**On conceptual historical analysis of borders in political language – Some remarks on Karelia**

***Abstract***

*Border has become more 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*

***JEL Codes:*** *F50, N40, N94*

**1. Introduction**

‘Border’ is certainly a key concept of contemporary political language. Recent events around Europe like a fencing of state borders in Hungary and Austria or a debate if the Schengen-borders should be temporarily closed because of an increased number of asylum seekers indicate importance of the borders. During the Cold War, the border was seen more as 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 preciously ripping down of borders became to symbolize the new Europe, optimism and hope for freedoms of citizens. Among politicians, like 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 21st century. The re-securitization of the borders after the 9/11 terror attacks has caused an explosion of walling and fencing borders around the world. ([Vallet&David 2012](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08865655.2012.687211#.Vm61ykqLRaQ)) ‘Border’ is really a contested concept and it really has been 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, a concept of border has become more manifold, also in relation to states and territories. It is seen not as a 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 that has expanded understanding of border and bordering beyond the state borders. The multiplicity of the borders requires to analyze a concept of border per se. Contemporary political situation shows how the state borders really matters, and how they are used in every-day political language. In many cases, the state borders still symbolize rather exclusion and othering than cooperation and encountering. Therefore, the borders are powerful part of political toolkit, and there is need for analyzing how and why it is so. ([Haselsberger 2014, 6-7](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649357.2014.963652))

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 in the national level, but also reflections of the international politics. This paper introduces how conceptual history is applicable on studying borders as political concepts. The paper gives empirical examples based on analyzing 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 some empirical examples related to Karelia region. Lastly, the paper contributes to discussion on how key concepts have been re-defined, challenged and contested during the last 25 years.

**2. Conceptual history and studying of political language**

Conceptual history is both a broad branch of historical and political research and also 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 using of them. Moreover, identifying conceptual shifts and analyzing how they have taken a place is paid a special attention. Conceptual history underlines fluidity and constant change of concepts in relation to other concepts, because there are no a-historical and comprehensive definitions for any political concept. (Koselleck 2004; Palonen 1997) History is not a linear progressive patch 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 by positioning events following others and creating narration between them. We are not able to study history as a past itself but as a narrative of what has happened. ([Tilli 2009](http://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/68084)) Conceptual history focuses especially on stoppages, shifts and crisis of history, when concepts are extremely politicized and open for re-conceptualization.

Because history is a narrative by its nature we are able to trace the past only through linguistic, oral or written, 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 us how things actually where, but how things are interpreted and reflected. Koselleck (1989, 2002) has emphasized the impossibility of “total history” because of 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](http://ptx.sagepub.com/content/38/6/749.abstract?etoc)) ‘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 17th 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, therefore, do 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 a concept, like border is, but what is meant by it. (Pocock 2002, 55) Henk van Houtum ([2005](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14650040500318522#.Vm62okqLRaQ)) notes, even in postmodern world borders are not totally vanishing, and they are perhaps needed for organizing societies. Therefore it is more important how we interpret and use the borders. In 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 how the border has been used 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, innovative ideologists or apologists who have been actively involved in political debates. Firstly, a contextualization of concepts. Relation is not just one-way, but more interlinked while the concepts are not just evaluated in the context, but they also effect on them. ([Pankakoski 2010, 765](http://ptx.sagepub.com/content/38/6/749.abstract?etoc)) Contextualisation, therefore, has a multiple significance for analysing how uses and meanings of concepts, conceptual change, has taken place in certain historical period. This means that any political concept is not able to be studied just per se, but in certain historical and political context, and in relation to other concepts and counter-concepts. ([Burns 2011](http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/187226311x555455); [Jakobsen 2010](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/eps/journal/v9/n3/full/eps201031a.html)) Skinner (2002) underlines how important it is to analyse texts through their original context instead of some discursive construction that aims to explain political changes. Koselleck (1989) notes that concepts always include references to other concepts and societal contexts and includes linguistic links. (pp. 318) 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 down easy historical parallels, like a return of Cold War after the annexation of Crimea.

