



Viewpoint

New geopolitics and the Finnish-Russian border as a marker of territoriality

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Much of the critical border studies literature has turned away from a focus on territorial borders as signifiers of sovereign power, proposing instead that borders are “everywhere” (Rumford, 2013) and “mobile” (Szary & Giraut, 2015). Such work underlines the need to shift attention towards alternative border imaginaries and performances enacted within and beyond the state space (see also Brambilla, 2015; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012). Some scholars, mainly political geographers, however, regularly remind us about the importance of gaining more nuanced understanding of the allure of territoriality (Elden, 2006; Lizotte, 2020; Murphy, 2013; Paasi et al., 2022).

This commentary departs from the notion that Russia’s aggressive invasion of its sovereign neighbor, the country of Ukraine, on February 24, 2022 has brought forward the preciousness of the idea of state territoriality and European borders as settled. In Finland, the north-western neighbor of the Russian Federation, the aggression has caused a “seismic shift” (Dougall, 2022) to the ways in which Russia and the nature of the 1340-km Finnish-Russian border is perceived. As Murphy argues in this *Political Geography* forum, the ultimate reason for why the Russian invasion to Ukraine is considered particularly threatening is because it undermines the very foundations of the modernist political-territorial order. The invasion highlights the weakness and vulnerability of the order, but also its persistence and influence: in the United Nations (UN) emergency session on February 28, 2022, 141 countries of 193 states voted for the resolution condemning the invasion. Only five states voted against it (UN, 2022).

Russia’s unprovoked invasion and war in Ukraine beginning in February 2022 has rapidly and fundamentally changed the way in which the Russian Federation as a state is seen in the West. At the same time, it has revealed that the critical question for border research may not be, after all, whether borders are “everywhere” (and hence nowhere) or “mobile”, but rather what are the constructive and destructive ways territorial borders are produced, determined, contested, and crossed in different times and contexts. We maintain that while the current geopolitical crisis may have wide-ranging impacts on our theorization of borders, it does not necessarily mean that the introduction of numerous brand-new border vocabularies is required. Instead, this crisis can spur

us to reconsider traditional border theories regarding territoriality and geopolitics.

This said, it is necessary to continue developing theoretical understandings of how the production of territory and territoriality are interwoven with specific ways of conceiving state borders and their role in identity politics. This is especially true in the Finnish-Russian context. Due to the geopolitical history of Finland, compared to the “absent” borders between Finland and Sweden and Norway, the Finnish-Russian border has been conceived as a security border (e.g., Laitinen, 2003) and as a dividing line between the East and West (e.g., Hannonen, 2017; Paasi, 1996). It is currently surveilled by technology and over two thousand border guards from the Finnish side only. The “seismic shift” in the ways in which Russia is seen in Finland is reflected in polls measuring support for the NATO military alliance in Finland, which had retained an independent defense policy until 2022. Whereas in 2017 polls indicated that 21% of the population of Finland supported joining the NATO alliance, in May 2022 the number exceeded 70% (Huhtanen, 2022; see also Yle News, 2022). The immediate shift in attitudes in Finland culminated on May 18, 2022, when Finland, together with Sweden, formally applied to join NATO, making a historical turning point in the geopolitics of the Finnish-Russian border. Finland’s membership in NATO is expected to involve further militarization of its border with Russia (Finnish Government, 2022), which also highlights the enduring meaning of the border as a marker of territorial order, state sovereignty and identity. Until February 2022, there had been a consistent interest in maintaining trade relations and collaboration across the border, although Finland, in agreement with other European Union (EU) member states, had implemented numerous sanctions against Russia following its 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

To understand the meaning of the new geopolitical situation and the reactions and experiences it has spurred in Finland, we must contemplate the historically formed symbolic meanings of the Finnish-Russian border as marker of territoriality and identity. For centuries, the territory of Finland was a frontier province of Sweden, functioning as a buffer zone against a succession of Russian states and as a battleground for several wars (Karsh, 1986, p. 47). As a result of Napoleonic wars,

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Sweden was forced to cede Finland, which became an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia in 1809. From the 1850s onward, social, political and cultural movements striving for independence gained momentum. Finland finally declared its independence on December 6, 1917, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. After becoming independent, the newly established border started rapidly distinguishing between people as “insiders” versus “outsiders,” and antipathy among Finns towards the Russian people became stronger (Karemaa, 2004).

