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Does the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) Mobilize the Municipal Level? City Twinning in Northern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades city-twinning became quite popular in Northern Europe. This form of coining transborder communality took place particularly in the Nordic countries with their long-standing cooperative experience but included also the Baltic States and Russia. Twinning is viewed by many North European municipalities as an instrument available for both solving local problems and ensuring sustainable development. In some cases it has amounted to a kind of local foreign policy (paradiplomacy). This contribution aims at a critical examination of city twinning through four examples (Tornio–Haparanda, Narva–Ivangorod, Imatra–Svetogorsk, and Valga–Valka). It is argued that city twinning can bridge the ‘trust gaps’ that have traditionally existed at the boundaries of nation-states, and create shared spaces across national borders. In particular, the study seeks to explain whether the causal mechanism behind the examined phenomena is the agency of the cities themselves, or whether these phenomena merely reflect the wider policies of the states to which these cities belong. City twinning is also examined in light of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

KEYWORDS City twinning; Baltic Sea Region; European Union; EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR); municipalities; northern Europe

Introduction

Cities and urban areas located along borders have, to varying degrees, contributed toward the integration of northern Europe in general and the Baltic Sea region in particular. This uneven development prompted Hanell and Neubauer (2005, p. 3) to distinguish between ‘actors’ and ‘reactors’ in describing the relationship between the metropolitan areas that clearly stand out as the main motors of development and integration, and the more peripheral actors. The twin ‘cities’ examined here (the Finnish–Swedish cities of Tornio–Haparanda, the Estonian–Russian pair Narva–Ivangorod, the Finnish–Russian twins Imatra–Svetogorsk, and the Estonian–Latvian municipalities Valga–Valka) are peripheral in location, and thus cannot be counted among the principal engines of integrationist development. Nonetheless, despite their size and remote locations, we believe it would be unfair to categorize them as merely

'reactors' and argue that they are all significant due to (rather than despite) their marginal locations along borderlands, in spite of conventional wisdom associating peripherality with a lack of autonomy. Through their policies of twinning, these towns employ a creative and offensive approach, cultivating identities which transcend state borders by alleging similarities with their international neighbors in order to autonomously pursue transnational policies (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2011). In short, these cities located in close proximity to national borders have sought to acquire a voice in the international sphere by engaging in city twinning activities with foreign partners.

This article argues that twin cities in the Baltic Sea region contribute to cross-border regionalization each in their own ways by pooling resources, resting their policies on far-reaching commonalities and more. Crucially, it appears that twinning entails a more radical rethinking of the meaning of difference (including ways of conceptualizing the 'self' and 'other') than most other forms of regionalization, albeit within a restricted area. Whereas regionalization is, as a form of identity-politics, generally felt to be attractive in confirming established identities through sensations of, and engagement with, what one is not, twinning works quite differently. Notably, it signals not only a willingness to engage with the other, but also an attempt to reconceptualize this 'otherness.' Twinning rests on the assumption that similitude, rather than unfamiliarity and difference (cf. Andersen 2014; Spierings and Van Der Velde 2013), generates the productive will to interact which reaches across borders and challenges various political and administrative structures. Through the establishment of close links based upon the geographic and alleged cultural similitude of the cities involved, twinning undermines the crucial distinctions of 'inside' and 'outside', of 'us' and 'them'. It is conducive to de-territorialization, de-bordering, and increased mobility, and thus contributes to the emergence of new political spaces in a way that would have been unthinkable only some decades ago.

Significantly, the instances of twinning probed here reach across frontiers within (Finland–Sweden, Estonia–Latvia) and beyond (Finland–Russia, Estonia–Russia) the European Union (EU). A comparison can therefore be made as to whether these two categories of twinning differ in their features. Do city pairs within the EU fare better at transcending traditional obstacles to close cooperation and at de-territorializing between adjacent cities on state borders, than those outside of the EU? The presence of EU members, as well as nonmembers also allows us to assess whether twinning evolved in a top–down manner, bolstered and supported in various ways by the EU (particularly by regional developments such as the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)), or in a bottom–up fashion, driven by local initiatives. An exploration of the connections between city twinning and European integration, and more particularly with processes of Baltic Sea regionalization, can shed light on all of these interconnected phenomena. Zelinsky (1991) has pointed to this connection in a broader context, by attributing part of the success of the European 'project' to the town twinning movement.

