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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Manakov, A. G., Kondrateva, S. V., & Terenina, N. K. (2020). Development of cross-border tourist and recreational regions on the Karelian section of the Russian-Finnish border. *Baltic Region*, 12(2), 140-152. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2020-2-9>

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# DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-BORDER TOURIST AND RECREATIONAL REGIONS ON THE KARELIAN SECTION OF THE RUSSIAN-FINNISH BORDER

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Received 30.08.2019

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-2-9

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*Despite the fact that cross-border tourism and recreation in the Baltic Sea Region have been extensively studied, there are still areas which require further research. The aim of this article is to identify regions which have active cross-border tourism and recreation in the adjacent territories of Finland and the Republic of Karelia. The authors propose to use an indicator characterizing the volume of incoming tourist flows. The number of tourists is not only indicative of the development of cross-border tourism and recreation; it is also one of the main criteria for determining the degree of the formation of cross-border regions. Using the statistics for Finland, the authors analyzed the geography of tourism in Finland's border areas and identified the degree of intensity of cross-border tourism exchange between the neighbouring administrative units of the two countries. The article also examines other tendencies indicative of the formation and development of cross-border tourism and recreation regions along the Russian-Finnish border. The authors identified three cross-border tourism and recreation regions of different development levels: South Karelia, Middle Karelia and North Karelia. South Karelia is a mesoregion with the average annual tourist exchange of about 100 thousand people, which is the average level of tourism development. The total volume of cross-border tourist flows from and to other cross-border tourist and recreation regions is about 30 thousand people per year. Middle Karelia microregion ranks second and is followed by the North Karelian microregion. The authors conclude that these two microregions are at the initial stage of their formation and, therefore, can be regarded as parts of one microregion — Russian-Finnish Northern microregion.*

## **Keywords:**

cross-border region, tourism, recreation, Republic of Karelia, Finland

**To cite this article:** Manakov, A. G., Kondrateva, S. V., Terenina, N. K. 2020, Development of cross-border tourist and recreational regions on the Karelian section of the Russian-Finnish border, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 12, no 2, p. 140–152.  
doi: 10.5922/2078-8555-2020-2-9.

## Introduction

The areas bordering the Baltic Sea have been the focus of many studies in the theory of tourism and recreation region building. The literature has identified transboundary tourism and recreation mesoregions. Yet, in the Baltic region, only the south-east coast of the Baltic Sea, as well as the Russian-Estonian and Russian-Latvian borderlands, have been explored in detail, and their microlevel regions have been described. In the Russian-Finnish border area, tourism and recreation regions of a microlevel have neither been identified nor described in detail.

Finland welcomes more Russian tourists than any other EU country does. According to the Russian Federal Agency for Tourism, Russians made 2.5 million touristic visits to Finland in 2018.<sup>1</sup> This figure, however, seems overstated as compared to that provided by Finland's statistical services (377,600 in 2018; tourism from Russia peaked in 2013 at 778,500 visits<sup>2</sup>). The difference comes from the way Russian statistics: in 2014, the country adopted the World Tourism Organisation methodological framework for measuring tourism, which counts business trips as well as visits to friends and relatives. Although Finland uses the same methodology, the country's statistics covers tourism visits proper. Moreover, there are regional data on inbound tourism, which are not collected in Russia.

This article *aims* to identify transboundary tourism and recreation regions on the Karelian part of the Russian-Finnish border as well as to assess their development based on tourism exchange between the neighbouring countries' bordering regions.

The study uses open *data* on transboundary tourism<sup>3</sup> and cross-border traffic between Russia and Finland<sup>4</sup> available from the official websites of Finland's statistical services. It also draws on reference materials and other sources concerning tourist attractions in the border areas in Finland and the Republic of Karelia.

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<sup>1</sup> *Statistics* on outbound travel by Russian citizens in 2018. URL: <https://ekec.ru/statistika-vyiezda-grazhdan-rf-za-granitsu-v-2018-godu/> (accessed: 20.07.2019).

