

## **ON CONCEPTUAL HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF BORDERS IN POLITICAL LANGUAGE – SOME REMARKS ON KARELIA**

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### ***Abstract***

*Border has become a multiple political concept in the post-Cold War period than it has been before. Political processes like the European integration, globalization and increased networking of trade, business and people have challenged traditional thinking of state borders. At the same time the borders have been re-securitized and used for othering and defining national identities.*

*The Ukrainian Crisis has returned geopolitical vocabulary to the every-day debates and the refugee crisis challenges core principles of the EU and Schengen region. This paper introduces a theoretical framework based on conceptual history that can be applied on studying how borders have been defined and used in the political language. Through conceptual history, a relation between academic, political and public discourses of borders can be traced and identified. This can help to understand multiplicity of state borders and especially how, and why they are powerful tools for driving certain political agendas.*

*The paper contributes to theoretical discussion on how to understand borders and bordering in contemporary political language. Also the paper notes that ‘border’ itself has been less studied in comparison to other key concepts of the post-Cold War politics.*

**Keywords:** *conceptual history, borders, Karelia, political language*

### **Introduction**

‘Border’ is certainly a key concept of contemporary political language. Recent events around Europe, just as the fencing of state borders in Hungary and Austria or the debate on the temporarily closing of Schengen-borders, due to the increased number of asylum seekers, indicate the importance of borders. During the Cold War, the border was seen rather as a dividing and separating, territorial line between the states. The Iron Curtain was a symbolic boundary between the East and the West. In the turn of 1990s, ‘border’ or more precisely ripping down of borders became to symbolize the new Europe expressing optimism and hope for freedom of citizens. Among politicians and some academic scholars, borders as separating territorial lines have been proposed to vanish in the era of postmodernity and post-nationality. However, state borders still exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The re-securitization

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of the borders after the 9/11 terror attacks has caused an explosion of walling and fencing around the world. (Vallet & David, 2012) ‘Border’ is a contested concept, which became one of the key concepts in political language during the last 25 years. Depending on the context, ‘border’ has been capitalized on re- or de-bordering between humans, states, nations or continents.

During the last two centuries, the concept of border has become more manifold in relation to states and territories. The concept is not granted with one essence, function and trajectory. On the contrary, academic discourses have so far emphasized borders as social, cultural and political constructions. (Paasi, 2005, 27) Various studies on borders have been carried out, expanding the understanding of borders and bordering beyond the state. The multiplicity of borders requires to analyze the concept of per se. The contemporary political situation proofs the significance of state borders and their notion in every-day political language. In many cases state borders still symbolize rather exclusion and othering than cooperation and encountering. Therefore, the borders are powerful part of the political toolkit underlining the need for analyzing how and why it is so. (Haselsberger, 2014, 6-7)

The Finnish-Russian border is one of the illustrative examples of politicized, contested border - not only historically but also contemporarily. As a border between the EU and Russia, it offers a good case to study not only competing conceptualizations on the national level, but also reflections on international politics. This paper discuss how conceptual history is applicable on studying borders as political concepts. The paper provides empirical examples based on analysis of border-related texts, published in the main Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Firstly, the paper interprets theoretical and methodological remarks of conceptual history and its applicability on the border studies. Secondly, it introduces shifting representations of the Finnish-Russian border in the turn of the 1990s through empirical examples related to Karelia region. Lastly, the paper contributes to discussion on how key concepts of ‘the border’ have been re-defined, challenged and contested during the last 25 years.

### **Conceptual history and studying of political language**

Conceptual history is both a broad branch of historical and political research and a set of methodological tools that can be applied on studying the past of society. (Ifversen, 2011; 65-66) Generally, conceptual historians are interested in the development of concepts, contestations over meanings and their use. Moreover,

identifying conceptual shifts and analyzing how they took place had been of special interest. Conceptual history underlines fluidity and constant change since there are no a-historical and comprehensive definitions for any political concept. (Koselleck, 2004; Palonen, 1997) History is not a linear progressive path from the dawn of humankind to a top of development, but more a chain of events and stoppages. A historical narrative is always constructed by contemporary actors through positioning following events and creating narration between them. It is not possible to study history as the past itself but as a narrative of what has happened. (Tilli, 2009) Conceptual history focuses on stoppages, shifts and crisis, when concepts are extremely politicized and open for re-conceptualization.