With a view to our four case studies, city twinning is narrowly defined as a policy of cities enhancing their ties in far-reaching ways, but specifically by utilizing their proximity along a shared national border. Our four cases of city twinning in border regions are explored to highlight instances of local polities developing a foreign policy autonomous from the central state, or 'paradiplomacy,' thus highlighting that diplomacy does not need to be statist, static, and conform to traditional categories, as it can change under altered conditions, in terms of both the scale of pursued policies

and the specific nature of involved polities (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2014). Twinning is nested in broader trends of subregional cooperation but constitutes an interesting phenomenon to explore in itself. Such arrangements may have developed unique features, and even a particular entelechy, which would have implications within the wider context of regionalization in northern European in general and the Baltic Sea area in particular. This article focuses on the question of how city twinning is able to contribute to shaping of a multilevel governance system in the Baltic Sea region, if it shapes multilevel governance systems at all. The article also examines whether local actors' sets of paradiplomacy are harmonized with the EUSBSR or not, and whether city twinning is either a sustainable or short-term project without a long-standing impact on the regionalization process in the Baltic Sea region.

Theoretical framework

According to the seminal work by Soldatos (1990) and Duchacek (1990), 'paradiplomacy' is an aspect of the ubiquitous processes of globalization and regionalization, under which substate and nonstate actors play increasing roles in global politics. The phenomenon of paradiplomacy raises new theoretical questions concerning the responsibility of the state, substate, and nonstate actors in international affairs, as well as challenges the existing state system and international law which provided the grounds for the international political order in the Westphalian era.

In the post-Cold War era, the theory of paradiplomacy (see, e.g., Kuznetsov 2015) has dynamically evolved in several directions. One particular group of subtheories aimed at explaining the factors that cause the rise of subnational units as international actors which include the decentralization of the nation-state, the arrival of a 'post-sovereign' state, the crisis of the 'classic' models of federalism, the spread of network-type relations, the replacement of the international relations system by the paradigm of global governance, and the emergence of the globalization (Rosenau 1997; Smith 2001). Another subgroup of paradiplomatic theory was based on the *geographic diffusion theory*, explaining the successful democratic transformation of some post-Communist countries and subnational units within them through Europe's spatial proximity, argued to be conducive to the diffusion of Western resources, values, and norms across subnational borders (Kopstein and Reilly 2000). The literature on leverages and linkages develops this argumentation by describing methods and instruments which were used by the West to influence the democratic transformation of the post-Communist countries (Way and Levitsky 2007). These subtheories suggest that intensive cross-border cooperation (CBC)/transborder cooperation and Western aid have contributed toward more profound, successful market systems and democratic reforms, as well as the Europeanization of both the Baltic space and Russia's north-western subnational units as compared to other, interior, provinces and municipalities (Lankina and Getachew 2006). These subtheories, however, have been criticized for making too strong an emphasis on the role of external factors, as well as for representing post-Communist countries and their subnational units as passive objects of Western manipulations, rather than decision-makers with subjectivities of their own. In contrast to this view, the 'classical' paradiplomacy theories underline that in reality there is always interaction between external and domestic factors that generate and affect subnational units' international activities (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2014, 20).

It is important to note that the very concept of 'twin cities' is a consensus definition. Furthermore, this nebulous meaning seems to have shifted over time. For example, Köhle (2005, 16) identifies a gradual change on the European scene from 'partnerships of reconciliation' to 'partnerships of integration.' Instead of a merely symbolic emphasis on togetherness, the aim is increasingly shifting toward concrete and functional cooperation. Different schools suggest different interpretations and employ various synonyms. Thus, one definition has taken city twinning to mean the domestic phenomenon of proximate urban centers agglomerating over time, while internationally focused definitions are split between broad and narrow perspectives of twinning, with the term 'twin city' itself being merely the most common term among many (Buursink 2001; Schultz, Jajeśniak-Quast, and Stokłosa 2002). The broad definition describes cooperative agreements between cities, towns, and even nonadjacent counties promoting economic and cultural ties (cf. Stephen 2008). Such twinning occurs primarily between cities sharing similar social, economic, and political patterns and structures, and/or historical links. In its narrowest sense, city twinning is limited to adjacent border towns cooperating across a national border. Buursink (1994) outlines two subcategories of adjacent border towns: first, town couples that aim at far-reaching cooperation, and second, town couples with a more competitive relationship. Schultz, Jajeśniak-Quast, and Stokłosa (2002) introduce a separate definition by asserting that only so-called 'double towns' can be seen as real twins, and set a number of additional criteria for defining such towns. They claim that 'double towns' should not only consist of border towns, but also those that share a common history as homogenous administrative units prior to national borders separating them. Schultz and her coauthors stress cases where urban entities face each other across a shared river, hence the synonymous term 'bridge towns.' They further assert factors that are conducive to the meaningful development of twinning, such as the presence of ethnic minorities, widespread familiarity with one another's languages, and the preexistence of a certain level of institutionalization of cooperation between the twins in terms of unified administrative structures and common urban planning.

