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# EU-Russia cross-border co-operation in the twenty-first century: Turning marginality into competitive advantage

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## Abstract

This paper aims to examine how Russian north-western regions and municipalities use their marginal/border position as a resource to build a sustainable development strategy. Theoretically, this study is based on the marginality theory which states that border or remotely located subnational units are able to turn their marginality from disadvantage to a resource and transform themselves from depressed and provincial territories to attractive places hosting intense international flows of goods, services, capital, technologies and people. A number of venues for the EU-Russia cross-border co-operation are explored: the European Neighbourhood Instrument, Northern Dimension partnerships, Euroregions and city-twinning. The authors conclude that despite some problems with establishing a proper division of labour between above programmes and project implementation cross-border co-operation proved to be a valuable instrument not only for successful development of the marginal/border actors but also for establishing mutual trust and collaborative relations between Russia and neighbouring EU countries.

## KEYWORDS

city-twinning, competitive advantage, cross-border co-operation, EU, European neighbourhood instrument, Euroregions, marginality, northern dimension partnerships, Russia

## JEL CLASSIFICATION

R58

# 1 | INTRODUCTION

Given the fact that the EU and Russia are key geopolitical and geoeconomic partners and competitors on the European continent at the same time it is extremely important to understand what channels and venues of communication they have in their disposal.

Along with capital-to-capital relations, cross-border co-operation (CBC) has become a widespread phenomenon in Europe, including EU's relations with Russia. Regional and local actors regard this type of external policy (labelled "paradiplomacy," parallel to national diplomacy) as a suitable and preferable response to numerous challenges (socio-economic, environmental, ethnic, religious, cultural, etc.) that they face on a daily basis. It is viewed by many Russian regions and municipalities as an effective instrument not only for solving local problems but also for ensuring their sustainable development. These actors believe that border-related resources can be utilized more effectively with co-operation extended beyond national boundaries, although the effectiveness and scale of CBC projects vary considerably among Russia's border regions and municipalities.

Russia's north-western regions and municipalities are especially active in developing outside contacts, in both the quantitative sense (number of international partners and projects) and the qualitative (diversity of methods and forms of international co-operation as well as its intensity). This is explained by their economic status – their foreign neighbours see them as relatively advanced and promising international partners – and geographical proximity to the EU.

The harsh realities of the 1990s also provided the initial thrust for Russia's north-western sub-national actors to make connections with the outside world. During the Boris Yeltsin presidency, many north-western Russian territories perceived themselves as abandoned by the federal government, and thus left dependent on themselves for survival. They regarded foreign aid and investment as effective instruments for keeping local economies afloat. Given the rather broad autonomy enjoyed by all regions of the Russian Federation under Yeltsin, the north-western regions managed to develop rather diverse international contacts, including with European countries.

Over time, as the socio-economic situation in Russia improved under Vladimir Putin's first two presidencies, sub-national entities have come to regard international co-operation as an integral part of their sustainability strategy rather than an emergency or survival "kit." This paradigm shift in sub-national units' motivation has wrought a radical change in their attitudes towards paradiplomacy, including CBC. Given the scarce resources available and the changes to the EU's CBC programme financing since the EU introduced a 50–50 matching funds rule, collaborative projects have become less ambitious and more realistic, directed at meeting the partners' practical needs.

The research objective of this paper is to examine how Russian north-western sub-national units use their marginal position as a resource to build a sustainable development strategy in changing domestic and international environments. The novelty of this study is that it aims to test a specific theoretical approach—marginality theory—with regard to the EU–Russia CBC, rather than make an empirical assessment of numerous CBC programmes taken place between two international actors over the last quarter of the century or produce a policy-oriented paper. That's why "theorist's," rather than "administrator's/auditor's" approach prevails in this study. On the other hand, we tried to draw some policy-oriented conclusions if they seem relevant for our study.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Unfortunately, the academic literature analyzing the EU-Russian CBC from the theoretical point of view is scarce. The scholarship is replete with empirical works describing various concrete programmes of the EU-Russia CBC (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2012; Laine, 2015; Rafaelsen, 2014), EU-Russian co-operation in the Northern Dimension framework (Heininen, 2001; Heininen, 2011; Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2003; Lejins & Nackmayr, 2000; Ojanen, 2001; Rafaelsen, 2014), Euroregions (Lepik, 2009; Sergunin, 2006) and city-twinning (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2011, 2012 and 2013; Sergunin & Joenniemi, 2017). They are mostly focused on depicting specific areas of co-operation. These works are basically of a descriptive nature and do not pay much attention to the theoretical/conceptual issues. Although these works have no ambitions to produce fundamental theoretical conclusions, they are helpful in the sense that they reveal the positive experiences of EU–Russian CBC and the need to return to a co-operative track in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis.

Very few works suggest a theoretical vision of the EU–Russia CBC. For example, the so-called *geographic diffusion theory* attempts to explain the successful democratic transformation of some Russian regions by citing Europe's spatial proximity, which facilitates the diffusion of Western resources, values, and norms to transitional countries and subnational units (Kopstein & Reilly, 2000). The literature on leverages and linkages develops this line of argument by describing methods and instruments that were used by the West to influence the democratic transformation of the post-Communist countries (Way & Levitsky, 2007).

These theories suggested that intensive CBC and Western aid have contributed to more profound and successful market and democratic reforms as well as the Europeanization of Russia's northwestern regions as compared to interior provinces (Lankina & Getachew, 2006). These theories, however, have been criticized for overemphasizing the role of external factors and representing Russian subnational units as passive objects of Western manipulation rather than decision-makers with agency (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2014, 2017; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Perkmann, 2003). In contrast to this view, many scholars believe that in reality there is always an interplay of foreign and domestic factors that generate and affect subnational units' international activities.