Because history is a narrative by its nature, it is possible to trace the past only through oral or written linguistic sources. Historical research is dependent on language; or like Reinhart Koselleck (1989) explains “*society and language insofar belong among the meta-historical givens without which no narrative and no history are thinkable*”. (pp. 310) Language then do not only convey a reality of society, but also construct societal reality. Meanwhile it is crucial to note that any linguistic sources available do not tell how things actually were, but how things are interpreted and reflected. Koselleck (1989, 2002) has emphasized the impossibility of ‘total history’ due to the contested and narrative nature of the linguistic past. Therefore, conceptual history critically analyses hegemonic discourses and instead of constructing new ones, it scrutinizes them.

Concepts are fluid and embedded with different layers of meanings during the time. They are formed through struggles and battles where different meanings and definitions have been produced by involved actors. (Basabe, 2014, 20-21; Pankakoski 2010) ‘Border’ is not an exception. It has been a key concept of inter-state relations for a long time, and it has been tightly linked with concepts like state and territory since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary border discourses and competing definitions of ‘border’ among scholars and politicians illustrate this contested nature and constant struggle over meaning of the notion. Conceptual history does not focus on concept per se, but using and defining it in political language. (Richter, 2003) So like commonly reminded, it is not worth to ask what the concept border is, but what is meant by it. (Pocock, 2002, 55) Henk van Houtum (2005) notes, that even in postmodern world borders are not totally vanishing, and they are perhaps needed for organizing societies. Thus it is more important how borders are interpreted and used. In the case of the Finnish-Russian border, this means not to focus on the border as internationally defined and legalized line between two independent states, but on the

border as an argument or rhetorical tool in political debates. The approach is based on three core principles of conceptual history. These are contextualization, defining of conceptual families and identifying of actors such as innovative ideologists and apologists which are actively involved in political debates.

Firstly, a contextualization of concepts. Their relation is interlinked while the concepts are not just evaluated in the context, but also effect on them. (Pankakoski, 2010, 765) Contextualisation has a multiple significance for analysing uses and meanings of concept and conceptual change that has taken place in certain historical periods. In other words it is not possible to study political concept just per se, but in certain historical and political context, in relation to other concepts and counter-concepts. (Burns, 2011; Jakobsen, 2010) Skinner (2002) underlines the importance of text analys through their original context instead of a discursive construction that aims to explain political changes. Koselleck (1989) notes that concepts always include references to other concepts. This means that concepts, new and old ones, are re-defined and challenged in a specific societal context and in relation to other concepts used. For example 'border' in the Westphalian context has tightly been linked with territory and state, whereas in the postmodern period it contributes to several other concepts like region, society and culture. Contextualization is highly important in order to avoid anachronist or a-historical interpretations. Additionally, it also helps not to fall for easy historical parallels, like a return of Cold War after the annexation of Crimea.

Secondly, a contextualization relates with an identification of conceptual families. Conceptual families reveal interlinks between concepts and underlying presumptions of actors. Conceptual interlinks also reveal contestation between the ways of conceptualization. Therefore conceptual historians pay special attention to semantic fields and study the meaning acquisition of a key concept. (Ifversen, 2011) Re-conceptualization of a key concept do not happen in a vacuum, but through these conceptual links. It is noteworthy which concepts are used for defining a key concept, and by which a dominant contemporary meaning of concept is challenged and defended.

Thirdly, for analysing conceptual change, it is important to identify innovative ideologists. According Skinner (2002) these innovative ideologists are actors who try to incite, persuade or convince "*their hearers or readers to adopt some novel point of view*". (pp. 149) They are mainly actors who by challenging *status quo* or dominating understanding of some political concept, try "*to legitimise questionable forms of social behaviour*" (ibdim). Innovative ideologists are a

necessity for conceptual change, while there is no shift or politics without linguistic and social communication. (Skinner, 2002) Identifying innovative ideologists does not mean that they would have succeeded on their endeavour, but examine what kind of rhetorical strategies and conceptual innovations they have used. Only by going through texts and analysing competing uses of concepts enables to note if new definitions have been labelled. Furthermore, historical context is needed for understanding the status quo and dominating definitions in the political language, offering a reflection of the durability of a possible conceptual change.