While taking note of the points described earlier, we proceed with our examination of our four northern city pairs using a somewhat different and more extensive definition of twin cities. Adjacency and the effort of transcending national borders constitute crucial features of twinning, but a policy of 'naming' also counts: it is essential for us that the cities themselves utilize twinning autonomously, and in doing so articulate a sense of belonging that breaks with the norms usually promoted by central agencies of the nation-state. Thus, by focusing on twinning as an active ingredient and a policy of naming, we aim to highlight the creative and offensive potential of twinning. These aspects seem to have been largely overlooked in the relevant literature. Here, the subversive potential of twinning is examined through our four city pairs by assessing how their development contributed to the unfolding of the Baltic Sea region and integration in northern Europe at large (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2011).

Cities as international actors

The twinning initiatives of North European cities follow broader European and international trends. Throughout the Cold War, Westphalian structures prevailed so that there was little scope left for actors, other than states, in the sphere of international relations. Since then, substate actors have found opportunities to establish relations of their own,

without decisive central supervision. The motivations of Northern European municipalities establishing transnational spaces in the 1990s were often quite idealistic. The policies pursued focused on depolarization through ties of friendship across the East-West divide. Cooperation was largely symbolic and rarely driven by pragmatic concerns which meant that the contacts established amounted to meetings between local leaders, diplomatic handshaking, and cultural events such as the organization of festivals. Occasionally, this cooperation would be more substantive, including aid deliveries to struggling former Eastern Bloc states and the establishment of some more permanent ties.

In the case of Russia's northwestern municipalities, the initial thrust for external activities can be explained by some of the harsh realities of the 1990s. In the Yeltsin era, many Russian provincial territories developed types of 'survival strategies' as they felt quite neglected – if not abandoned – by the federal government in terms of financial resources and support. In this context, foreign aid and investment were perceived as one of the most efficient instruments in keeping the local economies afloat. Owing to the broad autonomy of subnational actors over the Yeltsin period, particularly in Russia's northwest, many cities autonomously developed diverse international contacts.

When the Russian socioeconomic situation initially improved under the Putin regime, city-based paradiplomacy was well-established and started to adopt long-term strategies for municipal international cooperation. This paradigmatic shift in motivations actually entailed a radical change in their attitudes and substantive approach to city twinning. In sum, the romanticism of the earlier phase gave way to more pragmatic and rational considerations. With increased scarcity of resources and changes to financial conditions surrounding EU CBC programs, collaborative projects became more appealing and realistic by dealing first and foremost with the practical needs of the partners (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2014, 22). Municipalities, thus, increasingly coalesce across borders in order to solve concrete, shared problems, for reasons determined autonomously, and through the means they independently possess. These municipalities utilize the opportunity to join forces with similar polities that are presented by various regional endeavors in order to pursue the transgression of various borders – be them conceptual, identity-related, or spatial – ultimately to augment their autonomous strengths.

The above phenomenon has perhaps contributed to the fact that, generally, the logic of twinning has become more EU-oriented, and in that sense, transnational rather than remaining state-centered and binational in nature. Proximity to the EU, as claimed in general by geographic diffusion theory (Lankina and Getachew 2006), seems to have impacted city twinning in northern Europe to a considerable degree. The profile of various substate actors has become increasingly Europe-oriented, owing in part to the various financial possibilities available for twinning (e.g. Euroregions and other forms of cross-border and transnational cooperation). Notably, many previously closed spaces have been opened in the process of maximizing benefits from cross-border networking. It can also be observed that municipal actors have, for a variety of reasons, become part of an increasingly competitive logic, and that they have been compelled by this logic to devise active strategies of their own. What is important is that they have demonstrated the self-confidence required to do this, acting in determination with their specific needs. Despite undeniable top-down influences emanating from the EU or Moscow, the growth of intercity connections, and the 'paradiplomacy' pursued by cities including various forms of twinning, rests to a considerable degree upon bottom-up policies and local initiatives.

