



*Several towns at borders in northern Europe have joined pairs to intensify cross-border collaboration. They have also formed the City Twin Association to further their interests and to exchange ideas.*

*Kirkenes in northern Norway and nearby Russian town of Nikel have recently signed a memorandum declaring their intention to develop their joint projects in the spirit of European twin cities.*

## THE MODEL OF TWIN CITIES EXPERIENCES FROM NORTHERN EUROPE

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### The Role of Cities

Trans-border and cross-border cooperation in a globalizing world takes many forms and engages a broad variety of actors and venues. Northeast Europe adds, in this regard, a rather unique and helpful experience as exemplified by the Barents and Baltic Sea regions, or initiatives such as the EU policy the Northern Dimension. It may be noted, however, that the frame and conditions of cooperation are not stable and unchanging. Instead, and owing to political and economic changes since the early 1990's, some aspects have recently been rethought with a new Northern Dimension policy emerging.

Cities have for their part, as a bottom-up movement, significantly contributed to the emergence of rather dense patterns of cooperation. They have formalized this through the Union of Baltic Cities (UBS), projects such as the Baltic Palette or by joining networks of twinning, i.e. a rather

extensive network of 'sister' cities. For those cities located on their respective sides of a state border, the option of establishing a bond of twin cities has been available as well. With some cases being present in northern Europe, this opportunity has also added positively to Russia's relations with its European neighbours.



Kirkenes after the return of day-light in late winter.



Cross-border city pairs discussed in this article.

## The City Twin Association

Notably, the twin cities do not just form individual pairs; their cooperation has evolved into more collective and institutional forms. In order to learn from each other through networking and with the aim of promoting joint interests in a European context, a number of city twins located in North Eastern Europe came together in 2004. The experiences gained then led to the establishment of the City Twins Association (CTA) in 2006.

Altogether 14 cities are associated with the CTA, including two cities located in Russia. They consist of Imatra-Svetogorsk, Narva-Ivangorod, Frankfurt (Oder)-Slubice, Görlitz-Zgorzelec, Tornio-Haparanda, Valka-Valga and Cieszyn-Cesky Tiesin. They aim, above all, at developing the brand of twin cities. The concept is useful when applying for funding of joint projects, to share experiences in problem-solving and in general in order to convert their border-related location, usually associated negatively with being on the periphery, into an asset. They endeavour, in essence, to contribute to a 'Wider Europe' on a local scale, although in reality they struggle with quite concrete issues in trying to enlarge their share of the benefits originating from cross-border activities (which usually tend

to serve non-local rather than local purposes).

In addition to local, regional and national financing, the Tacis and Interreg funding programmes have been key sources utilized in the activities of the CTA and the cooperation between twin cities more generally. Occasionally financing has been received from various international financing institutes such as the Nordic Investment Bank or the European Investment Bank. There are plans regarding the establishment of a new financial institution, the Northern Investment Bank, focusing on mutual projects between Russia and other North European entities.

## Tornio-Haparanda

Although operating by now within a rather well-established setting and regime of European cross-border co-operation, the competence, interests, problems and relevant infra-structures of the twin cities taking part vary considerably. In fact, they represent several different patterns of co-operation. In some cases the border and the conceptual umbrella of city twins has really developed into an asset – as in the case of the city pair of Tornio and Haparanda across the Finnish-Swedish border – whereas being located at the border still functions as an obstacle and a barrier in others.



The Orthodox Chapel in Tornio, Finland.

Tornio and Haparanda have developed a very explicit twin city strategy and have succeeded since the start in 1987 in bring-





The old fortresses of Narva and Ivangorod facing the bridge amid them across the Estonian-Russian border river.

ing about a considerable degree of mutual trust. They have created well-functioning cooperative relations conducive to solving a considerable number of very practical problems. These range from joint hospital and postal services, employment agencies, educational facilities, a common library to a joint fire brigade. A new and combined city core is being created, and they have succeeded in attracting investments and businesses (the recently established IKEA is a case in point). This has been achieved by offering jointly a much broader area of marketing, labour skills and various other competences than by just appearing on their own.

Despite the fact that the cooperation developed rather slowly initially and was labelled by problems rather than solutions, overall Tornio and Haparanda today show signs of being well on their way towards a quite integrated bicultural community. Increasingly, the border connects rather than divides them from each other, people, goods and ideas flow across it almost without restrictions.

### **Two Russian Cities**

Out of the various city pairs located in northern Europe, those of Narva-Ivangorod and Imatra-Svetogorsk are the ones that also involve a Russian city.