Secondly, a contextualization relates with an identification of conceptual families, interlinks between a key concept and related concepts. Meaning of particular key concepts interrelates not only with a societal context but also other concepts used for defining it. 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 a special attention on semantic fields and study how a key concept acquires its meaning within that field. (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 one 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”. (Skinner 2002, 149) Innovative ideologists are a necessity for conceptual change, while there is no shift or even no politics without linguistic and social communication. (Skinner 2002) Identifying innovative ideologists does not mean that they would have succeeded on their endeavour, but just shows what kind rhetorical strategies and conceptual innovations they have used. This is why both an analysis of linguistic sources and a historical contextualization is needed. Only by going through texts and analysing competing uses of concepts it is able 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, but historical perspective is also needed for reflecting durability of a possible conceptual change.

Innovative ideologists are not just members of political elite or high-profiled persons on some 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. Instead of focusing on only some intellectual debates between academics or political elite, there is a need for enlarging the textual corpus. ([Jakobsen 2010](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/eps/journal/v9/n3/full/eps201031a.html); [Pankakoski 2010](http://ptx.sagepub.com/content/38/6/749.abstract?etoc); [Erjavec&Poler Kovacic 2008](http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&id_clanak_jezik=70800&lang=en)) Uffe Jakobsen ([2010](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/eps/journal/v9/n3/full/eps201031a.html)) shows interestingly how wider material enables to make new contributions on key concepts of political language. He analyses how a notion of *democracy* has been defined in various political declarations, parliamentary debates, public manifestations and newspapers. Conceptual history should not just concentrate on intellectual debates and elite discussion but reflect multiple sources of political debate. By doing so, the approach itself associates better with a concept of political that is, like Palonen ([2006](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1600910X.2006.9672919#.Vm63d0qLRaQ)) has noted, all linguistic acts between human beings.

**3. Representations of the Finnish-Russian border**

The Finnish-Russian border offers a good opportunity to study the relation between conceptual and political change 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 policy 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 on the domestic policy. Wide range of euphemisms of Soviet-related topics on the political language or official silence on violations of human right situation in Soviet Union reflects that not only politicians but also the media were subordinated to self-censorship. It was not only Soviet Union that aimed to influence on domestic policy, but the politicians and journalists themselves who narrowed freedom of speech during the Cold War time. (Salminen 1996; 35-40; 95-97)

In 1948, Finland and Soviet Union signed the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (The Finno-Soviet Treaty) that confirmed Finland won’t let Germany or its allies to use its territory against Soviet Union, while Soviets also confirmed not to harm territorial integrity of Finland. Furthermore, the treaty became one of key factors in forming of a consensus over Finnish foreign policy during the Cold War time. (Rainio-Niemi 2014) The official doctrine Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line, named after the Presidents J.K. Paasikivi (1946-1956) and Urho Kekkonen (1956-1981), was constructed around armed and political neutrality. The Finno-Soviet Treaty as a non-aggression pact secured the Finnish-Soviet border and neutralized a 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 under a risk of Soviet-influence on the domestic affairs. (pp. 33-34)

During the Cold War, the Finnish-Soviet border was complex. On the one hand it was closed, heavily controlled borderline between the socialist superpower and the mutually neutral Nordic state. ([Laine 2013](http://epublications.uef.fi/pub/urn_isbn_978-952-61-1130-8/)) Every-day contacts cross the border were rare despite of the official policy of friendship and mutual cooperation. Nevertheless, it was the official policy that allows limited and controlled tourism, cultural exchange and of course bilateral trade cross the border. Little by little a 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 Soviet Union. Because of that, special arrangements were used and bilateral trade meant more exchange of goods than a proper business. However, the trade was one way to cross the border and several Finnish worked in construction sites in Soviet Union. (Pernaa 2005, Kuisma 2015)

In level of high politics, the treasuring a stability and presence of the treaty was a key factor in forming of consensus over 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 interpreting to harm not only national integrity but also an existence of Finland. 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 for debate changed and especially after Mihail Gorbachev launched his reform policies an interest of Soviet Union towards domestic affairs 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 a foreign policy doctrine or the border per se. were discussed openly in the media. (Salminen 1996) The Finno-Soviet Treaty as a guarantee of border securitization was questioned and many request for joining in the European Community (EC) by journalists and foreign policy experts were proposed. (Moisio 2003; Browning 2008)