Innovative ideologists are not just members of political elite or high-profiled persons in the societal hierarchy. On the contrary, if the analysis is only focused on the academic discourses or speech acts of political elite, there is a danger to over-interpret the significance of these conceptualizations. There is a need for enlarging the textual corpus. (Jakobsen, 2010; Pankakoski, 2010; Erjavec & Poler & Kovacic, 2008) By doing so, the approach itself associates better with the concept of the political that is, like Palonen (2006) has noted, all linguistic acts between human beings. Uffe Jakobsen (2010) shows how wider material enables to make new contributions on key concepts of political language. He analyses how the notion of *democracy* has been defined in various political declarations, parliamentary debates, public manifestations and newspapers.

### **Representations of the Finnish-Russian border**

The Finnish-Russian border offers a good opportunity to study the relation between conceptual and political changes in the post-Cold War period. During the Cold War, Finland was a mutually neutral state between the Blocs, but dependency on Soviet policy effected not only foreign relation but also, and moreover, domestic affairs. Expulsion of the conservative, right-wing Coalition Party (*Kansallinen Kokoomus*) from government because of “foreign policy excuses” and re-election of long-served President Urho Kekkonen by an emergence law without general elections in 1973 are illustrative examples how national sensibility towards Soviet Union effected the domestic policy. A wide range of euphemisms of Soviet-related topics on the political language or official silence on violations of human right situation in the Soviet Union reflects that beside politicians also the media had been subordinated to self-censorship. In this way not only the Soviet Union that to influence domestic policy, but the politicians and journalists themselves narrowed the freedom of speech during the Cold War time. (Salminen, 1996; 35-40; 95-97)

In 1948, Finland and the Soviet Union signed the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (The Finno-Soviet Treaty) that confirmed that Finland will not let Germany or its allies use its territory against the Soviet Union, while the Soviets confirmed the territorial integrity of Finland. Furthermore, the treaty became one of the key factors for forming a consensus over Finnish foreign policy. (Rainio-Niemi, 2014) The official *Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line doctrine*, named after the Presidents J.K. Paasikivi (1946-1956) and Urho Kekkonen (1956-1981), was constructed around military and political neutrality. The *Finno-Soviet Treaty* as a non-aggression pact secured the Finnish-Soviet border and neutralized the major geopolitical risk for Finnish security. Like Rainio-Niemi (2014) notes, the Treaty was paradoxical while it defined Finnish neutrality policy and in parallel exposed Finland to Soviet-influence on domestic affairs. (pp. 33-34)

During the Cold War, the Finnish-Soviet border was complex. On the one hand it was a closed, heavily controlled borderline between the socialist superpower and the mutually neutral Nordic state. (Laine, 2013) Every-day contacts across the border were rare despite of the official policy of friendship and mutual cooperation. Nevertheless, limited and controlled tourism, cultural exchange and of course bilateral cross-border occurred. Little by little the number of visitors increased and in the 1970-1980s some 200-300 000 visits were done annually. (Pernaa, 2005, 186) Bilateral trade was a different ball game and it interconnected Finnish and Soviet economies together, despite of constant lack of capital in the Soviet Union. Special arrangements were used and bilateral trade meant rather exchange of goods than proper business. However, the trade was one way to cross the border and several Finnish worked on construction sites in the Soviet Union. (Pernaa, 2005; Kuisma, 2015)

On level of high politics, the treasuring of the stability and the presence of the treaty was a key factor for forming a consensus on Finnish foreign policy. The Finnish-Soviet border was used for reasoning un-alternativeness and urge of consensus, while criticizing and acting against status quo was interpreted to harm the national integrity and the existence of Finland per se. In addition, the border was in official rhetoric a place for cooperation, friendship and confidential loyalty despite of its closeness in practical terms. (Pernaa, 2005) During the 1980s a climate of debate changed the concepts and after Mihail Gorbachev launched his reform policies the interest of the Soviet Union on domestic affairs in Finland started to diminish. In the turn of the 1990s the neutrality based on the ideological juxtaposition became under scrutiny. Political debate opened and former “sensible”

issues, like the foreign policy doctrine or the border per se were discussed openly in the media. (Salminen, 1996) The Finno-Soviet Treaty as the guarantee of border securitization was questioned and requests for joining the European Community (EC) were proposed by journalists and foreign policy experts. (Moisio, 2003; Browning, 2008)