Although they did have their respective city administrations, Narva and Ivangorod formed a rather integrated social and cultural space during the Soviet period. This

changed considerably in 1991 with the Narva River reappearing in the role of delimiting a state border. The divorce between the two cities was in many ways – in view of their far-reaching earlier togetherness – contentious. Previously integrated systems were torn apart in spheres such as municipal water supply and waste water treatment. Only gradually has a dialogue been re-established, this then also amounting to a considerable number of joint activities and projects in the spheres of culture, tourism, employment, simplified border-crossing, spatial planning and infrastructure. For good reasons, re-creating trust not only among decision-makers but with the public at large constitutes an important aspect of cooperation between the two cities.

Being part of the CTA has been quite conducive to the process. It has provided a frame and an umbrella acceptable to various parties. The brand of twin cities increasingly conveys an innovative image that is very different – if not opposite – to the one which prevailed during the first part of the 1990s. Cooperation has been facilitated by a special visa-exchange arrangement between Narva and Ivangorod that provides 4000 multiple entry visas on discount conditions to those involved in supporting the activity of cross-border cooperation. New regulations allow people to simply walk across the border instead of having to travel in a vehicle as is the general rule. Other concrete projects have con-

sisted of development and promotion of tourist routes in the Narva River basin, establishment of a joint tourist route covering the two fortresses on their respective side of the river, plugging in the partners into the Baltic Sea small harbours network and developing a joint water tourist route.



One of the dams of the Imatra hydro-power plant on the Vuoksi river.

### **The Case of Imatra-Svetogorsk**

Imatra and Svetogorsk represent a different case in the EU-Russia relations. They are unique in terms of their location. This is the only place on the EU-Russia border where both rail and automobile border crossings are situated. Prior to the EU enlargement of 2004 it was the only region at the EU-Russian frontier where the boundary separated two adjacent urban settlements from each other.

The urbanised area is located on the banks of the river Vuoksi (*Vuoksa* in Russian), which is the outlet of Finland's largest lake (Saimaa), flowing across the border to Europe's largest lake (Ladoga). About two-thirds of the urban population lives on the Finnish side (Imatra: 29 000 inhabitants) and one-third on the Russian side (Svetogorsk: 15 500 inhabitants, although the surrounding Lesogorsk (3 800 inhabitants) will be become part of Svetogorsk in 2010. Another unique element of the region is its striking asymmetry. For example, the economic disparity at the Finnish-Russian border in terms of GDP per capita is greater than in any other EU-Russia border region. On the other hand, its border location and the existence of a relatively well-developed transport infrastructure turn the region

into a natural attraction for potential international business projects.

### **Towards Structured Cooperation**

In the early 1990s, local level cooperation took quite spontaneous and often somewhat chaotic forms. Many individuals and various organisations tried to use the opportunity to visit the other side of the border, and to launch various small-scale joint collaborative activities. The next important step was the "Imsveto" project. It aspired at developing an industrial park in Svetogorsk. This project, prepared by the Imatra Regional Development Company, aimed at being a pilot stage in the development of a zone of joint entrepreneurship. However, it never really materialised in the turbulent circumstances of that time.

In any case, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Imatra and Svetogorsk signed a cooperation agreement, but the actual practices proceeded slowly and remained fragmentary in the early years. One concrete aspect of togetherness consists of a paper mill (the American-owned International Paper Ltd, previously Svetogorsk Mill) being located on the Russia side with some of the employees commuting daily across the border. According to available information, some 60 (of those living on the Finnish side) persons commute regularly across the border. One has to pass the border in a vehicle; although bikes are included in that category (one joint project has consisted of constructing biking lanes).

Finland's accession to the EU made the Union's funds for regional Cross Border Cooperation (CBC) available. Of the EU financial instruments, Imatra and Svetogorsk have utilised both Interreg and Tacis CBC funding in projects dealing with issues such as improving the waste water treatment system and energy services in Svetogorsk, quality of water and fish stocks in the Vuoksi River, educational projects, tourism infrastructure, municipal government, and more recently, health and security issues.





The Norwegian customs station on the Storskog border-crossing between Russia and Norway.

The visa regime on the Finnish-Russian border remains a concern in the context of the twin city arrangement, although several categories of Finnish and Russian citizens have been made eligible for getting multiple long-term visas. These may cover 2-5 years, and are for free, although the latter has not always been the case in practice. Long-term multiple visas are issued for: diplomats, businessmen/engineers with a frequent-traveller status, academics and students who are part of the inter-government or inter-university agreements, sportsmen and people in the cultural sector (artists, musicians, etc.). It may be noted that in the case of the Imatra-Svetogorsk border this system has been flexible enough to allow people to commute frequently across the border for work related reasons. Multiple visas for a year are easily available. Yet it would signal considerable progress if the twin-cities arrangement could produce leverage for establishing more flexible visa regimes that could allow more intensive people-to-people contacts to develop.