Using of the border and broadly Finland’s position on 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. Later on the Schengen agreement enforced its status as a political demarcation line between the EU and Russia. At the same time, however, cross-border cooperation was developed after the Cold War and especially EU’s programs enabled official CBC between Finnish and Russian operators. Through the CBC-programms and increased number of everyday border crossings, the Finnish-Russian border has become more permeable and porous during the last 25 years. ([Laine 2013](http://epublications.uef.fi/pub/urn_isbn_978-952-61-1130-8/); Liikanen, Zimin et al. 2007; Scott and Liikanen 2011.) For studying how the borders have been conceptualized in these political debate, this approach propose to concentrate on texts produced by the contemporary actors and to emphasize diversity of political debates. Particularly this means that instead of focusing only on the high-level or institutionalized conceptualizations, there is a need to seek debates wherein dominant definitions of border have been challenged.

**4. Karelia - a disputed region or a mission completed?**

The approach introduced in this paper do not offer any new hegemonic discourse on the Finnish-Russian border, but wants to emphasize a presence of competing and completing discourses. An analysis of how the concept has been used can help to identify which political innovations concerning re- and de-bordering have been used in times of political shifts, and which have become dominant one. From European point of view, it is extremely interesting to see how the EU as a political innovator has aimed and succeeded to re-define conceptualization of the Finnish-Russian border. Furthermore, an identifying of competing definitions can help us to interpret why the Finnish-Russian border is so complex and through the post-Cold War time has been a central part of constructing not only national identity or narratives but also debating on foreign and security policy. (Browning 2008) The paper makes a difference to intellectual perspective on politics and political language, and rather points out a 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, or some other source material is already part of conceptual history. (Jakobsen 2010; [Tilli 2009](http://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/68084))

In my empirical case, chosen debates are linked in the Finnish-Russian border and a textual corpus consists of newspaper material including different type of texts, parliamentary documents and other speeches, reports or declarations that have been reflected on newspapers. Material resembles an idea of Jakobsen’s study (2010) on conceptualisations 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 and Poler Kovacic 2008, 958](http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&id_clanak_jezik=70800&lang=en)) Through media debates it is possible to identify key discussions wherein the border has been extremely contested and politicized. ([Tervonen 2013](http://www.euborderscapes.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Working_Papers/EUBORDERSCAPES_Working_Paper_5_TervonenWP5.pdf); [Laine 2013](http://epublications.uef.fi/pub/urn_isbn_978-952-61-1130-8/)) By following key debates, a textual corpus can be enlarged beyond to extend 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.

Aim of the approach introduced in this article is to study contestations over the border in political language. Starting point is to identify key periods, waves of politicization and struggle over meanings of concepts. (Pankakoski 2010) An empirical part of this article is based on analysing three intensive waves of politicization of the border from 1990 to 2014. In this particular case, a chosen period from the end of the Cold War to the beginning of the Ukrainian Crisis (1990-2014) is based on project work that traces conceptual shifts particularly on 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](http://www.euborderscapes.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Working_Papers/EUBORDERSCAPES_Working_Paper_5_TervonenWP5.pdf); [Laine 2013](http://epublications.uef.fi/pub/urn_isbn_978-952-61-1130-8/)). 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 approach emphasis three main premises of conceptual history: contextualization, an identifying of political innovations and innovative ideologist, and an observing of conceptual families.

There are several debates related on the Finnish-Russian border during the chosen periods and themes of the debates vary from foreign and security policy to trade and business. Altogether, the border is highly politicized concept during these peaks. Often border-related topics are associated with foreign and security policy issues, even though they are more about economy or history. For example the “Karelia-debate” illustrates nicely how different conceptualizations were used. In a nutshell, actors debated if the territories that were incorporated in Soviet Union after the Second World War should be returned to Finland or not. A question of disputed region had been painful for many Finns after the war, and even President Urho Kekkonen (1956-1981) tried unofficially 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 more liberate policy of Mihail Gorbatchev and independence movements in the Baltic States encouraged for open discussion in Finland.

