



A Respite from Geopolitical Tension? Russian Media Depictions of Cross-Border Cooperation with the EU 2014-2021¹

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Abstract

This article explores the hypothesis that geopolitical tensions at the macro level (e.g., between the EU and Russia) may be mirrored differently at the national and local levels. Despite the general EU freeze in relations with Russia after the Crimean annexation of 2014 until March 2022, the EU continued to provide support for cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs at the local level between actors in Russia and those EU states that border Russia. The paper examines the manner in which CBC initiatives with the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) were treated in Russian media in the period following the 2014 Ukraine crisis until 2021. The purpose of the media analysis is to determine the extent to which the Russian side made a linkage between local cooperation and geopolitical tensions, with Polish media coverage providing a comparative reference point. The analysis finds that while geopolitical events can, under extreme circumstances, severely interfere with local dynamics that may promote cooperation in international relations, in the face of less severe geopolitical tension, local cross-border initiatives can proceed relatively undisturbed, particularly if they have a non-political nature.

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The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea adversely affected almost all aspects of relations between the European Union (EU) and Russia. Sanctions were implemented, renewed, and ramped up over time on the EU side. Meanwhile, Russia followed suit with counter-sanctions. Most aspects of the relationship were effectively frozen despite some continuing high-level diplomatic contacts. Particularly in the Baltic states and Poland, where historical legacies bred suspicion of Russia, the sense of political vulnerability to Russian hybrid warfare threats sharpened in the face of Russian misinformation and the mobilization of irregular migration at EU borders by Belarus and Russia (Government of the Republic of Poland 2021; Radin 2017). However, in this highly politicized and tense geopolitical environment, some elements of cooperation remained. Some of these were fostered by economic realities and interests. Energy exports to many EU member states were maintained, and the development of the Nordstream pipeline from Russia to Germany continued despite protests from Poland and the Baltic states. Other areas of cooperation were continued on the EU side, in part to promote ‘people-to-people contacts’ in line with the long-standing hope of creating a human foundation for positive relations and to improve the lives of border residents. These areas of cooperation included various EU-funded academic programs that remained open to Russian participants and the EU’s cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs with Russia, with support from EU funding.

The continuation of EU-Russia CBC programs between 2014 and March 2022 presents fruitful ground to explore whether and how geopolitical tensions filter down to the local level, particularly in border regions, where historic linkages have not only created difficult historical legacies but also, in some cases, possibilities for sustained good relations. Dembińska, Mérand, and Shtaltovna (2020) have put forth the notion of the “autonomy of the local,” positing that “cooperation and conflict are not tightly coupled with the geopolitical level but also shaped by local dynamics of symbolic boundary making” (492). Indeed, the maintenance of the EU’s support for CBC initiatives until March 2022 made space for a possible “autonomy of the local” to assert itself, as hypothesized by Dembińska, Mérand, and Shtaltovna (2020, 492); CBC cooperation could potentially both reflect and support more positive local definitions of cross-border identities and linkages, despite the presence of political tension at higher levels. It is the purpose of the article to make a contribution to assessing whether CBC programs in this period of high political tension reinforced or manifested the “autonomy of the local” (Dembińska, Mérand, and Shtaltovna 2020).

In assessing whether this is the case, it is important to understand how those programs and associated cooperation efforts were represented and discussed in the public sphere in these border regions. Direct participants in CBC projects are limited in number, and while some CBC projects may offer benefits that affect a larger proportion of the population (e.g., in terms of the material outputs), any broader cultural or political influence would depend on the public having knowledge of the programs and an appreciation of their local significance. Using the lens of media analysis, this article explores whether and how the geopolitical conflict between the EU and Russia between 2014 and 2022 was reflected in public discourse about CBC in Russia and whether these media depictions may have nurtured and reflected a distinct local understanding of symbolic boundaries, thus supporting the thesis of “the autonomy of the local.”

The focus of the analysis in this article is on CBC projects between Russia and the four EU member states bordering Russia that joined the EU in 2004 (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland). All of these states had a history of conflict with Russia, the three Baltic states having been forcibly included in the USSR after World War II and Poland, while not part of the USSR, being subjugated within the Soviet bloc; parts of Poland had also been subject to previous Russian control. Political

discourse between these countries has been imbued with a strong overlay of geopolitical tension, augmented by particularly contentious events in the post-Cold War period. Examples include the Bronze Soldier controversy of 2007, when Estonian authorities relocated a Soviet war memorial from the centre of Tallinn, and the crash of a Polish plane carrying high-level Polish officials near Smolensk, Russia, in 2010, for which many Poles blamed Russia. Other points of controversy between Russia, on the one hand, and Estonia and Latvia, on the other, involve the rights of Russian speakers in the latter countries. The reception of Belarusian dissidents by these countries, particularly by Lithuania and Poland, has added to the overlay of tension in those relationships. The analysis excludes another EU country, Finland, which also shares an extensive border with Russia, because the political dynamic between Finland and Russia has, until recently, been quite different, involving a more accommodative position taken by the Finnish leadership, reflected in Finland's previous abstention from NATO membership.³