Using the border and Finland's position in the European-Russian *borderland* became one of the key issues in the political debates on foreign and security policy during the 1990s. (Moisio, 2003) After Finland's accession to the EU in 1995, the border became the longest external border of the Union. The Schengen agreement enforced its status as a political demarcation line between the EU and Russia. At the same time, cross-border cooperation developed through EU's programs. The CBC-programs and increased number of everyday border crossings made the Finnish-Russian border more permeable and porous during the last 25 years. (Laine, 2013; Liikanen, Zimin et al., 2007; Scott & Liikanen, 2011.) For studying the conceptualization of borders in these political debates it is proposed to concentrate on texts produced by the contemporary actors and to emphasize the diversity of political debates. Instead of focusing on the high-level or institutionalized conceptualizations, there is a need to seek debates wherein dominant definitions of border have been challenged.

### **Karelia - a disputed region or a mission completed?**

The approach introduced in this paper do not offer any new hegemonic discourses on the Finnish-Russian border, but emphasize the presence of competing and completing discourses. An analysis on the use of the concept helps to identify which political innovations concerning re- and de-bordering had been facilitated in times of political shifts. From European point of view, it is interesting to understand how the EU as a political innovator has aimed and succeeded to re-define the conceptualization of the Finnish-Russian border. The identification of competing definitions can help to interpret the reasons why the Finnish-Russian border became complex and why it had been a central part of constructing national identity, narratives and debates on foreign and security policy. (Browning, 2008)

The paper provides a distinction between intellectual perspectives on politics and political language. It points out the need for using various sources for interpreting conceptual struggles. Political debates as oral or written representations of language appear almost everywhere. A national parliament is just one arena of

debates and making policy per se, choosing a textual corpus is already part of conceptual history. (Jakobsen, 2010; Tilli, 2009)

In the empirical case, chosen debates are linked with the Finnish-Russian border and the textual corpus consists out of newspaper materials, parliamentary documents and other speeches, reports or declarations that had been reflected upon in newspapers. The material resembles an idea of Jakobsen's study (2010) on conceptualizations of democracy in Danish political debates. Choosing newspapers as the main source resonates its role as both an arena of debates and actor in the time of late modernity. (Erjavec & Poler Kovacic, 2008, 958) Through media debates it is possible to identify key discussions wherein the border has been extremely contested and politicized. (Tervonen, 2013; Laine, 2013) By following key debates, a textual corpus can be enlarged to extend to other arenas as well. So far, the analysis covers texts published in *Helsingin Sanomat* during three waves of politicization, or peaks of discussion introduced next.

The aim of the approach introduced in this article is to study contestations over the border in political language. Starting point is the identification of key periods, waves of politicization and struggle over meanings of concepts. (Pankakoski, 2010) The empirical part of this article is based the analysis of three intensive waves of politicization of the border from 1990 to 2014. In this particular case, the chosen period start at the end of the Cold War and stretches to the beginning of the Ukrainian Crisis (1990-2014). The analysis is based on project work, which traces conceptual shifts particularly in that period. Within the chosen period, major waves of politicization was identified through the fast-scanning and on the basis of earlier research. (Tervonen, 2013; Laine, 2013). These waves are related on three shifting events of the international relations: the end of the Cold War (1990-1991), the enlargements of the EU and NATO (2003-2004) and the Ukrainian Crisis (2013-2014). Within these waves of politicization, this paper emphasis three main premises of conceptual history: contextualization, an identification of political innovations and innovative ideologist, and the observation of conceptual families.

There are several debates related to the Finnish-Russian border during the chosen periods and the themes of debates vary from foreign and security policy to trade and business. Altogether, the border is a highly politicized concept and border-related topics are often associated with foreign and security policy issues, even though they contain economic or historical features. The 'Karelia-debate' illustrates how different conceptualizations were used. The debate focused on the question if the Finnish territories that were incorporated into the Soviet Union after the Second



World War should be returned or not. A question on a disputed region, connected to painful memories for many Finns. President Urho Kekkonen (1956-1981) tried unofficially to negotiate over the issue with Soviet government but got a negative response. Officially the question of Karelia was tabooed during the Cold War, but in the late 1980s, the liberal policy of Mihail Gorbachev and the independence movements in the Baltic States encouraged as well an open discussion in Finland.