<sup>2</sup> *Tilastokeskus*. Statistics Finland's PxWeb databases. URL: <http://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/> (accessed: 20.07.2019).

<sup>3</sup> *Tilastokeskus*. Statistics Finland's PxWeb databases. URL: <http://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/> (accessed: 20.07.2019); *Visit Finland*. Statistics Service Rudolf. URL: <http://visitfinland.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/VisitFinland/> (accessed: 20.07.2019).

<sup>4</sup> *Border traffic between Finland and Russia 2012–2019*. URL: [https://www.raja.fi/current\\_issues/statistics](https://www.raja.fi/current_issues/statistics) (accessed: 19.07.2019).

*Current state of research.* Most studies into transboundary tourism and recreation region-building focus on the southeastern part of the Baltic region [1–4]. The literature identifies and describes transboundary tourism and recreation regions (TTRR) of different levels, spanning neighbouring areas of the Kaliningrad region, Poland, and Lithuania. Some studies explore border districts of Russia, Estonia, and Latvia [5–7] and their tourism and recreation regions of both meso- and microlevel [8; 9].

Research into the Russian-Finnish borderlands examines transboundary tourist mobility [10–13], cross-border cooperation and projects [14–17], the emergence of a common socio-cultural space [18] and a territorial identity [19; 20], and the development of transboundary tourism ties [21; 22]. The findings of these studies have laid the groundwork for identifying transboundary tourism and recreation regions of various hierarchical levels in the Russian-Finnish borderlands.

### **Identifying TTRRs and their hierarchical levels**

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Elena Kropinova writes that the Karelian part of the Russian-Finnish borderlands has only one mesolevel TTRR — the North Russian-Finnish mesoregion. It borders on two TTRRs of the same level. The first one, the South Russian-Finnish mesoregion, is situated on the Finland and Leningrad region border. The other is located on the borderline area of Finland, Norway, and Russia's Murmansk region. The North Russian-Finnish mesoregion and its Russian-Norwegian-Finnish counterpart were classified as emerging [4].

We believe that the discussed Russian-Finnish northern mesoregion comprises at least three TTRRs of different levels. Since these three regions have gaps in between, some reservations must be made to call the parts of a single mesoregion. The formation of transboundary regions takes place around multi-lane International Automobile Border-crossing Points (MAPP). There are eight MAPP at the Russian-Finnish border, three of them on its Karelian part (Figure).



The three MAPP differ in an amount of traffic, i.e. in the annual number of border crossings from either side. The largest MAPP is situated in the southern part of the Republic of Karelia, with over 1 million crossings a year. The traffic handled by the second-largest MAPP, which is found near the town of Kostomuksha, is two-thirds smaller; we classify it as 'medium'. The northernmost Karelian MAPP handles one-seventh of the traffic of the largest checkpoint; it is classified as small. These three MAPP form the biggest part of tourism between the Republic of Karelia and Finland. There are several border-crossing points in the republic (railway and simplified procedure checkpoints). Since they contribute little to the regional transboundary exchange, these MAPP were not included in the analysis.

The locations of the MAPP and the traffic they handle have provided the framework for three tourism and recreation regions of different maturity and hierarchical levels. The southernmost TTRR can be regarded as a mesoregion. It is possible to refer it as the South Karelia or Middle Russian-Finnish mesoregion since there are other Russian-Finnish TTRRs northern. The two other TTRRs have the status of microregions. Their hierarchical level (order) will be identified below. These mesoregions can be either considered separately or as parts of a higher-level first-order microregion. This area will be referred to as the North Russian-Finnish microregion and its two parts, as the Middle Karelia and North Karelia microregions.

Kropinova proposes to consider a combination of TTRR characteristics when studying the process of transboundary tourism and recreation region-building. Out of ten characteristics, six are major and four are secondary [4]. Earlier we suggested adding another indicator to ensure more objective identification of both the maturity and level of TTRRs. This indicator is a mutual tourism between the foreign constituents of the TTRR [6].