This study suggests a different theoretical perspective on the EU–Russia CBC.

## 3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In contrast with the geographic diffusion concept which suggested one-way, West-dominant approach to the EU–Russia CBC where Russian border regions were perceived as passive objects/recipients of Western democratic initiatives and stimuli, we prefer to base this study on the so-called *marginality theory*, which to our understanding is better applicable to what is going on in the EU–Russia borderlands. For example, this theory explains much better than other theories why the Russian border regions and municipalities (most of which were closed/isolated territories in the Soviet time) were able to develop in a very dynamic way and achieve some positive results in the socio-economic, environmental and cultural spheres.

The marginality theory was first developed by Noel Parker (2000), and later applied to border sub-national units by Christopher Browning and Joenniemi (2003). It was not, however, used specifically to examine the EU–Russia CBC while our study has an ambition to test this approach in exploring various co-operative programmes and projects involving European and Russian border regions and municipalities.

As some scholars note, marginality is no longer seen as subordinated to and inferior *vis-à-vis* centrality. It contains agency as all other social orders and generates various processes that affect not only other marginal actors but neighbouring countries and the national centre as well (Browning, 2005; Parker, 2008; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Pezzi, Faggian, & Reid, 2019).

Moreover, centrality and marginality are co-constitutive in nature rather than opposite to each other, that is, there is no centrality without marginality (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2017). They are relational in nature and margins do

therefore not merely exist as extensions of the core. It should be noted that the margins actually have an autonomy of their own and even are able to refuse the spatial or social order proposed by the centre (Parker, 2008; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Pezzi et al., 2019).

The autonomy of marginal actors tends to increase with the increasing permeability of borders or intensification of international contacts in the borderlands, including CBC. Due to their permanent in-between standing and connecting various economies, polities, ethnicities and cultures, they actually enjoy the option of belonging simultaneously to two or more socio-economic, political or cultural orders. In some sense, the margins even find themselves in a privileged position as they are closer to the border which, due its changing nature, tend to determine the character of any order (Browning, 2005; Parker, 2008; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012).

We argue that marginally/peripherally located actors can successfully play with their unique position both domestically (in relation to the centre) and internationally (with similar marginal and/or central actors). Marginal actors can make use of their geographic location by acquiring, for instance, the role of mediator or “bridge” between countries. They can turn their marginality from a disadvantage to a resource and transform themselves from remote and provincial territories to attractive places hosting intense international flows of goods, services, capital, technologies, and people.

On a more general plane, CBC with participation of marginal actors contributes to de-bordering and de-sovereignization in a globalizing world (Browning, 2005; Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2017; Parker, 2008; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012).

## 4 | DATA AND METHODS

Since our study is of theoretical rather than empirical nature we did not need some categories of primary sources, such as, for example, interviews with participants and administrators of specific EU–Russian CBC programmes, focus groups or surveys results. We relied on desk research of relevant policy and CBC programme-related documents, reports and statistics. Particularly, this study is based on the following categories of primary and secondary sources:

- Documents on various EU–Russia CBC programmes.
- Northern Dimension partnerships' documents.
- Expert evaluation reports on the EU–Russia CBC programmes, Northern Dimension partnerships, Euroregions and city-twinning projects.
- CBC-related statistics.
- Media publications.

In dealing with the various CBC programmes and projects, it is quite difficult to create a reliable database. Different sources can contradict each other and/or be fragmentary. Available statistics is sometimes misleading or incomplete. As far as analytical reports are concerned their authors used to differ by their methods of assessment and interpretation of the empirical data. That is why it is important in the process of research to permanently check and double check available sources in terms of their reliability as well as to compare them with each other to exclude unreliable or erroneous data.

More specifically, we use three main principles (which are the elements of the qualitative content analysis) to select and interpret empirical data:

1. Sources should be representative, i.e. they are supposed to reflect typical rather than irregular developments in the EU–Russia CBC.
2. Preferences are given to the data that provide valuable and timely information on different CBC programmes.
3. Priority is also given to the sources that reflect original data as well as fresh/non-traditional approaches to CBC.

With the help of these research tools, the shortcomings of our empirical base can be successfully overcome and a set of reliable data for this study can be effectively created.

It should be noted that along with original documents on the EU–Russia CBC programmes and Northern Dimension partnerships, evaluation reports (mostly produced by the EU experts) are very important because they provide us with assessments of how efficient the above programmes and projects are. Methodologically, these reports' authors based their assessments on several research tools: expert questionnaires; web-based surveys; comparing programmes/projects' outcomes with self-established goals and indicators and making case studies. Based on this meta-data we can allow ourselves to avoid quantitative research and focus on making qualitative judgments on whether various CBC programmes were successful or not and what kind of problems and shortcomings can be identified.

Our research arsenal has also included the case study method. We selected eight EU–Russia CBC programmes, four Northern Dimension partnerships, seven Euroregions and three city-twinning projects to demonstrate whether marginality theory works or not in the EU–Russia borderlands. To make some generalizations on lessons drawn from these case studies a comparative method is helpful. A special section is devoted to the critical assessment of various CBC programmes which are compared with each other in terms of their effectiveness/ineffectiveness and successes/failures.

## 5 | EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD INSTRUMENT'S CBC PROGRAMMES

EU–Russia CBC took several institutional forms: the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) (2007–2013) and European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) (2014–2020) CBC programmes, the Northern Dimension, Euroregions and city-twinning.