After the annexation of Crimea and up until March 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine, the EU continued to support CBC initiatives with Russia, including four bilateral programs under the European Neighbourhood Instrument Cross-Border Cooperation (ENI-CBC) program: Latvia-Russia, Estonia-Russia, Lithuania-Russia, and Poland-Russia, as well as programs involving Russia and Finland.⁴ These CBC projects with Russia operated for the 2014–2020 EU budgeting period alongside some multilateral CBC carry-over projects being completed from the 2007–2013 budgeting period. Many projects from the 2014–2020 budget period were still in the implementation stage at the beginning of 2022, although some were completed, with the exception of final reporting. Although the EU also had announced the funding of similar CBC programs for 2021–2027, and plans for the funding competitions were already underway, 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 (European Commission 2022). No further payments would be made to the Russian side, nor were associated activities to be carried out in cooperation with Russian participants; the 2021–2027 programs with Russia were also suspended. Participants on the EU side were permitted to continue their activities in their own countries with the funding available. At the same time, the Commission expressed an intention to strengthen cross-border initiatives between EU member states (e.g., Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia) and Ukraine. In November 2022, a regulation of the European Parliament and Council was published with provisions of operation following the program suspension (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2022). While geopolitical realities clearly affected

³ Finland applied for NATO membership on May 17, 2022, and was admitted on April 4, 2023 (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2023).

⁴ Programs involving Russia and Finland are not discussed in this article. See the following project websites for the programs in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Some of these web pages have been renamed since 2022 or are now archived. The Lithuanian program website does not display a name. It is possible that further changes will be made after the publication of this article or that program materials may be archived at a different location.

The ministry (national authority) under which the program operated is indicated in parentheses after the web address where the ministry is not indicated as the contact for the website: Joint Technical Secretariat, State Shared Service Centre. "Estonian EU External Border Programme." Accessed March 21, 2024. <https://www.estoniarussia.eu/> (Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Development of Estonia); Joint Technical Secretariat. Lithuanian program (untitled website). n.d. Accessed March 21, 2024. <https://eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/>. (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania); Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Latvia. "Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020." Accessed March 21, 2024. <https://latruscbc.eu/>; Joint Technical Secretariat, Centre of European Projects. "Poland-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014–2020." Accessed March 21, 2024. <https://www.plru.eu/en/news/> (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy of the Republic of Poland).

CBC cooperation from March 2022, its impact in the earlier period, from 2014 to 2021, is the subject of this study.

Methodology

Using documentary materials and media analysis, this study assesses the link between high politics and the local level in 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 as cataclysmic as after February 2022. In the post-March 2022 period, geopolitical events, namely Russia’s attack on Ukraine and the EU’s reaction to it, definitively disrupted any “autonomy of the local.” However, this may be an exceptional event that does not negate the thesis overall. The 2014–2022 period may be more typical of periods of significant but not paradigm-shifting tension.

Examining Russian media coverage of the CBC programs with the Baltic states and Poland allows us to assess the degree to which public discourse about them was imbued with geopolitical overtones. If so, this would suggest that geopolitical tensions are injected into the local sphere by political authorities, thus raising doubts about the “autonomy of the local” thesis. If such geopolitical themes are absent and there is an emphasis on local identity or symbolic synergies across the border, this would be consistent with the thesis.

Russian media articles for analysis were identified using the search utility of the post-Soviet digital archive Integrum World Wide as well as the Russian search engine Yandex; the period examined is from January 2018, when some projects started, to August 2021. The period in the lead-up to the March 2022 invasion is excluded because already in this period a markedly different level of geopolitical confrontation was present. The search terms used to identify relevant articles included general terminology about the CBC program overall, as well as information about a selection of CBC projects. For these projects, the search included the use of the project name, five to seven keywords relating to each of the selected projects, and geographic terms related to the projects. Articles where CBC or a particular project were mentioned only once with no elaboration or where the focus of the article was completely different were omitted from the analysis.

For Russian articles dealing with Polish-Russian cooperation, five particular projects were included in the project-specific search, along with a general search query for any project dealing with water quality issues, which was an important focus of several projects for the 2014–2020 period. For Estonia, eleven projects were included in the search, for Latvia, seven projects, and for Lithuania, the two projects relating to governance issues mentioned below. The criteria for including projects in the search were the following. Any of the projects that might, from their project description, be more likely to have a geopolitical reference point or political elements were included. Very few projects met this criterion, most notably the two Lithuanian-Russian projects mentioned above. Second, a range of different types of projects were included from the various thematic categories in Estonia, Latvia, and Poland, including environmental and water quality themes, heritage and cultural themes, and encouragement of business entrepreneurship. Ninety-three Russian media articles extracted for analysis from the Integrum database were considered relevant and were analyzed. This would not be the full universe of articles that mention CBC projects because the search was limited to specific parameters, as indicated above.

The selected articles were coded, following a check for cross-coder reliability between the author and a research assistant with native Russian language skills. Sources identified by the Yandex search are not included in the coding exercise at this point as there was a significant overlap with the Integrum search; also, many of these were very short news notices. However, some excerpts from these articles are discussed below. The coding scheme for the Integrum articles included indicators of the way in which the project or program is described, whether and in what way the EU or EU member states are mentioned, information provided about funding sources, information about partners on both sides, mentions of benefits and achievements, and of obstacles or problems.