We divide the TTRR characteristics into three groups and consider them with a focus on the geographical component. The first group of characteristics made it possible to identify the external borders of TTRRs and estimate mutual tourism within them. The second group deals with tourist attractions in TTRRs. The third group allowed us to assess international efforts in tourism promotion — another important factor in TTRR development.

### **TTRR area, transport connectivity, and mutual tourism**

*The Middle Russian-Finnish (South Karelian) mesoregion* stretches from Petrozavodsk, the capital of the Republic of Karelia, to Kuopio, the centre of North Savonia. The major centre of attraction is the city of Joensuu, the capital of North Karelia. This mesoregion can be dubbed as Petrozavodsk-Joensuu. The

Russian part of the mesoregion includes the Sortavala, Lakhdenpokhya, Suoyarvi, Pitkyaranta, Pryazha districts and some areas of the Priozersk and Olonets districts. The Finnish part comprises North Karelia, Northern Savonia, and a considerable area of Southern Savonia. Some of the Russians entering the region head for Helsinki, Tampere, and Turku.

The mesoregion is serviced by the large Niirala-Vyartsilya MAPP, which handled 1,147 thousand crossings in 2018. A railway checkpoint of a capacity of 560 thousand crossings per year also operates in the region.

In 2018, according to Finnish statistics, the Finnish part of the mesoregion welcomed 34 thousand Russian tourists, which account for only 9% of Russian tourist coming to the country each year. In 2013, mutual tourism between Finland and Russia peaked with 79 thousand Russian tourists arriving in the area (10% of all Russian visits to Finland). In 2018, tourists travelling to Russia accounted for 54.4% of mutual tourism (as compared to 38% in 2013). Thus, mutual tourism within the mesoregion can be estimated at 70–80 thousand people per year (as compared to 120–130 thousand in 2013).

In the central part of the Republic of Karelia, in the village of Lenderskoe of the Muezersky district, there is a simplified procedure crossing point — Inari. Its traffic, 5 thousand crossings a year, is too small to speak of an emerging TTRR of any level. Further north there are two MAPP that have a potential for creating microlevel TTRRs.

***The North Russian-Finnish first-order microregion*** includes the Russian town of Kostomuksha and the Kalevala district, as well as part of the Loukhi district. The Finnish part of the mesoregion comprises the Kainuu region and the northeast of North Ostrobothnia. The microregion is serviced by to MAPP of a total capacity of 430 thousand crossings per year. In 2018, Russian made 12.5 visits to the area (3.3% of the total number of Russians coming to Finland); in 2013, 21 thousand (2.7%). Mutual transboundary tourism in the microregion is estimated at 25–30 thousand people a year, which marks it as not fully mature.

The identification of a Russian-Finnish northern first-order microregion is debatable since the two MAPP, which are rather far away from each other, serve as starting points of lower-level microregions of different maturity. A Mid-Karelian second-order microregion has virtually formed around the Lyuttya-Vartius MAPP (380 thousand crossings in 2018). Its Russian part includes the town of Kostomuksha and the Kalevala district; the Finnish part, the Kainuu region.

The Suoperya-Kuusamo MAPP (50 thousand crossings per year) is witnessing the emergence of a North Karelia third-order microregion. The microregion belongs to the third order because it is limited to the border areas of the neighbouring districts of Russia and Finland — the western part of the Loukhi district

in Karelia and the north-eastern fringe of North Ostrobothnia in Finland (including the city of Kuusamo). Although classified as emerging, the North Karelian microregion has some characteristics of a merely potential TTRR.

### **Tourist attractions in the TTRRs**

Tourism development in a TTRR becomes sustainable when people living on either side of the border have a mutual interest in cross-border visits no matter what the political and economic situation is. One of the important factors is the diversity of tourism activities. Below we will consider key cultural and historic as well as natural landmarks, natural reserves, and other attractions from the perspective of tourism activities development in the TTRRs.