Institutionalization of city twinning and city networking in north-east Europe

Twinning has long been associated with various forms of institutionalization. In the first instance, institution building has been prioritized in order to find sources of financing, but also with the aim of coordinating various activities, and as a form of gaining recognition on the international arena. Town twinning has generally been supported by the EU, bolstered by efforts to ‘flesh out’ the principle of subsidiarity. Twinning has, in this context, gained a recognized position as an integral part of European integration. Several associations operate in Europe to support town twinning, such as the International Union of Local Authorities (1913), the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (1951), the Union of Cities and Local Governments (2004), EUROCITIES (1986), the Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas (1996), and Douzelage (1989).

The end of the Cold War era drastically impacted both the Baltic Sea region and northern Europe, triggering new opportunities for municipal collaboration. The *Baltic Metropolises Network* (BaltMet), for example, was founded in 2002 representing 11 capitals and metropolitan cities around the Baltic Sea: Berlin, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Malmö, Oslo, Riga, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Vilnius, and Warsaw. One of the BaltMet’s key priorities consists in the harmonization of the 2009 EUSBSR and the Russian strategy for the socioeconomic development of the Northwestern Federal District, particularly in areas such as growth, employment, environment, education, competitiveness, innovation, and change.

The *Union of the Baltic Cities* (UBC), founded in 1992, has an even broader membership than the BaltMet, and currently includes more than 100 towns from 10 Baltic Sea region countries. According to its strategy for 2010–2015, the UBC aims at supporting its member cities in their development in order to promote a high quality of life for their inhabitants; promoting the Baltic Sea region as a dynamic, competitive, and prosperous region; furthering the interests of the Baltic Sea region and its cities in national and European decision-making (Union of the Baltic Cities 2016). Similar to BaltMet, the Union aims to facilitating EUSBSR implementation and engaging Russian municipalities in regional cooperation.

In 2006, Narva–Ivangorod, Imatra–Svetogorsk, and Valga–Valka established an organization of their own, the *City Twins Association* (CTA). The CTA emerged as a result of a City Twins Cooperation Network project (2004–2006) and was cofinanced by the EU’s INTERREG IIIC Program. Overall, many of the participating cities seem to have been dissatisfied with the CTA resulting in a decrease of activities of the association. This appears to confirm that city twinning remains primarily a local bottom–up type of endeavor and cannot be strengthened significantly by a collective and international organizational framework.

As far as twinning between adjacent cities in the Baltic Sea region is concerned, the phenomenon stands out as something relatively fresh when compared to Western Europe. Tornio–Haparanda predates the end of the Cold War with the initial steps of twinning taken in the 1960s. The other cases are of more recent origins, with shorter histories beginning at the end of the Cold War. Kirkenes in northern Norway and Nikel on the Russian side of the border constitute the latest case of city twinning, with an agreement signed in June 2008 between the two communities. The decision by these two towns to reach across the previously rather divisive Norwegian–Russian border

seems to indicate that the concept of twinning has retained its attractiveness, and does not merely pertain to the early years of the post-Cold War period. The following analysis aims to examine four twin pairs located in the Baltic Sea region: the Finnish–Swedish cities of Tornio–Haparanda, the Estonian–Russian pair Narva–Ivangorod, the Finnish–Russian twins Imatra–Svetogorsk, and the Estonian–Latvian municipalities Valga–Valka.

Tornio–Haparanda

The Finnish–Swedish cities of Tornio–Haparanda are situated on either side of the border along the Torne River in the northernmost part of the Baltic Sea region. The Swedish King initially founded the town of Tornio in 1621 on the western side of the Torne River, with it later becoming part of the Grand Duchy of Finland in 1809. On the Swedish side, a new town, Haparanda, was established in 1821 to replace the loss of Tornio; Haparanda came into being precisely because of the appearance of the border. In terms of historical memory, the Tornio–Haparanda configuration stands out as a case of ‘duplicated cities’ (Buursink 2001; Ehlers 2001). They do not have a joint history in the sense of having once been part of a unified whole, although prior to Finnish and Swedish state-building, the region was relatively unified, consisting of Finnish speakers and a Saami population. They have also varied in size and wealth through time, although more recently these differences in living standards have grown smaller.