Among pro-Karelian activists, the border was primarily conceptualized as a historical injustice and inequitable. They linked the border with notions of moral and historical justification, whereas counter-arguments referred to the inter-state political and stabilizing matters of the border. There was a clear gap between different groups of discussants, challenging the predominant notion of the state borders as rather permanent. Pro-Karelians noted that state borders can be re-locate by negotiation, whereas defenders of the status quo referred to international agreements like the charter of Paris and Helsinki as binding. The arguments and related concepts proof that it was not just a question about the Finnish-Soviet border, but about post-Soviet borders more generally. Appeals on moral and justice disassociated the border from traditional context of political geography, geopolitics and territory. It challenged realistic and geopolitical understanding of international relations by focusing on the morality and not just adapting the fundamental rules of geopolitics.

The group of pro-Karelian activists were certainly innovative and quite radical ideologists. They raised a hot topic on the agenda and questioned the legitimacy of the border and the fundamentals of the Finnish foreign policy. They used transnational rhetoric for supporting their views, and referred to the Baltic States or the Kuril Island - two other Soviet disputes discussed on that time. Despite of their aims, the policy was not changed. Neither Harri Holkeri's (1987-1991) coalition of right-wing and social democrat parties nor Esko Aho's (1991-1995) non-socialist government did any official calls for Karelia. Furthermore, both the Prime Minister Holkeri and the Minister for Foreign Affairs Pertti Paasio even tried to end the entire debate. They understood the debate from a high political point of view and considered it harmful for Finnish foreign (mainly Soviet) relations. The very same border was conceptualized differently and used for driving divergent political agendas. Politicians became apologist while defending the status quo and continuum of the Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line. Innovative ideologists – specifically the Karelia-activists - did not manage to change the dominant notion of the Eastern border. Their appeals on moral or historical justice were not noted by the politicians who had rather a bilateral and not transnational perspective. In the end, the Finnish-Soviet/Russian

border was not re-negotiated. The conceptual dilemma has, however, not been resolved. The border and Karelia as the borderland can still be understood as disputed and not been included in the intergovernmental negotiations so far.

## **Conclusions**

Constant struggle over the meanings and uses of the concepts is a crucial part of politics. Conceptual history enables to study shifts within and between the waves of politicization. Focusing on the debates inside selected peaks of discussion enables to contribute on contemporary debate on borders and resonance with political context and its possible change. The comparison of the peaks or waves offers a surface for analyzing temporal changes of politics and conceptualization. With combining horizontal and temporal changes, it is able to characterize maintenances and changes of meanings and notions of the border. Horizontal scrutiny allows to analysis if conceptual clusters are peculiar for a specific era, or if they are flowing from peak to peak and are used for different purposes by different actors. This helps to reflect how conceptual and political changes are interlinked.

The Finnish-Russian border exemplifies competing forms of politicization of state borders in the post-Cold War era. The Karelia-debate points out, that there has been competing and conflicting but also overlapping conceptualizations of the border. Politicization and using the border in multiply ways underlines how strongly Finland is imagined territorially as the borderland to Russia and the West. It seems that the border is a powerful concept for driving several political agendas. This is, however, just a small piece of the broad political debate on the border. Further research is needed and textual corpus should be enlarged following the introduced approach. Nevertheless, the newspaper material already enables to identify certain figures, themes and periods when the border has been highly politicized.

Beatrix Haselsberger (2014) address the question of thr possibility to go beyond othering functions of state borders in order to acquire a national identity without distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (p. 6). She inquires the *decoding* of state borders in regional planning, and underlines how the practice of decoding could be performed on all levels of borders and bordering. She claims that just the decoding of one dimension of the border, like economic or geopolitical, is not sufficient for avoiding othering and creating truly cooperation across the border. Similar processes can be traced in conceptual and political struggles over state borders.

This article states that identifying conceptual and political struggles over what the border is and what it means, can help the *decoding* process. Without knowing how and why the border has been used as a political argument for validating certain political agendas, there is no possibility to re-construct the border from an othering barrier to a place of encounter. No conceptualization is a self-evident truth, but rather a political selection. The conceptual analysis of the border acknowledges the reasons and logics behind their political selection and decodes them through critical review. The analysis of political debates on borders can identify waves of conceptual struggle and competing ways of (re)-conceptualization. Knowing how and by whom the dominant notions of border are challenged and defended, enables to seek an answer for the most crucial question - why do political borders still matter and how are the structures and logics of international relations formed.

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