop's (2002: 37-42) specifications, as the resurgence of 'suppressed historical economic space'. In this regional discourse it is underlined that when the border was established in 1809, it split a culturally and linguistically homogenous region, and a famous old trade route to the Arctic Sea became the border river. Especially during the 1700s the region and the Tornio marketplace was a quite prosperous 'natural' economic centre. After the border was established trade shifted from a north-south to an east-west direction inside the nation-state borders (e.g. Lähteenmäki 2004). Consequently unnatural development was forced on the region by central state administration, and local people had to adjust themselves to the new situation.

Motives for co-operation in the Finnish-Swedish border region can be found in peripheral locations in relation to national centres, and in the regional changes, which have brought new demands for economical efficiency and competitiveness in municipalities. Municipalities in the northern peripheral regions are facing problems in sustaining basic infrastructure and services because the population is decreasing and the population distribution unbalanced. In the Tornio Valley similar development occurs on both the Finnish and Swedish sides of the border. On the Swedish side the number of population has decreased since the 1950s, while in Finland the mass movement to cities (and to Sweden) began later in the 1960s and 1970s. The new mass movement from the Finnish countryside began in the last decade. Municipalities have also faced high unemployment since economic recession in the 1990s. Employment in the region has not reverted to the level before the recession and the percentage of unemployed persons remains high. The movement to the southern urban centres is strong in both countries, but especially on the Swedish side, where the municipalities of Kiruna, Pajala and Övertorneå have lost more than 25 percent of their population since the late 1960s (Facts about Norrbotten 2004). These are the biggest concerns in the region not least because of their influence on wider economical structure and basic services. In the open border context regional development at the other side of the border influences and perhaps also motivates the other side and that must also be taken into consideration in regional planning.

Another element contributing to the (re)emergence of region is the Tornio

Valley's shared peripheral status in which solution is searched from the creation of new 'functional economic space' (cf. Jessop 2002) since the 1980s. Here it is possible to approach cross-border regionalisation as a reaction to uneven development linked to a weakened regional policy and structural changes in periphery. Municipalities are forced to search for partners to sustain basic services and to overcome regional competitiveness. Environmental problems concerning the border river and waste water are resolved with a common refinery, and health care and rescue work are organized, in partly, in cooperation. Since both countries became EU members in 1995, the number of cross-border cooperation branches increased and the regionalisation process has become a conscious target that is actively promoted. This can be seen in infrastructural and other spatial planning initiatives as in the cross-border planning project TOMA, where officials learned about land use regulations in the neighbouring state, negotiated common principles for regional development and land use and simultaneously created a social network of specialists and authorities (Persson-Puurula & Piekkari 2000).

The most well known and ambitious cross-border plans concerns the twin cities of Haparanda and Tornio, where the final vision is an international city centre that is under common administration. The project, 'On the Border', is continuing although the citizens in Haparanda voted against the cross-border incorporation. High labour mobility, effective business networks and the founding of the EuroCity under the same administration are the future visions of the regional decision makers (see for example Cross-border Tornedalen 2007; Eurocity 2004).

In several branches, efforts are made to ‘undermine the national scale’ (cf. Jessop 2002), and funding is sought from the European foundations. Regional politicians and decision makers in particular strive for a cross-border region in the context of “the Europe of Regions”. The cities of Tornio and Haparanda are considered to be the trend-setters in the Tornio Valley region, but there has been intense collaboration in other cross-border municipalities in the organization of communal services such as education, health care and various free-time activities.

Although interaction and relations across the Finnish-Swedish border have continuously existed, especially in the context of the Scandinavian North-Calotte co-operation, the creation of the Tornio Valley cross-border region has now become a specific objective of EU policy, instead of being “spontaneous, natural economic territory” (Jessop 2002: 37). In many respects the development and means for cross-border cooperation in the Tornio Valley region since the 1960s can be compared with other west-European border regions (Eder & Sandtner 2002; Markusse 2004; Kaplan 2002; Knippenberg 2004; Bucken-Knapp 2003). However, the Tornio Valley’s location at the northern periphery, the arctic circumstances, and lack of economic growth, differentiates it from the more prosperous and central cross-border areas.

Different interest groups in the region are participating in these regionalization processes in different ways, utilizing these for their own purposes. If national funding is not available for regional development projects, local actors try to attain money from the Community (cf. Jenson &

Richardson 2004: 107). The international border is also negotiated quite differently among different actors, for some may prefer cross-border networking while others are more interested in national affairs (Prokkola 2007). On the other hand, the recent alteration of the Finnish-Swedish border environment also creates new social spaces and new possibilities for action, new spaces of access and enclosure that also change social relations and identities. For the local people in the Tornio Valley region some shared places have in fact always existed, but now these kinds of places are commercialized. Such a remaking of the cross-border landscapes reflects the change in co-operation orientation and growing regional consciousness, as regional identity building across the national border has become a calculated goal for many projects, together with increasing orientation towards non-local audiences.

Conclusions

It has been argued that the demand for cross-border collaboration is strongest in old and rural border regions (Bufon 2003: 178) and the Tornio Valley region fulfills both criteria. Cross-border regionalization and institutions are still rather sparse when compared with national institutions and identification. There have been two hundred years of differentiation between the Finnish and Swedish regions, and existing networks are in great measure state-centric. Continuity in regional development may mean that such existing nationally-orientated linkages will also constitute the base for development in the future.

Such factors are rather permanent, hence national borders as a hindrance to regional development are not easily removed or manageable.

Cross-border regionalization alone is not the answer to regional problems such as population decrease and unemployment. Due to the peripheral location of the areas of low population density, cross-border enterprise may not bring remarkable profits even if there are high expectations in many industries such as tourism. It has been noted that in rural regions the expectations are often unrealistic (Saarinen 2006) which may also complicate cross-border collaboration. On the other hand, it is not only the interest of local people which motivate collaborative place-making, but the interest and support directed to such cross-border enterprises from abroad. The conclusion of this paper is that geographical proximity and a long tradition of collaboration support the development of the cross-border region, but there are many cultural and social factors which suggest that cross-border regionalization will remain rather unprofound from the perspective of most inhabitants.

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