The exploitation of the Tornio–Haparanda area’s resources is nothing new. Being divided only by a stretch of wetland, and with a tradition of many informal, inter-personal contacts stretching far back in history, the two cities began formal cooperation in the 1960s through the establishment of a joint swimming hall. Since then, interest in cooperation has gradually progressed toward developing a very explicit strategy of transboundary cooperation, including joint planning and organization (*Provincia Bothniensis*), in 1985 (Kujala 2000). The twin-city strategy was produced in a top–down manner and has been implemented from 1987 onwards, bringing a considerable degree of mutual trust and positive cooperation. These have enhanced a common sense of identity, as well as solved a considerable number of practical problems. The latter range from a joint rescue and ambulance service, a joint tourist service, joint employment information agencies, joint schools, joint educational facilities, and a common library, with citizens often given a choice between facilities across the two locations as they prefer. In particular, the cities pride themselves on a hotel complex with a bar table stretching across the national border, and on a local golf course straddling not just the national boundaries, but also different time zones, (‘even the shortest putt may take an hour to complete’). These properties can be seen as a symbolic expression of the common space created through endeavors of city twinning. More recent developments pertain to a nascent joint city core that bridges the two cities in a very concrete fashion. The two towns have gradually succeeded in attracting businesses and considerable investment, for example, a new IKEA furniture store in the cities’ core.

A unified area and a joint core have been created with the construction of traversing roads and connecting pathways as well as the establishment of a common circle bus line. A further example of functional cooperation is the fusion of postal services that has rationalized the task of distributing mail. These functional gains, only

achievable through the reconceptualization of borders, are loaded with considerable symbolic significance, indicating far-reaching unity with a polity beyond the nation-state. In short, the standard divisive effects of national borders have been radically circumvented as a consequence of twinning.

However, it should be noted that the development of Nordic cooperation has greatly facilitated municipal cooperation across the border in the region. After Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995, EU membership has further spurred cooperation, providing resources for activities such as twinning. While Finland adopted the euro, Sweden's continued use of its own national currency constitutes an impediment toward creating far-reaching unity. However, considerable efforts have occurred as attempts to bridge this divide, with both the euro and Swedish krona being interchangeably used validly on both sides of the national border within the twin towns. Haparanda has even made the decision to use the euro extensively in calculating its municipality budgets, among other things, in order to facilitate the planning and implementation of joint projects with Tornio. The position of the euro as a *de facto* joint currency has subsequently facilitated the towns' integration and re-imagination along lines beyond the nation-state.

Clearly, projecting a new and far-reaching concept of transnational unity has not been easy, and the problems seem to have been most discernible among the Swedish-speaking inhabitants of Haparanda who tend to express fears that the integration with Tornio excessively favors the Finnish speakers on both sides of the border. Lundén and Zalamans (2001, 36) also highlight that there is a legacy on the Swedish side of viewing Finland as 'poor, dangerous or irredentist.' To transfigure this sentiment of otherness into a joint feeling of *we-ness* in the context of twinning is clearly a demanding challenge. In other words, although the trend is positive, the twin city does not yet fully function as unified in the proper sense of the word, with resistance toward growing integration. However, the divisive border now predominantly connects and facilitates cooperation and hence invites a transition into a common collective feeling encouraged by the experiences of city twinning. Further, on a theoretical note, the case of Tornio–Haparanda supports the first subgroup of paradiplomacy concepts that emphasizes the growing role of local actors in the worldwide processes of globalization and regionalization.

Narva–Ivangorod

From a historical point of view, the Estonian–Russian pair Narva–Ivangorod have either been part of a joint configuration or stood opposed to each other. Their histories at border locations along a river have tended to be convoluted and tragic. The city sites have functioned as a single composite settlement for nearly three and a half centuries, first under Swedish rule in the sixteenth century and then later during the tsarist period with Moscow having conquered Narva during the Livonian Wars. After a brief period of Bolshevik control during late 1918 to early 1919, both towns were incorporated into Estonia under the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Tartu.