As a point of comparison for the Russian media articles, an analysis of a selection of articles from Poland was undertaken.⁵ The search terms used included the locations of seven of the CBC projects that reflected a cross-section of sectors (i.e., those dealing with culture and history, environment and water quality, and transportation networks). The time frame for the search was January 2018–September 2021. The Factiva database was used, supplemented by Internet search tools of five local media sources in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Pomeranian voivodeships. The Factiva search yielded only 12 relevant articles. The search of local media was less successful due to the limitations of the media sources' search engines, yielding just four additional articles. The search was conducted and articles were coded by a research assistant proficient in the Polish language, using a similar coding scheme to that utilized for the Russian articles. The Polish selection is more limited than the Russian one, as the Factiva database does not provide as robust coverage for local media in Poland as does the Integrum database for Russia. It is, therefore, unwarranted to conclude that the CBC program got more limited media coverage in Poland than in Russia. In Poland, the program and its projects also received significant visibility through reports on the websites of local communes as well as through media outlets. The analysis of Polish media is not intended to be inclusive but to provide a point of comparative reference for the Russian media analysis.

A confounding variable for this study was the COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020. Completely apart from the geopolitical situation, the pandemic undercut cross-border contacts. The analysis remained sensitive to this complicating factor in reading media treatments of CBC programs.

Background and Theory

The CBC programs examined in this article are the most recent in a rich array of regional cooperation efforts in the Baltic Sea region between Russia and the EU. The previous EU-CBC program for the 2007–2013 EU budgeting period involved multi-state initiatives such as the Est-Lat-Rus program and the Lithuania-Poland-Russia program; some projects from this period were still in the stage of completion when the 2014 Ukraine crisis erupted. In addition, outside the purview of this article, the Council of Baltic Sea States has brought Russia together with several European countries for cooperation in a range of policy areas relevant to the Baltic Sea. For the 2014–2020 budget period, in addition to the CBC programs examined here, the EU supported other bilateral programs relating to Karelia, Kolarctic, and Russia-Southeast Finland. Russia earlier had participated in several Euroregions in the Baltic Sea area (Palmowski and Federov 2020). Federov (2020) mentions various agreements between Kaliningrad oblast' and various Polish voivodeships from the early 1990s. When the new Pomeranian and Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeships were

⁵ Media from the three Baltic states were not analyzed.

created in Poland in 1999, new agreements were signed, which also involved training local government officials and civil society development. In the post-2014 period, the freezing of relations, along with sanctions and counter-sanctions, led to a decrease in trade between Russia and the Baltic states in 2015–16 but with some areas of recovery from 2017–18 (Palmowski and Federov 2020).

In addition to CBC programs, a special EU local border traffic regime between Poland and Russia took effect in July 2012 and remained operative until 2016. This enabled visa-free travel between Kaliningrad oblast' (KO) in the Russian Federation and an extended border region in Poland (Żęgota 2021), a main benefit for KO residents being favourable shopping opportunities as well as tourism in Poland (Studzińska and Dunaj 2023). This arrangement required a special derogation from the EU's usual definition of border regions to permit all of KO to be included along with a larger than normal area within Poland. Some Polish and Russian leaders apparently considered this initiative as a possible test run for visa-free travel between Russia and the Schengen zone (DeBardeleben 2014). This special arrangement was suspended by the Polish side in 2016 on the basis of security concerns in the lead-up to the NATO summit to be held in Warsaw and the International Youth Days held in Krakow in July of that year (Kotowicz 2021). This decision injected the geopolitical squarely into the local (Sagan et al. 2018); Russia, on its side, reciprocated by also suspending the program (TASS 2016). Examination of Polish media coverage of the issue between 2018 and 2021 reveals that the continued suspension of the local border traffic regime by Polish authorities was quite controversial, with many calls by local officials and opposition political figures to reinstate the program (e.g., Sandecki 2019; Siegień 2019). Complaints included reduced economic benefits to border regions in Poland due to lower tourism income and less shopping by Russian visitors (Kurs 2021; Siegień 2019), as well as more limited possibilities for cross-border contacts. Along with COVID travel restrictions introduced in 2020 and restrictions placed by Poland and Lithuania on travel from Russia because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, opportunities for KO residents to travel to Europe were sharply reduced (Studzińska and Dunaj 2023). A less ambitious local border traffic mechanism had been in place between Latvia and Russia (Staalesen 2012); it remained operative until August 2, 2022, and was suspended by the Latvian side when Russia closed the Latvian consulate in Pskov that issued the permits (*Kommersant* 2022; Lebedeva 2022).

According to Sebentsov (2020), over time, the structure of CBC programs has been adapted, to a degree, to respond to Russian concerns. On the EU side, these programs are funded within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), which is primarily directed at supporting programs with countries involved in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy, which Russia declined to join in 2004. Russia was, however, given a special status for the ENI (previously the ENPI, European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument) to permit access to funding on a co-financing basis for the CBC programs. Various joint management bodies have been established within the various country programs, including a Joint Monitoring Committee, a Joint Technical Secretariat, and a Joint Project Selection Committee. These measures were directed at creating a sense of co-ownership. Agreeing on the joint parameters of particular cross-border cooperation programs took some time for the 2014–2020 programming period, so most projects began implementation only in 2018, 2019, or even later. The role of Russian co-financing increased during this period, reducing the asymmetrical nature of the programs.