Since the 1990s, CBC has been an important area for EU–Russia collaboration. In the pre-Ukrainian crisis period, EU–Russia CBC developed rather dynamically. Russia participated in five ENPI CBC programmes. These CBC programmes had three main objectives:

1. promoting economic and social development in border areas;
2. addressing common challenges (environment, public health, safety and security);
3. putting in place better conditions for persons, goods and capital mobility.

However, the crisis in Ukraine followed by mutual EU and Russian sanctions and the Russian economic crisis (caused mostly by the sharp fall in oil prices) and remilitarization of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) had a very negative impact on the regional CBC. For example, investment risks rose for those European companies that planned to take part in CBC projects with Russia. The European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which were involved in financing EU–Russia CBC projects, had to cancel or seriously limit their activities in this field. The EU sanctions, which targeted several leading Russian banks, also complicated the participation of these financial institutions in CBC activities. In general, mutual mistrust and suspicion rapidly increased in EU–Russia relations, which resulted in the cancellation or delay of many co-operative efforts in border regions.

On the other hand, given tense relations between Brussels and Moscow, both the EU and Russian leaderships believed that shifting the focus of EU–Russian bilateral co-operation from the national to the regional and local levels would be an appropriate solution (EEAS-DG NEAR, 2017). Most EU–Russia CBC programmes are executed in the framework of the ENI designed for the 2014–2020 period. There are eight ENI CBC programmes with Russia's participation.

Baltic Sea Region programme co-operation covers 11 countries: eight EU member states and three partner countries. The EU member states taking part are: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany (the *Länder* of Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Schleswig-Holstein and Niedersachsen [Lüneburg region]),

Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. Partner country participants are Belarus, Norway and Russia (St Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Murmansk, Novgorod, Pskov and Vologda Regions, Republic of Karelia, Komi Republic and Nenetsky Autonomous District) (see Figure 1).

The overall objective of the programme is to strengthen integrated territorial development and co-operation for a more innovative, better accessible and sustainable BSR. The programme's priorities include the development of innovative infrastructure, efficient management of natural resources, regional transport systems, maritime safety, environmentally friendly shipping and urban mobility (Interreg Baltic Sea Region, 2019). Projects must involve at least three partners from three different countries within the programme area. Funds available for the programme come from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (EUR 263.8 million), ENI (EUR 8.8 million), Russia (EUR 4.4 million) and Norway (EUR 6.0 million) (Interreg Baltic Sea Region, 2019).

Despite the tense relations between Brussels and Moscow at the regional and municipal levels European and Russian partners managed to successfully implement a number of concrete projects both on the Baltic Sea and adjacent regions. For example, the use of heavy fuel by commercial vessels was completely prohibited in the Baltic Sea. Several projects on bird natural reserves in the Kaliningrad Region and in the BSR at large were implemented. Measures to control conservation of forests/taiga in Karelia, Leningrad and Vologda Regions were strengthened. Cultural and sport links between Russian remote regions of Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Nenets district and Komi Republic with European regions were established and developed in a dynamic way.

The South-East Finland–Russia CBC programme involves three Finnish regions (Etelä-Karjala [South Karelia], Etelä Savo [South Savo] and Kymenlaakso) and two Russian regions (Leningrad and St Petersburg) as a core area. Its adjoining region includes Uusimaa, Päijät-Häme, Pohjois-Savo, North Karelia (Finland) and Republic of Karelia (Russia) (see Figure 2). The programme's overall objective were achieved through improved competitiveness, increased economic activity, a knowledge-based economy, skilled labour force, high-level cultural events and



**FIGURE 1** Baltic Sea Region CBC programme area, 2014–20.  
Source: Interreg Baltic Sea Region, 2019

**FIGURE 2** South-East Finland–Russia

CBC programme area, 2014–20.

Source: South-East Finland–Russia CBC  
2014–2020 (2015)



tourism, pure nature and waters, easy mobility, good transport corridors, and smooth and modern border crossing points (South-East Finland–Russia CBC 2014–2020, 2018). Before the coronavirus pandemic, the cross-border transport system between South-East Finland, Leningrad Region and Karelia was the best one in northeastern Europe and bottle-neck were almost eliminated on the cross-border highways.

The programme's total funding is EUR 72.294 million, of which the EU will provide 50% and Finland and Russia the other half (divided between them on a 50–50 basis (South-East Finland–Russia CBC 2014–2020, 2015: 100).

The Estonia–Russia programme includes three Estonian (Kirde-Eesti, Lõuna-Eesti, Kesk-Eesti) and three Russian (Leningrad, Pskov and St Petersburg) regions as a core area. Põhja-Eesti (Estonia) belongs to the adjoining area (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3** Estonia–Russia CBC

programme area.

Source: Estonia–Russia CBC  
Programme (2018)



Core area Adjoining area

Similar to other ENI CBC programmes, this one has the following strategic objectives: (a) to promote economic and social development in regions on both sides of the common borders; (b) address common challenges in the environment, public health, safety and security; and (c) promotion of better conditions and modalities for the mobility of people, goods and capital (Estonia–Russia Cross-Border Co-operation Programme 2014–2020, 2018). The EU's financial contribution to the programme is EUR 16.808 million, while Estonia and Russia will contribute EUR 9.013 million and EUR 8.404 million respectively (Government of the Russian Federation, European Commission and Ministry of Finance of Estonia, 2018). Similar to the previous CBC programme, the most prominent achievement was a radical improvement of the cross-border transport infrastructure which dramatically facilitates the freedom of movement of peoples and goods.

The Latvia–Russia programme for 2014–2020 includes the Vidzeme and Latgale regions in Latvia and the Pskov region in Russia as a core area. The adjoining area includes the Pieriga and Zemgale regions of Latvia and the Leningrad Region in Russia (see Figure 4).