The cities' togetherness within Estonia was altered by the outbreak of the Second World War. The Estonian population was either evacuated from the Narva region by the Nazi army or deported to Siberia by the Soviet authorities, followed by the immigration of Russian speakers into Estonia. Administratively, the conjoined status of the two cities changed in 1945, with Ivangorod maintaining closely functional and

cultural ties despite their separation by an administrative border. The administrative status of the two cities changed considerably in 1991 when the Narva River became a de facto state border which was subsequently institutionalized and an international border-crossing set up on the bridge connecting the towns. Thus, the two entities can be described as 'partitioned cities' (Buursink 2001, 8). The separation of the cities was quite drastic and contentious and has ultimately strengthened contrasting perceptions of 'us' and 'them.' Despite the broadly shared ethnic and linguistic background of the inhabitants, there was (at least initially) a growing tendency on both sides to separate along the new axis established by the border. It also appears that Estonian membership of the EU and NATO further accentuated the split.

The deterioration of a connected city space into two more clearly separate entities created feelings of loss. A variety of compensatory cooperative plans and projects were consequently proposed. Some of these have explicitly appeared under the heading 'twin cities' in the spheres of culture, tourism, employment policies, border policies, spatial planning coordination, and infrastructural improvements. There were plans to establish a joint tourist route covering the Narva and Ivangorod fortresses on their respective sides of the Narva River, as well as to develop a historical promenade along the river's banks and construct an aqua park in the border area. However, these plans were only partially implemented as a result of the global economic crisis.

Membership in the CTA has facilitated Narva and Ivangorod's cooperation. The brand of twin cities increasingly conveys an innovative and open image that is very different from that which prevailed in the early 1990s. Cooperation has been further facilitated within the broader framework of EU-Russia relations, with a specific visa-exchange agreement allowing both sides to issue up to 4000 multi-entry visas annually to border residents who have compelling needs to cross the border regularly. Yet, a principal obstacle to the emergence of greater integration seems to be the existence of a considerable psychological, identity-related distance. Boman and Berg (2007, 206) note that there is no perception of a joint historical-cultural identity: 'People in Narva possess some kind of "Narvian" identity which is not Russian anymore, but has not become Estonian either.'

Twinning thus unavoidably turns into a rather contentious theme. This explains why the twin city label has predominantly gained connotations of depoliticization and interest-oriented cooperation of a very practical and mundane kind. It has been deliberately narrowed to explicitly functional issues such as city planning and various interest-related contacts between the respective administrations, and has not been brought into the public sphere to any major extent. Still, because of its usefulness for the process of European integration, the concept of twinning has enjoyed legitimacy within the overall discourse on Europeanization.

Imatra–Svetogorsk

For quite some time, the Finnish–Russian twins Imatra–Svetogorsk occupied a rather special place in EU-Russia relations. The two cities were unique in terms of their location; at the only place on the EU-Russia border where both rail and automobile border crossings existed. Prior to the EU enlargement of 2004 – similarly to the case of Narva–Ivangorod presented above – this Finnish–Russian case stood out as the only example of adjacent settlements separated by a national boundary along the EU-Russian frontier.

Imatra–Svetogorsk used to be an integrated entity within the Russian Empire, and then formed part of an independent Finland from 1917. However, as a result of the Soviet–Finnish ‘winter war’ of 1939–1940, and the Second World War in general, the Finnish–Russian border was redrawn and the previously coherent industrial center of Enso was partitioned by this new boundary. The majority of the area subsequently remained on the Finnish side, although a large pulp and paper factory was on the Soviet side. With the previous population having migrated to Finland, it took some time to repopulate the Soviet section.

In January 1949, the city of Svetogorsk (i.e. the City of Light Hills) was founded. Meanwhile, Imatra evolved into a more coherent municipal entity. The two municipalities had the character of ‘border cities’ with very little, if any, contact between them. Although, some cooperation did begin to emerge, even during the Soviet period, from 1972 onwards when the reconstruction of the large Svetogorsk paper combine was launched as a joint Finnish–Russian endeavor.