Overall funding for CBC projects is modest, with the EU contributing about twice as much as the Russian Federation during the 2014–2020 period, according to project documents (see Table 1).

Contribution levels of EU Member States and participating beneficiaries in the EU Member States vary. Of national government contributions, Estonia provided the highest co-funding level. For two of the EU countries involved, namely Lithuania and Poland, the only Russian partner region was neighbouring Kaliningrad oblast', an exclave of Russia separated physically from it by Belarus and Lithuania. For Latvia and Estonia, three Russian regions (Pskov oblast', Leningrad oblast', and the city of St. Petersburg) were involved. In addition to standard projects, several large infrastructure projects received funding, with generally larger budgets or broader scope.

Table 1: Funding for EU-Russian CBC Programs in the Baltics^{6,7}

	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

Most of the projects supported by the CBC were of a technical or non-political nature. Project categorization differs between the various country programs, but they can be roughly summarized as indicated in Table 2. While there was a category for local and regional good governance in the three Baltic states, most of these projects had a sectoral focus and did not appear to address decision-making processes or public input. Only two projects carried out in Lithuania appeared to deal with these themes.⁸

⁶ Information derived from the CBC websites: <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/>; <https://www.estoniarussia.eu/>; <https://www.plru.eu/>; <https://latruscbc.eu/>.

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/>.

⁸ These projects are as follows: "Promotion of Active Dialogue between Local Authorities and Civil Societies as Foundation of Modern Self-Government in Šilalė and Slavsk." n.d. Accessed March 21, 2024. <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 PaghèGiai and Sovetsk." n.d. Accessed March 21, 2024. <https://www.eni-cbc.eu/lr/en/projects/approved-projects-of-the-2-call-for-proposals/lt-ru-2-058/1308>.

Table 2: Themes of CBC Projects with Four Baltic States⁹

	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	21	24+4	28+3

*Included in other categories as well ** Not included in other categories except total as + value

The “Autonomy of the Local” and Existing Research

The “autonomy of the local” thesis put forth by Dembińska, Mérand, and Shtaltovna (2020, 477) is based on the idea that “the degree of conflict and cooperation between Russia and Europe is partly autonomous from the political-strategic level because it also depends on the symbolic boundaries constructed at the local level.” The authors hypothesized that for countries with a ‘solid’ symbolic boundary, such as Estonia, “cooperation around issues of common interest is difficult but open conflict is not frequent” (478). In contrast, they suggested that Kaliningrad has a “fluid boundary,” where “[c]ooperation and conflict coexist” (484). Cooperation has focused on mobility issues, and the region was, at various points in time, given the status of a free economic zone, which made opportunities for cross-border interaction of interest to both Poles and Russians in Kaliningrad. According to this argument, the interaction at the local level is viewed as being significantly impacted by the identity and interest configurations of local actors.

In assessing this argument, it is, however, important to consider that these identity and interest configurations may be strongly affected, on both sides of the border, by the larger political and historical context in which they are formed and operate, thus making “autonomy of the local” responsive to this context. The EU and Russia have very different types of decision-making structures and processes, providing widely varying political and social contexts in which local populations and authorities form their understandings and act on them. This is important in two regards that are relevant to this analysis. First, the EU is a multi-level entity, where decision-making is anything but centralized, particularly in the foreign policy sphere. Member states retain significant autonomy in the foreign policy sphere, although some relevant aspects are subject to supranational rule, such as Schengen rules regarding external border controls and requirements for Schengen visas. Within particular member states, there may also be differing levels of

⁹ Table produced by the author from materials on the websites of the CBC programs. See footnote 6.

decentralization and varying types of identity formation among specific populations or regions. None of the EU states examined in this article are, however, federal systems. Despite its formally federal status, Russia, on the other hand, is a centralized state where all authority over foreign policy decisions rests with the central authorities in Moscow. Regional and local authorities have minimal autonomy in making decisions about interactions with foreign actors. Until the most recent crisis point with the West, they were, at times, granted authority to interact with external actors at the same level of governance, i.e., regional actors with regional authorities in another country but not with national-level actors in neighbouring countries.

The second difference relates to the geopolitical identity of the EU and Russia. Decision-makers in the Kremlin unabashedly make decisions based on geopolitical considerations and with geopolitical goals in mind, based on their interpretation of identity goals. While identity was contested in Russia, at least until the outbreak of the 2022 war (e.g., with some intellectuals or public figures favouring a more European identity focus while others emphasized Eurasianism), such differences are generally not reflected in Kremlin policy or in predominant public discourse. In contrast, identity politics are openly and publicly contested in the EU and its member states. Unlike in Russia, EU authorities have, until recently, eschewed geopolitical rationales or motivations for foreign policy decisions, appealing more often to normative or, sometimes, to economic or defensive security considerations. This author has dubbed the EU “an accidental geopolitical actor,” i.e., one that has resisted but gradually been compelled to acknowledge the unintended geopolitical consequences of its actions (DeBardeleben 2018). This was most notably evidenced in the eruption of the 2014 Ukraine crisis when the EU’s offer of Association Agreements and deep free trade agreements for Eastern Partnership countries, including Ukraine, inadvertently triggered a political crisis in Kyiv that ultimately led to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. During the term of Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission has, however, more directly acknowledged the importance of geopolitical considerations, alongside normative ones, also reflected in the notion of “principled pragmatism,” which was included in an important EU global strategy document put out in 2016.