During World War II, Finland fought against the Soviet Union first from November 30, 1939 to March 13, 1940 (The Winter War), and for the second time from June 25, 1941 to September 19, 1944 (The Continuation War). When World War II ended, the Finnish regions of Karelia, Petsamo and Salla were ceded to the Soviet Union. This area amounted to 12.5% of Finland’s territory, resulting in the resettlement of 420,000 citizens. Extensive population resettlements and the territorial losses of the southeastern part of Finland, Karelia, caused a national trauma, and these topics were subject to a certain taboo until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After the war, all cultural symbols reminding people about the lost cultural heritage of Karelia were hidden and silenced throughout Finnish society until the 1970s and 1980s, when the economic interests of local authorities and the emerging heritage industry in the border region gave rise to nostalgia for the “lost Karelia” (Paasi, 1999, p. 672).

The process of reterritorializing the former Soviet Union into fifteen of sovereign states was regarded globally as a world-historical event. In Finland, this sudden geopolitical transition led to major political and economic changes, including the abandonment of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance that had been concluded by the Finns with the Soviet Union in 1948 (Moisio, 2008, p. 83). It was now possible for Finland to openly turn towards Western Europe, and in 1995 it became a member of the EU. Finland also joined the NATO Partnership for Peace programme in 1997, although it formally remained a non-NATO state. Regardless, questions concerning Finland’s geopolitical identity – that is, whether Finland is a neutral country, a full member of the West or located “somewhere along a continuum between East and West” (Browning & Lehti, 2007) – have again accelerated in international forums (e.g., Sauvage, 2022).

The border with Russia and its Soviet predecessor has held a unique and deep symbolic meaning as a barrier that separates Finland from its threatening neighbor (Laurén, 2012; Ridanpää, 2017). The Finnish-Russian border stands as a multidimensional marker of political-territorial order, and its exclusive nature is continuously reproduced through emotional and affective bordering between us and the Other (cf. Lizotte, 2020). Emotional bordering between Finland and Russia has strengthened due to the war, fueled by Finland’s collective national memory. Moreover, news reports and commentaries on the geopolitical position of the Finnish-Russian border during the Ukraine crisis point out how specific historical memories of the wars are being mobilized once again to claim national cohesion and military capacity in the present. For example, romanticized narratives about “the miracle of the Winter War,” which recount how Finland managed to hold off overwhelming Soviet military superiority in the Finnish-Russian borderlands, have been referred to in numerous speeches and commentaries provided by Finnish politicians and historians (e.g., Forsman, 2022). The resistance and resilience of Ukrainians is praised by comparing their ongoing war with the past achievements of the Finnish military. Hence, at the same time as the “seismic shift,” a new geopolitics has arisen that has fundamentally changed the meaning of the Finnish-Russian border, reawakening the national consciousness, memories about the wars, and mistrust between neighboring countries.

It can be argued that the current geopolitical situation manifests, in many ways, a collision of the imperialist outward border-thinking and the settled external boundaries of the modern state system, that is, the status quo border (cf. Forsberg & Mäkinen, 2019; Vollaard, 2009). Forsberg and Mäkinen (2019) put forward that the Russian annexation of Crimean Peninsula in 2014 at last revealed how Russia has abandoned

the principles and norms of the international community, which it followed after the Cold War, and is now making claims based on national self-determination, “traditional” geopolitics, and its ostensible historical “rights.” Russian policy leaders’ aggressive rhetoric about their country’s current borders in terms of “historical mistakes” illustrates how specific historical framings of the borders and identities are used to mobilize imperialistic territoriality in the present. This has consequences for the ways Russia’s neighboring states understand the role of their territorial borders and territorialized security. In an international press conference on May 11, 2022, the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, suggested that the “Finnish mind” about its neighbor had already started to change in late 2021. According to Niinistö, “In the end of last year, [Russia] stated that Finland and Sweden can’t join NATO. They demanded that NATO doesn’t take new members. Russia actually expressed that you don’t have your own will” (Office of the President of the Republic of Finland, 2022). Russia’s outward looking imperialist territoriality and its buffer zone geopolitics, manifested in the claim that its neighboring countries should not join NATO, for example, thus crushed the Finnish imaginary of Russia as country respecting international norms and agreements regarding territorial integrity and the rights of independent states to choose their own future.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and international reactions to the events reveal how modern state territoriality is simultaneously both vulnerable and persistent. The current geopolitical situation also brutally reminds us that borderlines, as markers of territoriality, are highly important material and symbolic signifiers and at the same time contested and changing in meaning. We continue to live in a world of dynamic territorialized borders and border struggles.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

We confirm that there is no conflict of interest concerning this research and the manuscript “New geopolitics and the Finnish-Russian border as a marker of territoriality”.

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