The programme's strategic goal is to support joint efforts to address cross-border development challenges and promote sustainable use of the existing potential of the area across the border between Latvia and Russia (Latvia–Russia CBC programme 2014–2020, 2017). The EU contribution is EUR 16.055 million (EUR 17.554 million together with co-financing partners), while Latvia will contribute EUR 1.035 million and Russia will give EUR 7.938 million (EUR 8.743 million together with partners' co-financing) (Latvia–Russia CBC programme 2014–2020, 2017). Along with the improvement of the cross-border infrastructure, which promoted the tourist industry in the region, some important environmental monitoring projects were executed by the two partner countries.

The Lithuania–Russia programme 2014–2020 includes Russia's Kaliningrad region and Lithuania's Klaipeda, Marijampole and Taurage counties as core regions. Alytus, Kaunas, Telsiai and Siauliai counties form Lithuania's adjoining regions (see Figure 5).

The programme's thematic objectives include: (i) the promotion of local culture and preservation of historical heritage; (ii) promotion of social inclusion and the fight against poverty; (iii) support for local and regional good governance; and (iv) promotion of border management and border security, mobility and migration management



**FIGURE 4** Latvia–Russia CBC programme area, 2014–2020.  
Source: Latvia–Russia CBC Programme (2017)

**FIGURE 5** Lithuania–Russia CBC

programme area, 2014–20.

Source: Lithuania–Russia CBC

Programme (2016)



(Lithuania–Russia CBC programme 2014–2020, 2016). The EU and Russia together with co-financing partners will contribute EUR 18.71 million and EUR 8.5 million respectively (Lithuania–Russia CBC programme 2014–2020, 2016).

The Poland–Russia CBC programme in 2014–20 covers Russia's Kaliningrad region and the following subregions of Poland: Gdański, Trójmiejski and Starogardzki (all in Pomorskie region); Elbląski, Olsztyński and Etcki (all in Warmińsko-Mazurskie region); and Suwalski (in Podlaskie region). The subregions of Stupski (Pomorskie region) and Białostocki (Podlaskie region) form the adjoining region in Poland (see Figure 6).

The programme's specific priorities include: (i) co-operating on historical, natural and cultural heritage for their preservation and cross-border development; (ii) co-operation for a clean natural environment in the cross-border area; (iii) accessible regions and sustainable cross-border transport and communication; and (iv) joint actions for border efficiency and security (Poland–Russia CBC programme 2014–2020, 2016).

According to the indicative financial plan the total programme's co-financing amounts to EUR 68.012 million. The financial allocations of the EU are 41.645,86 million, while the Russian contribution to the programme is EUR 20.652,617 million and minimum co-financing is EUR 5.713,532 million (Poland–Russia CBC programme 2014–2020, 2016).

Along with promotion of tourism, cultural and educational co-operation, Lithuanian and Polish CBC programmes with Kaliningrad created really favourable conditions for the region's economic development. Due to close co-operation with its BSR neighbours Kaliningrad—being an exclave region separated from "mainland" Russia by foreign countries and sea—however, quite easy overcame two economic crises (2008–2010 and 2014–2016). Moreover, over the last 20 years the car-building sector was created from scratch in the region and became one of the biggest ones in the whole country. Ship-building (both civilian and military) cluster develops quite dynamically. Finally, fishery industries are also on the rise (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2013; Sergunin, 2018). This is a striking difference with the situation in the region in the 1990s and early 2000s when Kaliningrad had to be transformed from a remote/marginal Soviet/Russian military outpost on the country's Western border to a contemporary/innovative region.

Core areas:



**FIGURE 6** Poland–Russia CBC programme area, 2014–2020.

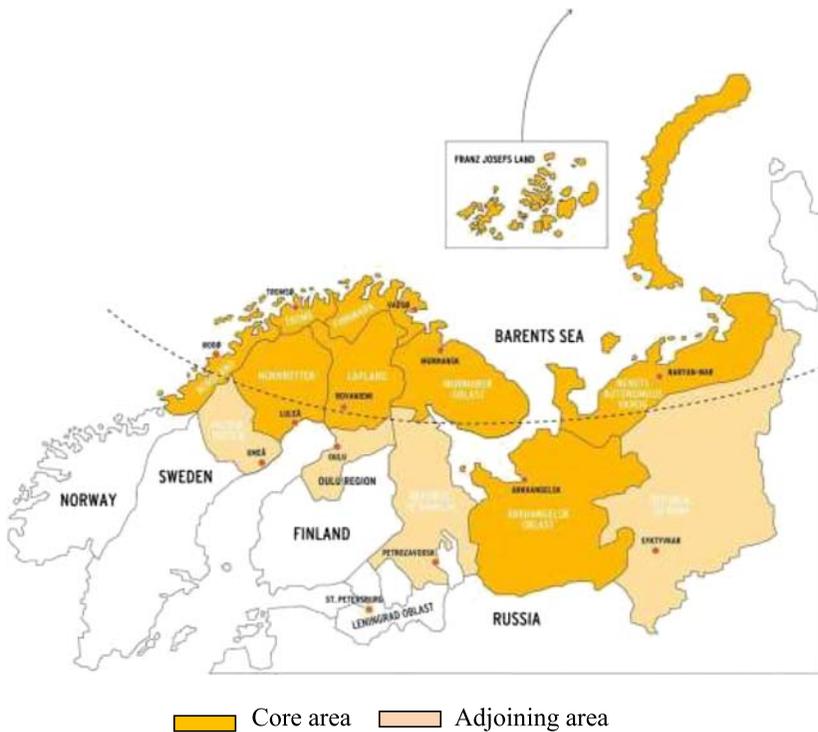
Source: Poland–Russia CBC Programme (2016)