These two differences between the EU and Russia suggest that the dynamic of any ‘local autonomy’ would be quite different on the two sides of the border. The EU explicitly promotes local-level cross-border cooperation, allowing that it should be driven by local stakeholders through a competitive application process, operating within a clearly developed policy framework governed by transparent rules established at the EU level. Local actors or member state governments are also expected to make financial contributions to these CBC projects. The EU’s CBC program can thus empower local and regional actors to use the program to realize their own objectives, suggesting that local constructions of identity (and interest) can, at least theoretically, act as important movers in shaping the directions of particular projects. Even the overall programmatic project priorities are established by national-level actors in consultation with their Russian counterparts. The Russian side, on the other hand, is more reactive in its relationship to this EU program framework; it is mainly a recipient rather than an author of the policy. While in some cases, local Russian actors have played an important role in initiating or developing particular CBC project proposals, they have done so within a clearly laid out process initiated by the EU.

The cross-border programs involving the Baltic states and Poland all operate within the framework of a common EU-CBC policy. The premise for the EU’s continuing CBC cooperation after 2014 was the possibility of positively impacting the lives of people on both sides of the border as well

as promoting people-to-people understanding between the EU and Russia, potentially shielding local interaction from geopolitical impacts. The projects were also expected to have economic impacts, particularly in addressing the specific economic, environmental, and social problems of marginalized border regions, some of which had previously, in the Soviet period, been significant transport conduits (e.g., between St. Petersburg and Tallinn). Experts also identify other broader goals for CBC programs, e.g., the extension of the EU's geopolitical influence and image-building (Deiana, Komarova, and McCall 2019) and its "conflict transformational potential" (McCall 2014, 531). Găvăneci (2016) develops a similar idea in arguing that "civil society cooperation between Estonia and Russia avoids the discursive trap 'of European values', which conjures up the notion of a geopolitical and civilizational divide" (477).

For Russia, the continuation of the CBC program after 2014 was accepted according to a different logic, as the Russian leadership generally was pushing for an un-freezing of relations with the EU in the post-2014 period. The continuation of the CBC programs could be seen as an indicator that the sanctions implemented by the EU were accompanied by spheres of 'normal' relations. Local actors in Russia might also see these projects as opportunities to promote normalization in their relations with cross-border partners or as providing needed financial support to address pressing local problems, particularly as sanctions imposed economic hardship.

Several studies of CBC programs and other forms of cross-border cooperation have been carried out by Russian, Baltic, and Western scholars in the period following the events in Ukraine in 2014.¹⁰ Authors disagree about the impact of geopolitical factors on the operation of CBC projects in this time period. Makkonen et al. (2018) noted declines in cross-border traffic due to the weakening of the Russian ruble as an impact of the geopolitical situation, an important consideration for projects focusing on tourism. Palmowski and Federov (2009, 6) concluded that "the intensity of cross-border ties has decreased in recent years amid tensions between Russia and the West." Bobilev et al. (2020) also cited the negative effects of the 2014 Ukraine crisis on CBC, namely remilitarization of the Baltic Sea, investment risks for Western companies involved, complications created for financial institutions affecting cross-border transactions, and a rise in mutual mistrust. Studzińska, Sivkoz, and Domaniewski (2018) observed the economic effects of the crisis. The economic motivations for cross-border shopping may have been affected by the sanctions, as some goods were no longer available in KO; smuggling also occurred. Other authors noted a decline in cross-border shopping from Russia to eastern Finland after 2014 (Prokkola 2019). Another less expected effect in Lappeenranta, Finland (located near the transit route from St. Petersburg to Helsinki) was a greater appreciation of Russian tourism in Finland (Prokkola 2019). Zabielska (2020) concluded from interviews with inhabitants of Kaliningrad oblast' that the suspension of the local border traffic regime between Kaliningrad oblast' and Poland in 2016 led to a reduction in cross-border cooperation; this was related both to Polish-Russian tensions and EU-Russian tensions. However, Bojarowicz (2021) indicated continuing cooperation on the regional level despite the suspension of the local traffic regime, particularly involving Poland's Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeship. Cooperation apparently also continued with Pomerania (Maciejewska-Mieszkłowska 2021). This cooperation was facilitated by the continuation of the EU-CBC programs in the 2007–13 period (with many projects not completed by February 2014) and 2014–2020 (Maciejewska-Mieszkłowska 2021).

¹⁰ See also DeBardeleben and Nechiporuk 2019.