It may be noted, as to border-crossing, that Svetogorsk is located within the confines of a security-related border-zone. Yet it seems that this has in no way impacted cooperation between Imatra and Svetogorsk. Nobody from the Finnish side has been compelled to ask for a permission to visit the area, nor sanctioned for not having asked for such permission. Invitations from the Svetogorsk city authorities have been a valid reason for respective authorities to

grant a visa without any other authority interfering.

## The Funding of Projects

The EU has not constituted the only source of finance for local CBC projects. Some Finnish funds have been available as well. For instance, the monitoring of air quality in Svetogorsk has been voluntarily linked to the system regulated by Finnish law. The initiative for this arrangement originated from contacts between the Environmental Agency of Imatra and the Health Administration in Svetogorsk. The monitoring service was purchased by the Svetogorsk Mills from Imatra municipality. Along with the exchange programs for teachers, the air monitoring system ranks among the most institutionalised cross-border links there is between the two towns.

One additional factor that stimulated the local CBC was the municipal independence that Svetogorsk was granted from the Vyborg district in 1996. It has meant that Svetogorsk has got its own administrative competence and tax revenues to engage in CBC.

To enhance their cooperation Imatra and Svetogorsk launched a twin-city concept in 1998 that was supported by the EU Tacis CBC program. Initially, it mostly aimed at economic/industrial cooperation. In 2000 culture, tourism, sports and the development of civil society institutions (NGOs) were added to the list of priorities.



Frankfurt an der Oder, Germany, with its twin city Slubice across the river in Poland.

In general, Imatra and Svetogorsk have used twinning as an umbrella concept; it has covered activities and concerns forming

the focal areas of cooperation at each particular point in time. The concept of twin cities has not only provided the participants with a specific brand; it has also been helpful in developing trust among the partners in cooperation and to ground it more generally among the inhabitants of the two cities. Taking into account that the traditional mindset among dwellers of border regions often has favoured isolation and detachment rather than cooperation, this has constituted a very crucial aspect of twinning. Hence various cross-border seminars and other forms of bilateral togetherness should not be judged merely on the basis of its immediate and concrete results.

The key decision-making body of twinning in Imatra-Svetogorsk has consisted of a steering group with key members of respective administrations of the two towns onboard. In addition, the institutional setup includes a commission with representatives of various ministries in Finland and Russia taking part (although in practice the latter body has yielded little and has in reality been abandoned). As to the organizational structures, it may also be noted that the Russo-Finnish centres for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise's (SME) support operations both in Imatra and Svetogorsk.

### **A Joint Industrial Park**

In 1999, the idea to create the Russian-Finnish Key East Industrial Park (KEIP) in the neutral zone in the border-area was re-animated. The first deputy mayor of Svetogorsk, K. Patraev, was the driving force behind the initiative. An area spanning 136 hectares was designed for the project. Russian and Finnish experts prepared a draft of the intergovernmental agreement on the KEIP. The model drew upon the Russian-Korean special economic zone (SEZ) in Nakhodka. Potential investors were to gain tax and customs exemptions and, in fact, a visa-free regime was proposed. A single KEIP management system was suggested. In 2003, a tender for development of the park was announced and the Finnish investment company Skanska stood out as the prospective winner.

However, in 2006 the passing of two new Russian laws changed the circumstances. The new law on local government transferred issues related to industrial development, social security and education from municipalities to the regional level. Moreover, the new Russian law on Special Economic Zones (SEZ) has downplayed the municipal competences and transferred such issues largely back to the regional and federal levels of decision-making. Currently municipalities have the authority to create and operate areas up to three hectares.

The twin city strategy covering the years 2007-2013 informs that "the first companies have started their operations in the park," (consisting of a Russian company in the field of road-construction) and that a larger business park project has been launched. In order to bolster entrepreneurship, the plans also include items such as establishing a joint labour register.



The Northern Dimension of Cross Border Cities.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Cooperation across state borders, including the borders between Russia and the EU, has over the years developed into a well-established practice. Local actors such as cities have a prominent role in that context, with twin cities as one aspects of such an overall pattern.