The Russian parts of the TTRRs have considerable potential for cultural, educational, event, and ecological tourism. The Green Belt of Fennoscandia, a unique ecological system spanning an area from the Barents to the Baltic Sea, has a special role here. International projects run along the Karelian stretch of the national border made it possible to create a system of protected areas, 80% of which are located in Russia. The ecological system and its valuable recreational objects are unmatched by any other border region in the country.

Alongside natural attractions, the Finnish part of the TTRRs boasts cultural and historic landmarks: the Olavinlinna Fortress, the New Valamo Monastery, the Lintula Holy Trinity Convent, etc. Most Russians, however, cross the border for shopping and recreational purposes.

#### ***South Karelia mesoreigon***

*Cultural and educational attractions:* the Olavinlinna fortress (Savonlinna), the Outokumpu mine museum, the New Valamo monastery, the Lintula Holy Trinity convent, and the Kerimäki Church in Finland; the Valaam Monastery of the late 10<sup>th</sup>/early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Vazhiozersky Monastery of Saviour and Transfiguration, the Syandemsky Convent of the Dormition, the Tulmozerie mining park, the historic 17<sup>th</sup>-century town of Sortavala, the Kronid Gogolev private museum in Sortavala, the Winter War and Great Patriotic War memorials, the Owl Mountain command and communications bunker of the Finnish Army (Lakhdenpokhya), the Kollasjärvi memorial (Suoyarvi district), and the historic villages of Kinerma (16<sup>th</sup> century), Kindasovo, and Nurmolitsy in Russia.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The economic geographical reference book of municipalities in the Republic of Karelia. Petrozavodsk: Karelian Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences Press, 2009.



*Ecotourism and recreational attractions:* the Botania botanical garden (Joensuu), the Koli national park in Finland; the Valaam archipelago natural park (established in 1999, 24,000 ha), the Ladoga Skerries national park (2017, 122,000 ha), the Ruskeala mountain park, the White Bridges and Ahinkoski waterfalls, and others in Russia.<sup>6</sup>

*Event tourism highlights:* international music festivals, White Nights and Jaakkia rallies, the Karelia national classical rally championship, the world's only snow-and-ice rally, the 'Russia — Northern Forest' Baja FIA World Cup round, the Olonets Father Frost Games (Olonets), and the Olonia — the Capital of Geese ecofestival (Olonets district).

*Shopping tourism attractions:* the towns of Kitee, Tohmajärvi, Joensuu, Savonlinna, Varkaus, and Kuopio and Finland; the village of Vartsilya and the towns of Sortavala and Petrozavodsk in Russia.

### ***Middle Karelia second-order microregion***

*Cultural and educational attractions:* the rune-song villages of Kalevala and Voknavolok (Russia).

*Ecotourism attractions:* the Friendship transboundary national park, which comprises five Finnish protected areas and the Kostomuksha nature reserve (1983, 49,000 ha) in Russia.<sup>7</sup>

*Event tourism highlights* international music festivals (chamber music, the Nordsession rock festival, the Kanteletar folk festival); St Peter's Day (village of Akonlahti); the Festival of the Ukhta Karelians (village of Kalevala); the Karelian Culture Festival (the village of Khaikolya).

*Shopping tourism attractions:* the towns of Kajaani (Finland) and Kostomuksha (Russia).

### ***North Karelia third-order microregion***

*Cultural and educational attractions:* the rune-song village of Kestenga (Russia).

*Ecotourism and recreational attractions:* the Ruka skiing resort, the Oulanka and Paanajärvi (1992, 104,000 ha) national parks (Finland) [24] with a visitor centre in the village of Pyaozersky (Russia).

*Event tourism highlights* the Karelian summer festival in the village of Vartiolaampi (the Paanajärvi national park).

*Shopping tourism attractions:* the town of Kuusamo, and the Ruka resort (Finland).

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<sup>6</sup> Specially protected natural areas in the Republic of Karelia. Petrozavodsk, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Transboundary tourism coordination and transboundary tourism routes

The *South Karelia* mesoregion has two major tourism routes. The first one, the Blue Road, is over 2,000 km long (See Figure). The organisation of the same name, which was established in 1962, played a major role in the development and promotion of the route. In 1990, the Karelian Regional Non-profit Organisation was created. In 1992, the works on the Russian part of the route began. The route runs along historic navigable waterways from Norway's town of Nesna through Sweden, Finland, and the Republic of Karelia (Kolatselga, Pryazha, Petrozavodsk, Medvezhyegorsk, and Pudozh) to the Arkhangelsk district.