Koch (2018, 606) also saw past relationships as providing a basis of continuity in Finnish-Russian CBC cooperation after 2014: “Even if Finnish-Russian ENI CBC has been threatened by sanctions after the Ukrainian crisis, cooperation activities continue almost unfettered.” Koch (2019) further noted that the Finnish government successfully pushed back against proposals to include CBC ENI projects on the sanctions list after the Crimean annexation; the Finnish Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Economics Affairs and Employment “acted as mediators between ENI CBC programmes and the EU by representing national interests and defending them in Brussels” (126). This illustrates the manner in which both the EU-Russian geopolitical context and internal EU political debate have influenced the shape and fate of CBC programs during times of tension.

Some Russian authors have also examined the role of CBC in Russian regional and foreign policy. Kuznetsov and Kuznetsova (2019, 65) noted that the 2020 *Strategy for Spatial Development of the Russian Federation* “mentioned border territories in sections on foreign economic ties rather than in those on regional development.” They also drew attention to the special attention devoted to Kaliningrad oblast’ by federal policy, presumably due to its exclave status, the goal being “to ensure standards of living and economic growth rates comparable to (or higher than) those in the neighbouring EU countries” (68). Relying on interview data from 2014 and 2015, Sebestov (2020) cited several obstacles for the Russian side in their CBC participation, including cross-border visa difficulties; the requirement for special Russian visas for foreign visitors within the 5 km zone near Russia’s external border; and differences in political structures and competences at various levels on the two sides of the border. He also mentioned obstacles identified by “foreign participants,” namely, the centralization of power in Russia, which restricts the independence of local actors, a weak civil society, and limited internal funding. Nonetheless, Sebestov (2020) also observed some positive developments, in that the Russian side was able to take more initiative in developing projects in the 2007–2013 funding period, also creating a sense of joint effort (Bobylev et al. 2020). Experience gained by potential Russian participants, increased understanding of EU rules, and support from Russian regional authorities helped to make the program less ‘asymmetrical.’ At the same time, Sebestov (2020) noted that “[a]ccording to interviews with participants of Programs and representatives from regional authorities, opportunities for further CBC are closely related to the Federal border policy’s direction” (82). Bobylev et al. (2020) concluded that “CBC experiences show that the main hindrances came from political factors rather than from the technical inexperience of the participants” (856).

EU-based authors have also cited obstacles to CBC which have political aspects. Găvăneci (2016), for example, noted delays in the Russian Federation’s signing of various agreements, as well as visa issues. In addition, civil society organizations on the two sides of the border may have different priorities (Găvăneci (2016). On the other hand, previous contact between partners can be helpful. Găvăneci’s (2016) research supports Sebestov’s idea of asymmetry, in that Russian participants often have to rely on the knowledge of their Estonian partners and may feel that their interests are not adequately taken into account. On the other hand, Estonian civil society actors also sometimes lack the expertise or resources to fulfill complex EU requirements. Drawing on interviews with police officers involved in cross-border cooperation in crime prevention in Finland and Russia, Heusala and Koistinen (2018, 366) also cited obstacles to cooperation due to the fact that “the motivation and ability of Russian law-enforcement organizations is often paralysed by central government policies, which weaken organizational learning.” Based on interviews in Finland, Koch (2018) concluded that the development of a real partnership mentality is difficult in practice and that distrust on the Russian side may be an obstacle, whereas Finnish subnational actors have “a high level of institutional trust...towards Finnish national and EU institutions”

(606). On the other hand, CBC projects are not only obstructed by low levels of trust, but they can also help to build trust or foster the creation of a cross-border regional identity, particularly important for Kaliningrad oblast' (Żukowski, 2021).

Findings and Discussion

While Russian national media generally do not make CBC projects a specific focus of attention, regional coverage is extensive. This indicates that the CBC programs and their continuation after 2014 were not a high-profile item at the Russian federal level, but they were considered quite important in some cases from a regional or local perspective. Overall, the analysis reveals that Russian media coverage of these projects and of the CBC program on a regional or local level suggests insulation of the CBC programs from the larger geopolitical context during the study period (2018-2021). There was a sharp disjunction between the general rupture in relations and the depiction of day-to-day CBC activities on the ground; even expected problems of normal project operation were rarely mentioned.

Only 6.5 percent of the examined articles mentioned any problems, and these had to do with routine issues such as funding being inadequate or slow (33 percent), border/visa problems (17 percent), partner problems (17 percent), or impacts of the pandemic (33 percent). While these percentages look impressive, they are a portion of only the 6.5 percent of articles that mention problems; thus, only two of the 93 articles mention funding issues or the pandemic as a problem (e.g., Zamaraeva 2020), and only one article each mentions border/visa issues or partner problems. Those that do mention a geopolitical context do so in a limited way. A clear example is an article about the Latvia-Russia project "From Hobby to Business," which acknowledges that the largest part of the funding comes from the European Union. The article (Zinov'ev 2018) quotes a comment by a local official: "It is amazing, but at the same time pleasant, to realize that under current conditions, with total sanctions against Russia from all sides, including the European Union, we, a small Russian rural settlement, managed to receive a grant, approval for carrying out a project involving cross-border cooperation with Latvia..." The official observed that the settlement had been involved in a previous project that was completed.