It is to be observed that some of the cities that are part of such a category have succeeded in creating considerable dynamics by joining forces and using their location at a state border as an asset, despite histories of conflict, problematic legacies, and prevailing asymmetries. In other cases different potential and divergent interests

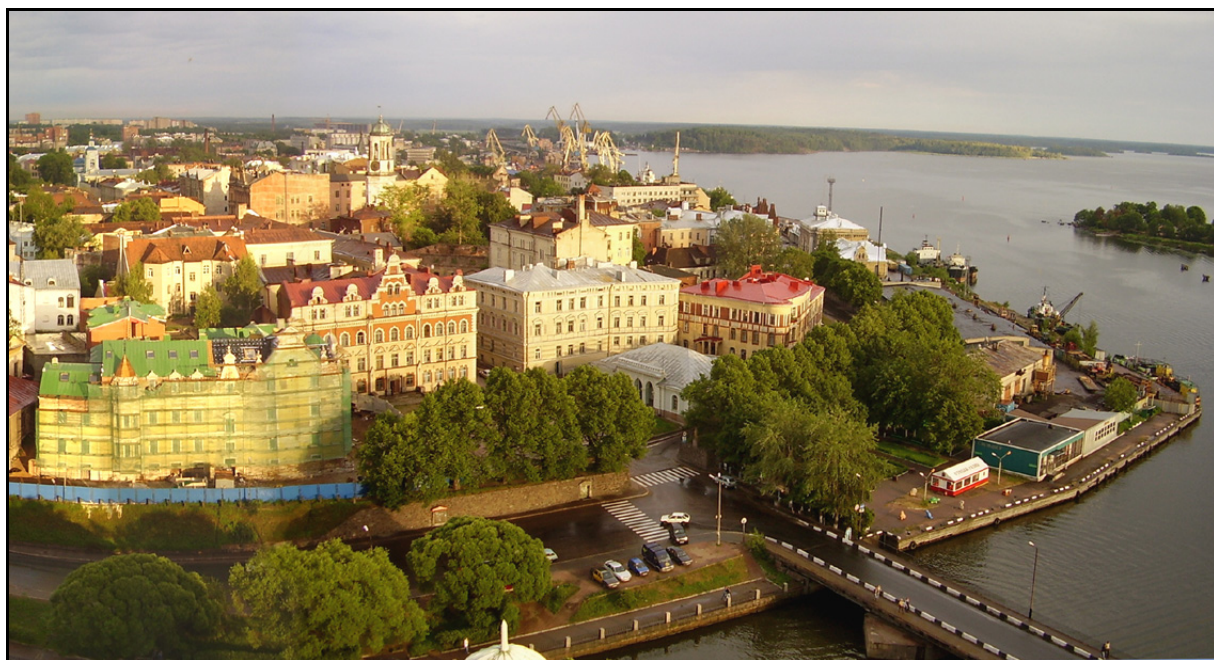


as well as tensions within a broader setting of relations have still made it difficult and time-consuming to exploit the opportunities offered by increasingly permeable borders.

As noted, also two Russian cities in northern Europe have joined the pattern in order to use the concept of city twins as a niche in their endeavours of development. There has been no decisive obstacle for joining in, although the experiences gained seem to point to that there are considerable hurdles to overcome before cooperation really yields tangible and mutually satisfactory results. However, a model has been established and neither Ivangorod nor Svetogorsk have shown signs of being overly critical of the experiences gained, or wanting to drop out. On the contrary, the various designs and long-term plans put forward seem to point to that an increasing amount of rather practical issues are being tackled and that the parties have been encouraged increasingly to think about themselves as twin cities. Gradually also societies at large have been drawn into the pattern of cooperation which is an important requirement for success in the longer run.

With networking and international contacts increasingly impacting the future of cities in very concrete terms, the twin city model quite probably has a future. More cities will join, and the brand will gain additional and presumably more concrete features.

This also goes for Northern Europe, although it is to be noted that with the recent revision of the Northern Dimension Initiative, the conditions for cooperation might to some extent be changing. With the NDI thus also turning into a concrete frame of cooperation, also cities located in the border region seem to be tempted to pool their resources under that umbrella. Thus also Imatra and Svetogorsk are on their way of joining a wider constellation called the Northern Dimension of Cross Border Cities, an arrangement amounting to a cross-border city conglomerate of some 250 000 inhabitants expanded to include other nearby towns such as Vyborg, Lappeenranta and Primorsk. Notably, the twin city identity does not disappear but it becomes part of a regional 'corridor' of cities reaching across the border, and might also as such be quite useful in a broader context.



The water-front on the Gulf of Finland of the Russian town of Vyborg (Viipuri) on the Karelian Isthmus.