

NÄKÖKULMA

TEEMU OIVO

Postdoctoral researcher, University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Institute
Visiting researcher University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri Institute



RETROSPECTIVE COMMENTARY ON “EXTERNAL BORDER MANAGEMENT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF MIGRATION CONTROL: THE FINNISH – RUSSIAN BORDER” BY KATHARINA KOCH

In his commentary Teemu Oivo tracks the changes of Finnish–Russian border policy in the 21st century and how it has changed from regional economy policy to immigration control policy similar to Mediterranean border policies.

Key words: asylum seekers, border policy, Finnish–Russian border, immigration policy, War in Ukraine

Katharina Koch examined the Finnish–Russian border from the perspective of immigration control on the EU/Schengen external border, a perspective that some at the time might have considered irrelevant, not knowing what the future held. More specifically, Koch analysed the border policies through the lens of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies’ concept of *securitisation* and broader EU policies, and reflected on the Finnish counter-terrorism strategies of 2001 and 2004, the governmental report on Finnish security and defence policy of 2012, and interviews with experts working in the Ministry of Employment and the Economy and the Ministry of the Interior.

At the time, Koch concluded that securitisation was not prominent in Finnish border policies due to the relatively recent opening of the Russian border and Finland’s new status as an immigration country, while still not experiencing as large numbers of irregular immigrants as Mediterranean countries. Additionally, border management was influenced less by military issues and more by economic factors. Much has happened in the following 11 years, as we have seen the Finnish–Schengen–Russia border fundamentally change to a closed border with securitised immigration. Although Koch quoted James Scott about the relative degradation of Finnish–Russian border cooperation already by 2013, it soon faced even more devastating setbacks.

To give an abridged recap, I start from 2014, when Russia shocked the European security political landscape by illegally annexing the Ukrainian territory of Crimea and waging a low-intensity proxy war in Eastern Ukraine, which led to the first sanctions against Russia. European border discourse generally changed the following year when an unprecedented number of asylum seekers travelled to European countries through the Mediterranean Sea. At the end of 2015, some of these people began travelling through the “Arctic route” via Russia to Northern Finland and Norway, seemingly orchestrated by Russian authorities. The year 2016 saw election success for many parties advocating for thicker borders for immigration in Europe and North America. Among many other states, Finland has tightened its immigration regime, particularly during the governments of 2014–2019 and from 2023 onwards, where the (True) Finns Party has been involved. However, by the 2020s, Finland was arguably much less of a new migration society than it was a decade prior.

In 2020, following the Covid-19 outbreak, Schengen borders were closed for the first time. In Fall 2021, Belarus aided numerous asylum seekers to the Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish borders, where their access was restricted. Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, led to an estimated six million Ukrainians seeking asylum in

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European countries. Finland imposed anti-Russian sanctions along with other EU states, froze cooperation, and supported Ukraine. Consequently, Russia defined Finland as an “unfriendly country” and made unspecified threats of retaliation in response to the sanctions and Finland joining NATO in 2023. In the same autumn, according to Finnish intelligence, human traffickers, in cooperation with the Russian Border Guard, which operates under the Security Service FSB, facilitated an unprecedented influx of asylum seekers to its Finnish border. Hence, Finland closed the border. Now, in 2024, the pre-2014 European border and security political order perhaps seems distant, even though many of the problems were already looming on the horizon.

Immigration has increasingly become a security question not only in Southern Europe but also in the North. The European Council’s New Strategic Agenda 2019–2024, for example, emphasises the role of border security in protecting the rights and freedoms of EU citizens. More generally, comprehensive security thinking has gained ground; for example, the 2020 EU Security Union Strategy sought to integrate threat aspects into several other policy fields. In 2021, researchers Lindblom and Castrén concluded that the broadening of the border security concept was primarily a result of long-term development rather than an *ad hoc* response to any specific key events.

Koch noted how the Finnish Security and Defence Policy Report of 2012 highlighted increasing immigration rates and rising nationalism in Russia as potential issues, suggesting that economic development could mitigate these problems. This principle was also reflected in the Finnish anti-terrorism strategy of 2004, which emphasised measures to eradicate poverty, enhance good governance, and respect democracy and human rights to prevent terrorism. Overall, Finland aimed to strengthen cross-border economic cooperation with Russia to promote social justice and improve living conditions through investments and employment opportunities. These objectives can hardly be seen as a failure from a contemporary perspective. The regional disparity of economic development between Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East, along with a series of conflicts, led to an influx of asylum seekers, which Russia later apparently instrumentalised for its own purposes.