Another article relating to a clean water project between Estonia and Russia refers to the difficult geopolitical situation, but the interviewee, who is a regional expert in water management, reassured the readership when the interviewer asked: "Regarding cooperation with foreign partners, and considering the not so simple situation in external political relations, how reliable are they? How strong are the agreements? Wouldn't some kind of force-majeure arise?" (*Pskovskaia Lenta Novostei* 2019). The expert responded: "I am sure it won't. Because we have good relations with all of our foreign business partners. This is true for the program 'Russia-Latvia' and 'Russia-Estonia'. These are business-like and completely friendly relations, and I am sure that we will fulfill all obligations in our joint projects" (*Pskovskaia Lenta Novostei* 2019). In explaining the motivation of the Western partners, he explains that benefits are accorded to both sides.

Only 19.4 percent of the articles identified the EU explicitly as a funding source, with another 28 percent mentioning euros but not the EU as the source. Thirty-four percent of the articles mentioned the EU specifically in some context, but most did not. Many of these references were disclaimers, probably understood to be required by the EU, indicating that the content of the publication is the responsibility of the author, not the EU or Russian Federation. Where the EU is mentioned, it is generally with a positive tone, suggesting a normality of relations: "A good

partnership relationship has developed with the Narva city government and with the Narva Museum. This is a pledge (*zalog*) for the joint activities in international projects with the European Union, aimed at the development of tourist infrastructure and museumification” (Trofimov 2018). A short article in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (Alekseev 2018) paraphrased the EU ambassador to Russia, who was in Kaliningrad oblast' for the opening of the European Film Festival, as saying that the region is one of several “where cooperation between Russia and the EU functions as before.” The article goes on to quote the ambassador: “It is pleasant to come here, both due to the geographical location, but also your policies— very open to tourism, business...Cross-border cooperation of Kaliningrad oblast' with its neighbours is an excellent example of positive interaction, which is being realized on many levels and is useful both for the regions of Russia as well as for its neighbours. I support this work.”

Other articles are less explicit but imply a tone of good relations or cooperation. One article suggests a common cultural context for Russia and Europe: “Ivangorod is unique. It is a particular business card for Russia seen from the side of the European Union. In Europe there is no other place where in one zone two fortresses are visible, located on the territory of different states” (*Kingisepp.ru* 2020).

The importance of cross-border projects in their practical implementation is evidenced by the attention given to them by high regional officials. The acting governor of Pskov oblast' and the presidential plenipotentiary envoy to the Central Federal District were shown drawing attention to the cross-border cooperation framework in an article in the Pechorskii district (*Pskovskaia pravda* 2018): “In Pechorskii district, the presidential envoy, Alexandr Beglov, could not overlook another important question: cross-border cooperation in municipalities bordering the European Union. Now applications are being approved by the European Commission and we consider that financing will begin at the end of 2018, said the head of the region.” The article goes on to cite the importance of cooperation with Estonia and Latvia for rural entrepreneurship, the fishing industry infrastructure, water purification, and improvement of checkpoints on the Russian-Latvia border. In another article (*iLuki.Ru* 2018) about the same visit of the presidential envoy, mention is made of the larger geopolitical context in which the cross-border cooperation is undertaken, particularly the NATO membership of Estonia and Latvia and security questions raised by Pskov's border location. The official reportedly indicated that the border location produced “both constraining, as well as positive factors”: “In the first order is the reality of questions of border security and socio-political stability” and “in the opinion of the leader of the region, in recent years sanctions and contra-sanctions have rather seriously complicated trade relations with the Baltic area” (*iLuki.Ru* 2018). This situation is seen as reinforcing the importance of cross-border cooperation, with the acting governor of the oblast' quoted as saying, “[o]n the whole, the region actively is participating in international relations, and we plan to expand that work” (*iLuki.Ru* 2018).

In many cases, reference is made to bilateral cooperation with a particular EU member state without reference to the EU, implying a normalization of state-to-state relations and skirting the fact that CBC programs are heavily financed from Brussels. For example, in a typical article, a Pskov paper depicts the cooperation in the following way: “In the meantime, there is good news for those who grow crops on their garden plots. Under the program of cross-border cooperation between Russia and Estonia, a horticultural products processing center is being built in Logozovichi near Pskov” (*Pskovskaia pravda* 2020). Another example highlights the breadth of Russian-Polish cooperation, quoting a Polish official:

Kaliningrad Oblast and Warminsko-Mazursko voivodeship in Poland intend to continue cooperation in economic, social, cultural, and touristic spheres. The general consul of the Republic of Poland in Kaliningrad, Marcin Nosal noted that on the level of local government regional cooperation has not stopped, evidenced by hundreds of implemented cross-border projects. In the words of the general consul, a new stage in the program of cross-border cooperation is beginning for 2014-2020, for which 60 million euros have been allocated. (*Ria Novosti* 2016)

The reference to funding in euros is quite common, without specifying the source as the European Union (e.g., Ivanov 2021). Several of the articles are quite detailed in their technical description of the projects as well as the benefits. Other articles involve only very brief mention of the project details. In some cases, co-funding by the Russian side is specifically mentioned.