The ENI CBC *Kolarctic* programme's geographical area covers several border regions in Russia (Murmansk and Arkhangelsk regions, Nenets Autonomous District), Finland (Lapland), Norway (Finnmark, Troms, Nordland) and Sweden (Norrbotten). The so-called adjoining areas included Pohjois-Pohjanmaa (Finland), Vasterbotten (Sweden), Republic of Karelia, Leningrad Region and St Petersburg (Russia). (see Figure 7). The overall aim of the programme is to promote a viable economy and attractiveness of the region, where inhabitants and visitors come to enjoy the Arctic nature and where natural resources are used in a sustainable way. The programme has the following thematic objectives: (i) business and SME development; (ii) environmental protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation; (iii) improvement of accessibility to the regions, development of sustainable and climate-proof transport and communication networks and systems; and (iv) promotion of border management and border security, mobility and migration management (*Kolarctic CBC Programme 2014–2020*, 2018: 4).

The indicative allocation of EU funding for the *Kolarctic CBC programme 2014–20* is EUR 24.718 million. Availability of an additional ERDF allocation of EUR 10.355 million for years 2018–20 is subject to a mid-term review by the EU and the availability of matching ENI funds. The Norwegian equivalent funding totals EUR 7 million. National co-financing from EU member states (Sweden and Finland) is a total of EUR 12.359 million; Russia is to provide the same amount. The programme requests all individual projects to allocate their own contribution of a minimum of 10% of the total project budget (European Commission, 2015).

The programme was not very successful in improving the environmental situation in the region because a number of the Norilsknickel-owned smelters still operate in the border area but the achievements in spheres, such as transport infrastructure, intensive links between local educational, health care, mass media, sport, women's, youth and cultural institutions are obvious.

The Karelia CBC programme 2014–2020 unites several regions in Finland (Pohjois-Pohjanmaa (Northern Ostrobothnia), Pohjois-Karjala (North Karelia) and Kainuu) and Russia (Republic of Karelia). The adjoining areas included Lapland, Pohjois-Savo, North Savo, South Savo and South Karelia (Finland), as well as the Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Leningrad regions and St Petersburg (Russia) (see Figure 8). Its Joint Operation Programme defines its overall objective as follows: to make the programme area attractive for the people to live and work and



**FIGURE 7** Kolarctic programme 2014–2020 area.  
 Source: The Kolarctic CBC Programme 2014–2020 (2018)

businesses to locate and operate. The four thematic objectives chosen for the Karelia CBC programme are: (i) business and SME development; (ii) promotion of local culture and preservation of historical heritage; (iii) environmental protection, climate change adaptation; and (iv) promotion of border management, and border security (Karelia CBC programme, 2015). Most of these projects are being successfully implemented and previously remote and backward regions of these two countries became really interlinked and even intertwined.

The programme is co-funded by the EU out of the ENI and ERDF allocations, and by Russia and Finland, with each source providing EUR 10.75 million (Karelia CBC programme, 2015). Forty joint projects were selected for funding by the stakeholders (Karelia CBC programme, 2018).

Table 1 contains aggregated data on funding EU–Russia CBC programmes for 2014–2020.

## 6 | OTHER CBC PROGRAMMES

### 6.1 | Northern Dimension

The involvement of local and regional authorities in CBC was also given prominence in the context of the Northern Dimension (ND) of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which was launched in 2000. In 2006, the ND was reformatted. Instead of being one of the regional dimensions of the CFSP, it became a joint policy of four equal partners: the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland. The ND now operates through four partnerships: the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP), and the Northern Dimension Partnerships in Public Health and Social



**FIGURE 8** Karelia CBC Programme 2014–2020 area.  
Source: The Karelia CBC programme (2015)

**TABLE 1** EU–Russia CBC programme funding for 2014–2020 (million EUR)

Programme	ERDF	ENI	Finland	Sweden	Norway	Russia	Total
Baltic Sea Region	263.8	8.8	-	-	6.0	4.4	283.0
Kolarctic	24.718		12.359		7.0	12.359	56.436
Karelia	10.75	10.75	10.75	-	-	10.75	43.0
South-East Finland–Russia	36.147		18.0735	-	-	18.0735	72.294
Estonia–Russia	16.808 (EU) + 9.013 (Estonia)		-	-	-	8.404	34.225
Latvia–Russia	17.554 (EU) 1.035 (Latvia)		-	-	-	8.743	27.332
Lithuania–Russia	18.71		-	-	-	8.5	27.21
Poland–Russia	20.653	20.992	-	-	-	20.653	62.298
Total	459.73		34.7535	6.18	13.0	91.8825	605.546

Well-being (NDPHS), on Transport and Logistics (NDPTL) and on Culture (NDPC). The structure, nature and tasks of partnerships vary from project-centred financing to expert-oriented co-operation.

In the 2007–2013 period, the ND policies aimed to support stability, well-being and sustainable development in the region by means of practical co-operation. This covered a wide range of sectors, such as the environment, nuclear safety, health, energy, transport, logistics, promotion of trade and investment, research, education and culture.

For example, under the NDEP's auspices, dozens of wastewater treatment plants were built or rehabilitated in Arkhangelsk, Kaliningrad, Leningrad Region, Novgorod, Komi Republic, Petrozavodsk, Pskov and St Petersburg. Heating systems were modernized in Kaliningrad and Vologda. A solid-waste management project was implemented in Petrozavodsk. The NDEP participated in the construction of the St. Petersburg Flood Protection Barrier (Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership, 2019).