The second route is the Mining Road, which was created in 2012–2014. It spans 400 km between Petrozavodsk and Outokumpu. The transboundary route was developed within the international project of the same name. Its highlights are about twenty geological features and mining sites: old mines, ironworks, and functioning mines in Eastern Finland; geological landmarks and historic mines in the south of the Republic of Karelia (including the Tulmozero mining park) [23; 24].

A third, culinary, transboundary route has been developed since 2018. It brings together the traditional cuisine of the Republic of Karelia (Russia) and North Karelia (Finland) within the 'Kalitka: cross-border gastronomic tourism' project.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, tourist agencies in both Russian and Finnish Karelia are designing various thematic transboundary tourism routes.

The Kantele Tour Route, which was created in 2007–2013, runs through the *Middle Karelia microregion*. It links rune-song areas, which cherish the heritage of the Kalevala epic: Kainuu, Sotkamo, and Kuhmo in Finland and Kostomuksha, Kalevala, Khaikolya, and Belomorskaya Karelia in Russia.<sup>9</sup>

Another tourism route crossing the Middle Karelia TTRR (or the *North Karelia microregion*) is the White Road, which appeared in 2012–2014. The route stretches along an ancient trade route that once connected the White and Baltic Seas and today links the Republic of Karelia and Northern Finland. The route was designed within the 'White Road' project.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kalitka: developing cross-border and culinary tourism. URL: <https://kareliacbc.fi/ru/projects/kalitka-ka4007> (accessed: 02.07.2019).

<sup>9</sup> Ontrei Malisen's Kantele Tour Route, Official web site. URL: <http://www.ontrei.fi/en/route> (accessed: 02.07.2019).

<sup>10</sup> Belaya doroga — White road. URL: [http://old.nko-karelia.info/белая\\_дорога.html](http://old.nko-karelia.info/белая_дорога.html) (accessed: 02.07.2019).

## Conclusions

The study identified three transboundary tourism and recreation regions along the Karelian part of the Russian-Finnish border: the South Karelia mesoregion (Petrozavodsk — Joensuu), alternatively called the Middle Russian-Finnish mesoregion, the Middle Karelia second-order microregion, and the North Karelia third-order microregion. The two latter TTRRs can be combined into a first-order North Russian-Finnish microregion.

Annual mutual tourism within the Middle Russian-Finnish (South Karelia) mesoregions is estimated at 70—80 thousand people. During several years, it was above 100 thousand people. This TTRR is medium mature. Within the North Russian-Finnish TTRR, which brings together the Middle Karelia and North Karelia microregions, mutual tourism reaches 25—30 thousand people per year. This TTRR is classified as emerging.

The Blue Road and the Mining Road (the Middle Russian-Finnish TTRR), as well as the Kantele Tour Route and the White Road (North Russian-Finnish TTRR), run through the studied regions. The routes were developed within special international projects. Tourist agencies in the two neighbouring countries are designing various new thematic transboundary tourism routes.

The Russian and Finnish parts of the TTRRs have abundant resources for promoting cultural and educational, event, and ecological tourism. Most tourists, however, cross the border for shopping and recreational purposes. The unique potential of the Green Belt of Fennoscandia and its ecotourism routes can make Middle Karelia and North Karelia much more visible in mutual tourism. Moreover, cross-border tourism will benefit from better transport and tourism infrastructure and a wider range of tourist services.

*This study is part of the strategic project 'Russia starts here' (run at Pskov State University within the 'Flagship regional university' programme) and the state-commissioned project 'A methodology of system research and management development of the economic, social and cultural space of the northern and border areas of Russia in context of natural security (AAAA-A19-119010990088-8 of 19.01.2019).*

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