In this case, the twin city concept emerged from the common discourse in the late 1990s, mainly due to advice provided by various consultants. In 2001, Imatra and Svetogorsk signed a cooperation agreement and decided on a common development strategy using EU funding, although the two cities have never formally declared themselves as constituting a twin city. In 2000, a pilot project to develop the twin-cities strategy for the short (2002–2003) and long terms (2006–2010) was initiated under the aegis of the Tacis program. Therein, the general aim of twinning has been to improve ‘the welfare of the inhabitants of both the towns’ (Hurskainen 2005, 132), i.e. to facilitate border-crossing and cooperation, which, for example, facilitates the more efficient use of resources.

The key decision-making body of the twinning process has been a steering group comprised of key members of both towns’ administrations. In addition to this local input, the institutional setup includes a participatory commission with representatives of various ministries in Finland and Russia (although in practice this body has yielded very little and has effectively been abandoned). There are also Finnish–Russian small- to medium-size enterprise support centers that operate both in Imatra and in Svetogorsk.

In parallel, the idea of creating a Finnish–Russian Key East Industrial Park (KEIP) in a neutral zone existing along the border area has been developed since 1999. Potential investors were granted tax and customs exemptions, and a visa-free regime was proposed, as well as a single KEIP management system suggested. However, economic hardship and changes in Russian legislation (that were not conducive to establishing such technoparks) have hampered the project’s implementation which is still in its formative phase.

Other concrete aspects of cooperation consisted in collaborative projects. These included the modernization of the Svetogorsk paper combine; the improvement of Svetogorsk’s energy, health, social security services, and wastewater treatment systems; the assessment and measurement of the water quality and fish stocks in the Vuoksi River; the establishment of educational contacts; the development of tourist infrastructure; and attempts to improve the functioning of the municipal governments. Furthermore, the international arts festival ‘Vuoksa,’ is held annually in Imatra and Svetogorsk, creating an important joint space for the towns’ inhabitants, and there are plans (under the EU-Russian ‘neighborhood partnership’ program) to build a freeway that bypasses Svetogorsk and Imatra in order to ease

bottlenecks on the Russian–Finnish border and improve the transportation and communication systems between the two countries. Increased access to visas further facilitated interaction across the border from 2007, greatly aiding the general aims of twinning.

In summary, cooperation has, on one hand, advanced between the Imatra–Svetogorsk city pair, while on the other, has failed to advance to the extent to which local identities would be questioned. Although circumstances have forbidden the progress made from being as dramatic as in other cases of twinning, the effects on Imatra–Svetogorsk have been unmistakable. While for a long period after the Second World War otherness was projected across the border, as we have seen, the attractions of twinning do take hold; both as a method of increasing the relative positions of peripheral polities and in terms of its functional logic. The long-term trend is consequently pointing very clearly away from the divisions of old, and toward a new cooperative conception. In this sense, we agree with geographic diffusion theory that proximity to the EU has been decisive both in shaping the paradiplomacy of Russia’s northwestern subnational units and in achieving success in twinning projects.

Valga–Valka

The Estonian town of Valga and the Latvian town of Valka have a long and closely interrelated history. They first appeared on historical records in 1286 as the German city of Walk. The period of Polish rule led to city rights being achieved in 1584, followed by the city’s transition as a part of Estonia during Swedish rule in 1626. A century later, it was integrated into the Russian Empire. Throughout this period, and despite the German name, Estonians and Latvians primarily inhabited the area.

After Estonia and Latvia both gained independence in 1918, international arbitration established the border between the two countries by drawing a line along a stream running through the city, with ethnicity as the main criterion for dividing the previously unified city. Consequently, the towns remained divided until the Second World War. In 1945, barriers were removed as part of Sovietization, although a variety of ethnic and cultural lines of division prevailed. The only concrete border remaining was the administrative one, with the two cities belonging to different Soviet republics, although Valga–Valka were treated as a single Soviet town furnished with a unified administration, joint educational facilities, common health care, and a common transportation system.

In 1991, the largely reunified entity was once again divided into two separate towns, centered on the reinstated, nationally premised border. The cities were surprised to find that they were now expected to establish their own separate administrative arrangements. For example, both had problems with the quality of drinking water, yet were forced to inefficiently construct separate sewage-treatment plants. It should be noted that Valka suffered most acutely from the economic effects of division, having suddenly been separated from its previous primary market. In addition, the Russian population (some 35% of the population in Valga, and some 25% in Valka) became ‘aliens’ without citizenship and had to submit visa applications (Zalamans 2008, 5).