The NDEP's nuclear 'window' has become a major multilateral initiative in dealing with nuclear waste management in north-west Russia. Its focus was on the Kola Peninsula, Arkhangelsk and Murmansk regions, which constituted the largest repository of nuclear waste in the world. The NDEP coordinated its work with the Contact Expert Group of the International Atomic Energy Agency. NDEP nuclear safety projects included construction of spent nuclear fuel storage facilities, defueling of nuclear submarines, modernization of spent nuclear fuel transportation systems on the Kola Peninsula (Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership, 2019).

As for the NDPTL it had a general aim of developing major transnational transport connections and logistics infrastructure between the partner countries with the view of stimulating sustainable economic growth and trade at the local/regional and global levels (Northern Dimension Partnership for Transport and Logistics, 2018; Rafaelsen, 2014). In practice, however, the NDPTL had a slow and difficult start. The decision to establish it was taken on 28 October 2008. However, only at the end of 2012 was an NDPTL support fund established so that the first projects could be funded. Moreover, it turned out that Russia was not a high priority for the NDPTL partnership: in 2013, the secretariat selected only one (the road from the "border-crossing point to the Vyborg bypass) of 12 projects submitted in the first call and this project related to the Baltic rather than Arctic region (Rafaelsen, 2014).

Prior to the Ukrainian crisis, the NDPHS worked according to the initial provisions (the Oslo Declaration of 2003), which stipulated that the partnership should promote co-operation and should develop in the two priority areas: (i) reducing major communicable diseases and prevention of lifestyle related non-communicable diseases; (ii) enhancing and promoting healthy and socially rewarding lifestyles (The Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being, 2014). The EU started to fund the NDPHS projects rather late—from 2011. Despite the EU's modest participation in the projects, Russia was rather supportive of this partnership. In 2010–2013, Russia became increasingly involved in the NDPHS, considering it a politically important partnership that could play a significant role in the regional co-operation. Russia actively participated in the work of expert and task groups, being the co-lead partner in two expert groups and one task group, and was engaged in the running of NDPHS projects. It also contributed financially, mostly to the secretariat budget (Rafaelsen, 2014).

Established in 2010, the NDPC is the youngest of the four ND partnerships. From the very beginning, its aim was to contribute to social and economic development in the region by focusing on culture-based creativity co-operation, promoting the operating conditions for cultural and creative industries (CCI), by bridging the gap between public and private funding and strengthening co-operation between the cultural and creative industries and the business community throughout the entire ND area (The Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture 2017). Furthermore, culture was seen as the driving force in regional and international development and an important part of co-operation in all other sectors across the ND area. As in the case of the NDPHS, the EU financial contribution to the NDPC was quite modest. Brussels funded four projects with Russia's participation in 2011–2014. True to the project's strategic focus, these were all culturally-orientated and included a study on the Viking route heritage sites in Russia and a mapping study of music industry operators in North West Russia. The EU's total contribution was as little as 572,498 EUR (Rafaelsen, 2014).

In the course of the NDPC's early activities, some fundamental conceptual differences between the EU and Russian partners emerged. While CCI was a fast developing sector in Europe, it was not the case in Russia. Russia has only recently taken an interest in this sector and its contribution to economic development. Many stakeholders were unconvinced that CCI belongs to the cultural area and therefore questioned the focus of the NDPC. The fact that it was the ministries of culture that participated in the NDPC was also questioned, as some countries saw CCI as part of economic development.

In their assessments of the programme, EU experts emphasized that, to achieve long-lasting results, the NDPC would require a predictable and larger funding stream. Considering the dual nature of the CCI (a cross-over between economic development and culture), the funding could originate from both public (EU, national funding and other organizations) and private sources (Rafaelsen, 2014). While EU financing has been instrumental for the NDPC's project activities, it has been less of a catalyst for attracting funding from other sources (public or private) in comparison

to other ND partnerships. The NDPC partners expressed their interest in having a dialogue with the European Commission's DG Education and Culture to get more information on available funding opportunities from EU funds. EU experts also suggested measures to strengthen the NDPC secretariat because with its limited staff and scarce financial resources it was unable to run the partnership effectively (Rafaelsen, 2014).

In the post-Ukrainian crisis period ND partnerships developed rather sluggishly: some projects were cancelled or suspended; only projects approved in the pre-crisis period were continued and no new projects were launched. For example, the NDEP did not initiate any new projects with Russia in the 2014–2020 EU budget cycle, but, at the same time, turned its attention to co-operation with Belarus. Some modest activities and progress can be observed in the cases of NDPHS (Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being, 2018) and NDPC (The Northern Dimension on Culture, 2017) alone.

## 6.2 | Euroregions

Euroregions are in essence administrative-territorial units designed to promote CBC between neighbouring local or regional authorities in countries that share land or maritime borders. In fact, they constitute well-known mechanisms for co-operation between regions and municipalities. Several of Russia's north-western regions and municipalities were involved in Euroregion projects. For example, the Kaliningrad Region currently belongs to five Euroregions – Baltic, Saule, Neman, Lyna-Lava and Sesupe (Sergunin, 2006). Karelia and the Pskov Region have participated in Euroregions with Finland, Latvia and Estonia.

The projects implemented under Euroregion auspices aimed to develop regional transportation, energy and border-crossing infrastructure; monitor environmental risks; train municipal officials; and establish cultural, educational, youth and other people-to-people contacts. In this respect, the Euroregions foster Europeanization, de-bordering, de-marginalization, increased awareness and familiarization.