Project benefits are emphasized in most articles but with a clear local focus. In 65 percent of articles, these are only benefits on the Russian side, with 18 percent mentioning benefits on both sides and 16 percent implying mutual benefits. People-to-people understanding was rarely mentioned (only in two articles), even though presumably, regardless of the thematic focus, this could be a project effect. Most benefits mentioned were focused on the particular sectoral outputs of the cooperation. Most often, references were made to national, regional, and local authorities rather than the EU. Often, only the local partner is identified (e.g., “Partners in the project are: The department of development and economics of the city of Narva on the Estonian side and the administration of the municipality ‘City Ivangorod of the Kingisepp municipal district of Leningrad oblast’ on the Russian side”) (Trofimov 2019). Only 18 percent of the articles mentioned EU member state funding. In contrast, 39 percent of the articles mentioned Russian funding and the Russian government (i.e., central government). Official Russian government approval is sometimes mentioned (e.g., Gorod-Kingisepp.ru 2018), but usually, the focus is on local authorities and actors.

Examination of Polish media coverage in the period through December 2021 reveals similar patterns to those found in Russian media. The coverage of the projects is overall very positive, emphasizing benefits to the regions of Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Pomerania. Most articles focus on particular activities of individual CBC projects, providing considerable details. Particular coverage was given to the “Two Ships” project, which involved the renovation of the Soldek National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk matched with the renovation of the Russian ship ‘Vityaz’ in Kaliningrad oblast’, drawing attention to a common maritime heritage (*Rzeczpospolita* 2018).

Several articles mention the marginal economic position of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie region in particular, including the outflow of population, poverty and social exclusion, and inadequate infrastructure. Local officials, impatient with delays in the issuance of the call for proposals in 2017, emphasized the critical importance of the program as a source of funding for important development projects (*Rzeczpospolita* 2018). Benefits to the Russian side are more rarely mentioned, nor are activities there covered in any detail. Similar to the Russian media, references to the larger geopolitical situation are rare and are only made in a couple of articles. One states, “[w]e can only be glad that something is going well in Poland despite the pandemic and despite bad political relations with Russia” (*Rzeczpospolita* 2020). The other makes a general reference to the cooling of economic contacts between the Warmia and Mazury regions of Poland and Russia after Poland’s EU accession, “as political relations between Poland and Russia cooled,” so not specific to the post-2014 period (*Rzeczpospolita* 2018). Problems in interactions with Russian partners are also not mentioned. In contrast to the Russian media coverage, however, all but four

of the articles explicitly mention EU funding, while three of the four other articles reference the Poland-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme (without mentioning the EU). Although more than half of the articles mention specific Russian partners, only one mentions Russian financial contributions. This may be, however, because Russian funding would go specifically to the Russian side, whereas EU funding was designated to support both Polish and Russian project activities.

Conclusion

As occurred in March 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, geopolitical events can, under extreme circumstances, severely interfere with local dynamics that may promote cooperation in international relations. This can occur through the actions and decisions of the EU that suspend or alter the conditions of such programs; it can also occur due to policies at the national level or even in response to public pressure.

In the face of less severe geopolitical tension, however, local cross-border initiatives can proceed relatively undisturbed, particularly if they have a non-political nature. EU, national, and local authorities may view such initiatives as having some functional elements. As Hataley and Leuprecht suggest (2018), the functions of borders may be different for various state and non-state stakeholders; likewise, the functional importance of CBC will vary for different actors. For EU officials, the functional elements of CBC include localized, practical benefits for the population of an EU member state and associated awareness of EU support for them, thus bolstering the legitimacy of the EU. Another potential benefit is that CBC may contribute to long-term objectives of social attitudinal change in the partner country. For a particular member state and localities within it, the benefits are more likely economic or for maintenance of relative regional stability and predictability. For some project beneficiaries on both sides of the border, CBC projects provide funds for infrastructure development or other activities that would not be available elsewhere. For Russian national authorities, the functional aspects are more closely tied to geopolitical interests, supporting a discourse of normalization.

The analysis of Russian media coverage of CBC projects is consistent with the "autonomy of the local" thesis in a general sense, however, with a different nuance than suggested by Dembińska, Mérand, and Shtaltovna (2020). Geopolitical considerations are only rarely mentioned in Russian media coverage of CBC programs or its projects, and when they are mentioned, they are placed in contrast to local cooperation. The same pattern is present in Polish media coverage. This is all consistent with the "autonomy of the local" thesis. However, the largely descriptive nature of media coverage of the projects and programs does not suggest the creation of a discursive space where identity is mediated or constructed. For the most part, cooperation is not framed in identity terms or in terms of impacts on identity but rather in relation to very pragmatic project outputs that are of benefit to specific Russian population groups. Information about project outputs is communicated to a broader local and regional public through a detailed presentation of project benefits, with an emphasis on the role of local Russian partners, local and regional Russian political figures and institutions, and a cooperative Russian federal government. This framing serves the interests of political actors in Russia by projecting an image of effective management of interactions with foreign partners that brings concrete benefits to the public, even in times of geopolitical conflict.

While discursive identity formation processes may be occurring at another level through direct contacts involving project participants from both sides of the border, the broader impact would be fairly restrictive due to the limited number of Russian participants. To assess this, a different methodology would be required, one involving interviews or surveys of local project participants. Unfortunately, at the present time, it is not possible to conduct such research in Russia, but some insights could be gained from participants on the EU side. This can form the next step in a research agenda to assess the explanatory value of the “autonomy of the local” for understanding cross-border cooperation.

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