



RUSSIAN MEDIA DEPICTIONS OF EU CROSS-BORDER INITIATIVES IN THE BALTICS

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Geopolitical Conflict and Cross-Border Cooperation between the EU and Russia: The Baltic States and Poland¹

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs represent, par excellence, possibilities for cooperation at the local level, even in a context of high geopolitical tension. Since January 2014, one non-political circumstance and two geopolitical events posed radical challenges for such projects: the global pandemic (2020-), Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), and Russia's war on Ukraine (2022). The pandemic undercut cross-border contacts; and the latter two events put Russia and the EU on a geopolitical collision course. This research assesses the interlinkage between high-level geopolitical tension and cooperation at the local level, with the goal of contributing to discussion of the thesis put forth by Dembinska, Merand, and Shtaltovna that "cooperation and conflict are not tightly coupled with the geopolitical level but also shaped by local dynamics of symbolic boundary making."²

After the Crimean annexation, the EU continued to support CBC initiatives with Russia, including four bilateral programs: Latvia-Russia, Estonia-Russia, Lithuania-Russia, and Poland-Russia (under ENI-CBC).³ Each was operative for the budgeting period 2014-2020 but many funded projects were expected to be completed only in 2022. The EU also announced the funding of similar CBC programs for 2021-2027. This suggests a possible 'autonomy of the local', as hypothesized by Dembinska, et al, where local cooperation can continue despite the presence of political tension at higher levels. The premise for continuing CBC cooperation after 2014 was the possibility of positively impacting the lives of people on both sides of the border as well as to promote people-to-people understanding between the EU and Russia, potentially shielding local interaction from geopolitical impacts. The academic literature on CBC, however, provides only limited evidence about measurable impacts of CBC on people-to-people understanding or perceptions of the EU in Russia.⁴

In contrast to the CBC programs examined here, one important cooperative cross-border initiative between Poland and the Russian Federation, was however, clearly impacted by the Crimea annexation. A special local border traffic regime took effect in July 2012, enabling visa-free travel between Kaliningrad oblast and adjacent Poland. This arrangement required a special derogation by the EU from the usual definition of border regions to permit all of Kaliningrad oblast to be included along with a larger area within Poland. Polish and Russian leaders had considered this initiative as a possible test-run for visa-free travel between Russia and the Schengen zone.⁵ The decision by the Polish government to suspend the special border regime

¹ This research is supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

² Magdalena Dembińska, Frédéric Mérand, and Anastasiya Shtaltovna (2020). "Conflict and Cooperation between Europe and Russia: The Autonomy of the Local." *East European Politics* 36 (4): 477–98, p. 492
doi:10.1080/21599165.2020.1784145.

³ Other programs involving Russia and Finland are not discussed in this memo.

⁴ Joan DeBardeleben & Dmitry Nechiporuk (2019) Diverging views of EU-Russian borders: points of congruence and difference in EU and Russian analyses, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 27:2, 196-207, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2018.1534727

⁵ Joan DeBardeleben, "New EU-Russian Borders after Enlargement: From Local to Transnational Linkages," in *Shifting Priorities in Russia's Foreign and Security Policy*, R. E. Kanet and R. Piet, eds. (Ashgate, 2014), pp. 73-94

based on security concerns in 2016 was opposed by some local officials in Poland.⁶ In this case, local cooperation was clearly disrupted by geopolitical tensions due to a national level decision

Using documentary materials, media analysis, this study assesses the link between high politics and the local level relation to cross-border (CBC) programs involving the Baltic states and Poland, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other in the 2014-2021 period when the geopolitical rupture was high but not cataclysmic as in 2022. Examination of Russian local and regional (oblast) media treatment of selected projects carried out within the CBC program has been undertaken. 93 articles were extracted through a targeted search of the Integrum database as well as other internet media sources. Currently analysis of EU Member State media is underway, and interviews with EU officials and EU-side program participants planned, while interviews on the Russian side are no longer feasible due repercussion of Russia’s unprovoked attack on Ukraine in February 2022.

As Table 1 shows, overall funding for the CBC projects is modest, with EU contributing about twice as much as the Russian Federation. Contribution levels of EU Member States and participating beneficiaries in the EU Member State vary. Despite overall modest funding levels, the grants provided to local participants are substantial and critical for achieving local program objectives.