The Ukrainian crisis has negatively affected the Euroregions with Russia's participation. While most of these remain dormant, Euroregion Baltic demonstrates some modest activity. It is involved in three projects funded by the EU Interreg South Baltic Programme: CaSYPoT (youth issues), INTERCONNECT (travelling with one ticket by various means of transport in a selected region of the South Baltic) and UMBRELLA (support for small NGOs, local and regional authorities, associations, chambers of commerce, etc. in developing CBC in the region) (Euroregion Baltic, 2018).

It should be noted, however, that, despite some successes, the overall results of the Euroregions projects remain rather modest. Moreover, the Euroregions were often reduced to what Russians call "bureaucratic tourism," by which they mean exchanges between regional and municipal officials. Only the Baltic, Saule and Karelia Euroregions really promoted co-operation and horizontal links at the people-to-people, company-to-company or NGO levels (Scott, 2013; Sergunin, 2006). Thus, the Euroregions concept, although a potentially important tool for CBC, does not work properly.

To improve the Euroregions' performance, Russian and international experts : (i) clarifying the legal status of Euroregions in Russian and European law; (ii) providing them with a sustainable financial base through EU and national long-term funding schemes; and (iii) through local and regional budget allocations, publicizing the activities of Euroregions to facilitate lobbying in national and international agencies (Lepik, 2009; Perkmann, 2003; Sergunin, 2006).

## 6.3 | City-twinning

Twin cities have become one of the most successful and interesting forms of CBC in the post-Cold War era. They are a relatively new form of urban co-operation. As an aspect of regionalization, twinning shows that national

borders are losing their capacity to impose order, even as it turns marginality from a disadvantage to a competitive advantage and increases familiarity.

To coordinate and institutionalize twinning, the City Twins Association (CTA) was established in December 2006. This comprises 14 cities, including four pairs in northern Europe: Valka and Valga (Latvia and Estonia), Imatra and Svetogorsk (Finland and Russia), Narva and Ivangorod (Estonia and Russia) and Tornio and Haparanda (Finland and Sweden). One more city pair Kirkenes (northern Norway) and Nickel (Murmansk Region, Russia) had plans to join the CTA prior to the Ukrainian crisis.

These pairs differ in terms of experiences and effectiveness. Tornio–Haparanda can be seen as a success story, and Valka–Valga, Imatra–Svetogorsk and Kirkenes–Nickel as relatively successful pairings; but the Narva–Ivangorod duo exemplifies, if not complete failure, something close to it.

Twin-city projects covered spheres such as wastewater treatment systems, the assessment and measurement of water quality and fish stocks, culture, tourism, employment policies, border policies, spatial planning coordination and infrastructural improvements (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2011, 2012, 2013).

In the post-Ukrainian crisis era the two city-twinning projects with Russian participation (Narva–Ivangorod and Imatra–Svetogorsk) have been reduced to some routine activities and do not exhibit any potential for a breakthrough. On the other hand, these city pairings continue to benefit from the ENI CBC Estonia–Russia and South-East Finland–Russia programmes. Co-operation between Kirkenes and Nickel develops quite dynamically. Particularly, transport and border-crossing infrastructure was radically improved; business-to-business and cultural co-operation continues to develop. After some drop in number of border-crossings because of the Russian economic crisis of 2014–2016, a number of travellers started to increase again.

Despite some problems, 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 EU in the BSR (Sergunin & Joenniemi, 2017). Twinning with Russia’s participation is still in its infancy, often oriented toward short-term rather than the long-term perspectives, yet there are solid 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.

## 7 | CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CBC PROGRAMMEMES

Given the early stage in the implementation of ENI programmes, it is too early to draw any far-reaching conclusions about their effectiveness. Some preliminary observations, however, can be made.

It should be noted that ENI CBC programmes are much better designed than ENPI ones. Building on previous experience, and mirroring the approach of the Interreg programmes, important efforts were made towards narrowing down the thematic focus of the ENI CBC programmes with a view to maximizing their impact.

The Joint Monitoring Committees of the specific programmes provided an effective forum for all parties to articulate concerns about various aspects of programme progress and/or to propose alternative approaches to the achievement of overall programme objectives. All partners had an opportunity to participate and some fundamental changes were made to some programmes as a result. While the constant reformulation of programmes is not to be recommended, the responsiveness of programme management to changing circumstances is an important success factor (Evaluation Unit of the DG NEAR, 2018).

Russian co-funding is very important for the success of the CBC programmes. At a general level, it has helped to create a sense that the CBC programmes are recognized as a genuine joint effort to address shared social and economic problems, rather than being some external aid programme over which the participants have little control. At the more operational level, Russian co-funding has imposed legal and administrative obligations on Russia to obtain a good return on the investment (Evaluation Unit of the DG NEAR, 2018).

The activities of the ENI CBC programmes have been implemented with a high level of mutual understanding and respect between the partners on both sides of the border. This “parity of esteem” is extremely important for the Russian partners in particular and is an important ingredient in the maintenance of good diplomatic and political relations between the programme countries (Evaluation Unit of the DG NEAR, 2018).

Again, building on the experience from the past, the ENI CBC programmes are increasingly aware of the importance of communicating their results. At the time of submission of the Joint Operational Programmes, programmes also submitted a communications strategy for their whole duration as well as an indicative information and communications plan for the first year, including visibility measures. The majority of programmes developed dedicated websites from the outset, considered as their main communications tool. Another improvement is the increased use of social media to promote the programmes and their results (EEAS-DG NEAR, 2017).