Among pro-Karelian activists and other writers, 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 inter-state political and stabilizing matters of the border. There was a clear gap between different groups of discussants that challenged a predominant meaning of the state borders as rather permanent. Pro-Karelians noted that state borders can be re-locate not only by war and force but by negotiating, whereas defenders of status quo referred to international agreements like the charter of Paris and Helsinki as binding agreements. Rather different arguments and related concepts shows that it was not just a question about the Finnish-Soviet border, but post-Soviet borders more generally. Would it be possible to re-locate the borders if security and political environment changed? Appeals on moral and justice disassociated the border from traditional context of political geography, geopolitics and territory. It also challenged realistic and geopolitical thinking of the international relations by presenting how states would be able to do morally right decisions, not just adapting to the fundamental rules of geopolitics.

The group of pro-Karelian activists were certainly innovative ideologists, even quite radical one. They raised a hot topic on the agenda and questioned not only a legitimacy of the border but also fundaments of the Finnish foreign policy. They used transnational rhetoric for supporting their views, and often 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 demolish an entire debate. They looked the topic from high political point of view and considered it harmful for Finnish foreign (mainly Soviet) relations. The very same border was conceptualized rather differently, and used for driving totally divergent political agendas. Politicians were clearly apologist while defending the status quo and continuum of the Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line. Innovative ideologists, Karelia-activists did not manage to change a dominant meaning of the Eastern border. Their appeals on moral or historical justice were not really noted by the politicians for who the question was bilateral, not transnational. In the end, the Finnish-Soviet/Russian border was not re-negotiated unlike the Baltic-Russian borders. Conceptual dilemma has, however, maintained. The border, and Karelia as the borderland can still be seen as a dispute, whereas it has not been a topic in the intergovernmental negotiations so far. Time by time after the early 1990s the debate has heated also in the media. There are still actors who by using similar rhetoric and argumentation claims that the government should open negotiations with Russia.

**5. Conclusions**

Constant struggle over the meanings and uses of the concepts is a crucial part of politics. Conceptual history enable 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 resonation with political context and its possible change. Secondly, 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 uses of the border. Horizontal scrutiny allows to see if some conceptual clusters are peculiar for some specific era, or if they flowing from peak to peak and used for different purposes by different actors. This kind of analyzing helps to reflect how conceptual and political changes are interlinked, that has so far been an interest among conceptual historians.

The Finnish-Russian border exemplifies competing forms of politicization of state borders in the post-Cold War era. Like the Karelia-debate points out, there has been not just competing and conflicting but also overlapping conceptualizations of the border. Instead of the border a plural should be used in this context. Politicization and using the border multiply shows how strongly Finland is imagined territorially as the borderland in relation to Russia, but also the West. Also it seems that the border is powerful concept for driving several political agendas, not just official foreign and security policy. This is, however, just a small piece of broad political debate concerning the border. Further research is needed and textual corpus will be enlarged like the introduced approach provides. Nevertheless, the newspaper material already enables to identify certain figures, themes and periods when the border has been highly politicized.

Beatrix Haselsberger ([2014](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649357.2014.963652)) asks if there is any possibility to go beyond othering function of state borders, so to acquire a national identity without making distinguish between us and them. (p. 6) She ([2014](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649357.2014.963652)) writes about *decoding* of state borders in regional planning, and underlines how the decoding should be done in all levels of borders and bordering. Her thesis is that not only a decoding of one dimension of the border, like economic or geopolitical, is enough for avoiding othering function and creating truly cooperation cross the border. Even though her perspective is on regional planning, 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 means, can help in *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 othering barrier to place of encountering. No conceptualization is a self-evident truth, rather a political selection. Conceptual analysis of the border enables to reveal reasons and logics behind political selections, and also to decode them through critical review. Analysing of political debates on borders, we can identify waves of conceptual struggle and competing ways of (re)-conceptualization. By knowing how and by whom the dominant meanings of border are challenged and defended, we are able to seek an answer the most crucial question: why political borders still so strongly matters on how the structure and logic of the international relations is formed.

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