Table 2 Funding for CBC Program in the Baltics, and Russian partner regions⁷

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland
Overall funding (millions €)	34.2	24.8	27.2	62.3
EU maximum contribution	16.8	15.8	17.0	41.6
Russian state contribution	8.4	7.9	8.5	20.7
EU Member States or co-financing contribution	9.0 (MS)	1.0 (MS)	1.7 (co-financing)	N/A
Russian regions involved	St. Petersburg Leningrad oblast Pskov oblast	Pskov oblast Leningrad oblast St. Petersburg	Kaliningrad oblast	Kaliningrad oblast

⁶ Iwona Sagan, Vladimir Kolosov, Dominika Studzińska, Maria Zotova, Alexander Sebentsov, and Kaludia Nowicka (2018), “The Local Border Traffic Zone Experiment as an Instruments of Cross-Border Integration: The Case of Polish-Russian Borderland,” *Geographia Polonica* 91 (1), p. 108

⁷ Information derived from the CBC websites: <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/>; <https://www.estoniarussia.eu/>; <https://www.plru.eu/>; <https://latruscbc.eu/>

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Most of the projects supported by the CBC program are of a technical or non-political nature. (See Table 2). Even those in the category of local and regional good governance have a primarily non-political, sectoral character, and do not appear to address decision-making processes or public input. Only two projects carried out in Lithuania appear to deal with these themes.⁸

Table 2. Themes of CBC Projects⁹

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland
Large Infrastructure	(2)	(4)	4	3
Business; small-medium enterprise (SMEP) development	13	10		
Environment; climate change; associated public health	12			10
Border management/security; accessible regions; mobility		2		4
Local culture; historical heritage; associated tourism			13	14
Social inclusion; community-led initiative; health			7	
Local and regional good governance	10	9	4	
TOTAL	25	32	24+4	28+3

The analysis of Russia media coverage of these projects and of the CBC program overall indeed suggests insulation of the CBC programs from the larger geopolitical context during the study period (2018-2021). Only 7% of the articles mentioned any problems and these had to do with routine issues such as funding or border/visa problems; even the pandemic was only mentioned twice. Thus, there was sharp disjunction between the general rupture in EU-Russia relations and the depiction of day-to-day CBC activities on the ground; even expected problems of normal project operation were ignored. This might appear to be consistent with the ‘autonomy of the

⁸ These projects are: “Promotion of active dialogue between local authorities and civil societies as foundation of modern self-government in Šilalė and Slavsk”, <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/projects/approved-projects-of-the-1-call-for-proposals/lt-ru-1-019/1242>; and” Electronic democracy - prerequisite for effective dialogue between local authorities and citizens of Pagėgiai and Sovetsk,” <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/projects/approved-projects-of-the-2-call-for-proposals/lt-ru-2-058/1308>

⁹ Information derived from the CBC websites: <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/>; <https://www.estoniarussia.eu/>; <https://www.plru.eu/>; <https://latruscbc.eu/>.

local' thesis. However, on closer reflection the meaning of this disjunction is more ambiguous. Only 19% of the articles identified the EU as a funding source and only 34% mentioned the EU at all. The articles generally emphasized only Russian benefits rather than mutual benefits. The reporting appeared to occur in a geopolitical vacuum. The articles suggest a shielding of the public from the reality of the program funding and origin (an EU initiative), while giving credit to the Russian government, which is mentioned as a funding source twice as often as the EU.

On March 4, 2022, in response to Russia's war on Ukraine, the European Commission suspended CBC cooperation programs with Russia and Belarus, indicating a sharp hardening of approach.¹⁰ No further payments are to be made to the Russian or Belarusian sides nor are activities to be carried out with them under 2014-2020 ENI-CBC projects; the 2021-2027 program is suspended. However, EU-side participants may continue their activities, with funding available.¹¹ At the same time, the Commission expressed an intention to strengthen cross-border initiatives between EU Members States (e.g., Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia) and Ukraine.

The analysis suggests that geopolitical circumstances can, under extreme circumstances, severely interfere with local dynamics that may promote cooperation in international relations; this may occur through the actions and decisions of higher-level authorities (whether at the EU or national level) that suspend or alter the conditions of such programs. However, in the face of less severe geopolitical tension local cross-border initiatives can proceed relatively undisturbed, particularly if they have a non-political nature, which national or EU authorities may view as having some functional elements. In the cases examined, however, such local cooperative mechanisms did not provide an effective shield or counterbalance to higher geopolitical tension as might have occurred in a less adversarial environment. These findings, therefore, suggest only conditional support for the 'autonomy of the local' thesis.

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¹⁰ See European Commission, "Commission suspends cross-border cooperation and Transnational cooperation with Russia and Belarus, Press release, March 4, 2022,

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_1526

¹¹ E.g., see the project websites: <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/news/recommendations-for-the-beneficiaries-from-lithuania/1875>; <https://latruscbc.eu/meeting-ec-eni-cbc-programmes/>; <https://www.estoniarussia.eu/>; <https://www.plru.eu/en/news/>