Despite the overall positive assessment of outcomes from the EU–Russia CBC programmes, ND partnerships, Euroregions and city-twinning, neither Brussels nor Moscow want to produce a rosy picture of their co-operation in the region and are quite self-critical in terms of their assessments. Four main types of problems associated with the implementation of the CBC concepts can be identified. First, is the partners' capacity and preparedness to enter into a programme partnership. Second, there is the partners' willingness and capacity to manage the programme and, notably, to establish a system of joint management responsibility. Third, potential obstacles come in the realm of partners' knowledge and capacity to develop and implement project proposals and, finally, support from the national level for the establishment and management of the programme by local partners (see, for example, European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2011).

There are also some more technical challenges, such as the complexity of procedures relating to implementation, reporting, control, audit and recoveries, the capacity of projects to create synergies with other processes and the delineation of roles and responsibilities between stakeholders, which could have impacts on the pace of implementation (EEAS-DG NEAR, 2017). Problems like the signature of financing agreements and the making of special provisions for Russian procurement, visibility and administrative concerns can absorb a significant amount of management time and leave less resources to deal with the practical challenges of project implementation (Evaluation Unit of the DG NEAR, 2018).

Notwithstanding these more practical issues, the CBC experiences show that the main hindrances came from political factors rather than from the technical inexperience of the participants. The implementation of CBC programmes in the BSR and North suffered from the spill-over of political conflicts between its participants, including but not limited to the 2008 Georgian-Russian armed conflict, tensions over the human rights situation in Russia, some Baltic Sea region countries' opposition to the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, 2014 Ukrainian crisis, etc.

Another negative examples included the cases of Estonian Internal Security Service officer Eston Kohver, who was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in jail by Russian authorities in September 2014 for crossing the border illegally, and a retired Norwegian border police officer Frode Berg who was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to 14 years for espionage. Both Kohver and Berg were finally exchanged for Russian spies imprisoned in Estonia and Lithuania. However these cases had a direct and very negative effect on Estonian-Russian and Norwegian-Russian CBCs.

The decision by Poland in 2016 to suspend (allegedly for security reasons) the visa-free regime for residents of the Kaliningrad Region and two Polish border regions in the aftermath of the crisis in Ukraine has had a negative effect on the Poland–Russia ENI CBC programme because it made the free movement of people in the region more difficult and resulted in a reduction in tourism and cross-border trade.

As the “lesson” from the EU–Russia CBC programmes demonstrates, it is impossible to develop co-operation against the political will of participating countries. However, as evidenced by the rather positive experiences of some NDEP projects, as well as the Kolarctic and Karelia CBC programmes, Baltic Euroregion, Imatra-Svetogorsk and Kirkenes-Nickel twinning projects, with a little political support or at least governmental neutrality, co-operative programmes can be successfully implemented and have positive ‘confidence-building’ effects and some useful practical results for participants.

## 8 | CONCLUSIONS

A range of CBC programmes provide opportunities for dialogue with a number of different stakeholders, including civil society organizations, local and regional authorities, academia and the private sector. In other words, CBC offers one of the few available funding platforms for certain (marginal) stakeholders who would otherwise not have access to such co-operation. It should also be noted that CBC networks strengthened dialogue both between neighbouring countries and regions and within participating countries.

Many CBC programmes are characterized by the participating countries' strong commitment and ownership based on a balanced partnership between them and non-state actors. The programmes are not only planned but also implemented in a coordinated manner, and through joint management structures involving partners at different policy levels (national, regional, local). This is certainly an important contribution to good neighbourly relations and the creation of a climate of trust between the partners that is especially valuable in the context of current EU–Russia tensions.

In general, EU–Russia CBC programmes provide a very effective instrument for the promotion of strategic co-operation between the partner countries, even in the post-2014 environment. Relations between some EU member states and Russian institutions in the transport, border management, environmental, healthcare, educational and cultural sectors seem to be very strong and there is great willingness to continue co-operation. As demonstrated above, in many cases CBC projects brought concrete positive results and not only solved specific problems but also helped to Russian and European border regions and municipalities to create proper capabilities for sustainable development. These practical forms of co-operation appear to be strongly supported at high political levels in both the EU countries and Russia, despite ongoing diplomatic tensions.

There are, however, a number of caveats regarding the role of CBC in developing strategic co-operation between the EU and Russia. While relations between European and Russian national and subnational authorities seem to be strongly supported by past and present programmes, the same impact is not so evident in relations between Brussels and Moscow. There are many complex geopolitical factors that negatively affect EU–Russian relations, including in the CBC sphere. For this reason, CBC programmes probably have the greatest strategic value at the regional and local/municipal levels rather than at the top tier.

On a practical note, better coordination and synergies could be sought between ENI CBC and other EU financial instruments and EU political initiatives in the BSR and Northern Europe. It is especially important to establish a proper division of labour between ENI CBC programmes, on the one hand, and the ND partnerships and Euroregions, on the other. Some duplication currently exists in terms of specific projects, participants and funding schemes. The ND partnerships, Euroregions and city twinning should be revived because they have proved to be important CBC instruments that complement and reinforce ENI CBC programmes.

To conclude, in spite of a number of negative factors—such as an unfavourable geopolitical environment, EU–Russian tensions and mutual sanctions, the lack of some stakeholders' commitment to specific CBC projects, some partners' inexperience in managing international projects, and numerous technical difficulties in project implementation – EU–Russia CBC appears to be a useful and effective instrument in transforming marginality from disadvantage to competitive advantage as well as in building practical co-operation and trust at the transnational, national, regional and local levels.

At the same time, it should be noted that in the current situation, which is seriously affected by the Ukrainian crisis and corona virus pandemic, the EU and Russian approaches to and priorities of CBC should be redefined and the specific CBC programmes should be properly adapted to new realities.

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