Here, the notion of rising nationalism in Russia, as mentioned in the 2012 Finnish Security and Defence Policy Report, was on point. While not all theorists agree that Putin’s regime should be characterised as nationalist, much of the justifi-



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cation for militarisation in Russia is based on national myths and the expansive unification of Russians against foreign threats. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine caused the displacement of millions of Ukrainians and approximately a million Russians. The first wave of emigration from Russia emerged in spring 2022, followed by a second wave following the mobilisation of Russians to the front in the same autumn. From the threats foreseen in 2013, transnational criminal networks have also materialised, as smugglers orchestrated the movement of asylum seekers at the border in both the winters of 2015–2016 and 2023.

Despite historically strong cooperation between Finnish and Russian border officials, relations soured on this front in spring 2022. In response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Finland froze border cooperation, which Russia formally terminated in October 2023. Shortly thereafter, an increasing flow of asylum seekers arrived at the Finnish border, prompting a crisis, and Finns closed the border. Between August 2023 and January 2024, close to 1,300 people arrived at the border. Russian officials claimed that due to Finland's refusal to cooperate, they had no reason to prevent people from coming to the Finnish border to apply for asylum. However, border zone control, which prevents unauthorised people from reaching the border, was not part of previous agreements but rather Russia's own several decades-old policy, which remains operational to this day.

To help with monitoring the border region, Finland had initiated construction of a partial bor-

der fence to monitor unauthorised border crossings already earlier in the year and after closing the border, the Finnish Border Guard requested personnel from the European border control agency Frontex to aid. By January 2024, the Finnish Immigration Service had not yet accepted any of the applications, whereas 190 of the applicants had disappeared, likely moving to other Schengen countries. At that time, amendments to the border procedure legislation were planned to process asylum applications directly at the border. The process could be shortened from six months to four weeks, and during this period, the applicants could not move freely in Finland and the Schengen area. Concurrently, at the EU level, updates to the European Asylum and Migration Pact in April 2024 aimed to expedite the asylum application process, applicant identification, and returns.

Despite broad support from most of the Finnish parliament, the decision to close the border checkpoints in late 2023 is not without controversy from the perspectives of the basic rights to apply for asylum and exit the country. The government claimed that the asylum seekers caused a serious disturbance at the border and that considering the wider context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the state had to close the border to ensure national security and maintain general order against an immediate threat. Whether the threat involves infiltrated terrorists, an overload of asylum processing capacity, or simply exacerbate tensions among Finns about the idea of young Muslim men seeking asylum in Finland, there has

been a lack of high-level public clarification about the actual threat scenario. Arguably, the authorities essentially securitised the immigrants by making the radical decision to close the border and bypassed much of the critique involved in the usual political decision-making process. This lack of transparency was also partly justified by confidential intelligence information.

Additionally, the closure of the border has severely disrupted the transnational lives of many of Finland's residents and citizens with family and other ties to Russia. They have been forced to take much longer and more expensive detours to Russia via Estonia or even Turkey. As a result, some of them have demonstrated against the border closure and demanded alternative solutions. Furthermore, in January 2024, the Alexander Association was established to "promote the interests of Russian Finns, Russian-speaking Finns, and those aligned with their values, aiming to foster constructive dialogue between the Finnish government and people interested in crossing the eastern border".

Generally, the status of Russian speakers in European countries has come under scrutiny, with many experiencing increased antipathy towards Russians following the war. Among other factors, this was stirred by the discontinuation of granting Schengen tourist visas in September 2022 and the banning of the use of Russian-registered cars a year later in Finland and the Baltic states. Consequently, some have even echoed Russian state officials' accusations of these policies as manifestations of Russophobia. This speculation is not helped by the ongoing discussion about revoking multiple citizenships from Russian nationals.

In 2013, based on her analysis, Katharina Koch recommended the European Neighbourhood Policy to better acknowledge the northern region's differences from the immigration control-oriented Mediterranean external marine border and boost cross-border development programs. Unfortunately, the northern border has since become qualitatively more like the Mediterranean border in this regard. While the land border may not be as fatally perilous for immigrants as the marine one, it still poses significant risks. The regional development-oriented border cooperation was not perfect, but the materialised threat did not emerge from the regional economic disparity, but rather from nationalism, which was mentioned as a concern in the 2012 strategy document. The Kremlin's bloody campaign to unify Russians has triggered a snowball effect that is evident, among other places, in the EU's northernmost borders, affecting those who once cooperated, individuals whose lives were intertwined between the two states, and even people arriving from other continents.

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