The situation changed only gradually in the mid-1990s. Both municipalities officially accepted the common logo of ‘one city, two countries’ in a special agreement concluded in 2005. Subsequently, relatively strong cross-border networks developed in areas such as spatial planning, tourism, education, health care, culture, and sports. A joint secretariat emerged, and a cross-border bus line was established, a concrete sign

of the formation of a common space (although it was short-lived due to a lack of passengers interested in taking a cross-border ride). When Estonia and Latvia joined the Schengen agreement, the importance of the border further declined, making the city pair more comparable to the case of Tornio–Haparanda discussed earlier. Besides enduring administrative differences, the main contemporary dividing lines seem to be language and culture (Zalamans 2008).

City twinning stands to gain from the almost complete demise of the border over swathes of Europe, and there might consequently be an increased emphasis on Europeanism in policymaking. But, this is yet to be seen, and certainly some obstacles remain. Cultural and identity-related issues are the most problematic. The symbolic slogan of ‘one city, two countries’ remains more of an aspiration than a reality, but as in many other instances of twinning, the trend is in favor of greater cooperation, as previous obstacles are increasingly undermined. Further, it should also be noted that the Valga–Valka case again supports geographic diffusion theory because even prior to Estonia and Latvia’s EU accession (2004), close cooperation with Brussels was really conducive to the twin-city project’s emergence and implementation.

Conclusions

Effectively, for all four cases, there are considerable elements of twinning, in the sense that these northern European city pairs do not merely aim at intensified cooperation as separate ‘border cities.’ Rather, they display attempts to create varying degrees of communality and joint spaces; the basis of the ‘twin city’ concept. Other forms of cooperation remain available, yet it seems that a particular interest exists in employing the specific conceptual framework of ‘twinning,’ even in the face of varied and challenging obstacles.

Overall, the experiences of twinning gained in northern Europe can be summarized as positive. The introduction of the concept – one allowing for the difference of the ‘Other’ to be viewed as benign and complementary, and positioned within a broader sphere of commonality – has enabled several cities to use their contiguous border locations to opt for new forms of being and acting. The coalescing of cities clearly contributes to the strengthening of communality, mutual trust, and cooperation in the region, and provides relatively small polities the opportunity to realize greater achievements. There is increased stress on similarity rather than difference across borders whereby distances appear shorter and conducive to cooperation, confidence is bolstered, and new channels of togetherness are opened up.

In view of the more recent experiences, twinning contributes an interesting notion to our understanding of Europe, by extending EU-spurred ‘Europeanness’ beyond the Union’s borders, as well as the mutual harmonization of Russia’s policies at the regional and local levels with the objectives of the EUSBSR. This process, however, has come to an end for the time being as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis. It also testifies to the potential entelechy behind the concept of city-ness, owing to its inherent logic of increasing cooperation and transcending statist borders.

It may also be noted that twinning remains something of a conceptual battlefield. Its conceptual interpretations are reflections of its equally varied implementation in practice, with the level of unity found in Tornio–Haparanda not reproduced to the same degree in Imatra–Svetogorsk or Narva–Ivangorod. Notably, and despite the slogan of ‘one city, two countries,’ Valka–Valga essentially stands for intensified cooperation between separate entities, rather than becoming a twin city in any deeper

sense. The enduring grip of state-based identities seems to stand in the way of profound cooperation that could link the distinct administrative entities at their core. There is adjacency as to location, and a considerable amount of cooperation, but seemingly insufficient psychological proximity for real unity to occur.

It seems clear that the concept of a twin city, with the far-reaching unity and like-mindedness it implies, remains quite challenging for the cities involved. This is natural given that what is implied through the concept of twinning is a complete reconceptualization of what cities are basically about. Yet, it may be concluded that the city pairs involved seem to be well-equipped to make use of the changing nature of state borders within the Baltic Sea region. Past negative conceptions of otherness seem to be gradually transforming perceptions into something positive. Thus, it can be assumed that twinning – or far-reaching togetherness under some other related label – is here to stay. The trends may not be spectacular, but they are certainly favorable. Various broader tendencies of transborder regionalization may aid the process further, as we move toward greater Europeanization and internationalization at large. Twinning is still in its infancy in the Baltic Sea region, often oriented toward short-term rather than the long-term perspectives, yet our brief study provides the grounds to expect that it will likely become more established over time. This implies the usefulness of theoretical insights as the twinning experiments go forwards.

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