

# EU-Russian Border Security

## Stereotypes and Realities

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Russia has land borders with five European Union states: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The aggregate length of these borders is more than 2,250 kilometers, roughly one-fifth of all EU land boundaries and one-tenth of Russia's own border. The EU-Russian border is guarded rather strictly by the so-called "Schengen curtain," named for the European visa regime that now allows visa-free travel within 24 European states while hindering such travel across the EU's eastern border. This regime is designed to protect "fortress Europe" against unwanted migration, drug trafficking, other criminal activity, and terrorism.

Is the "Schengen curtain" an appropriate instrument for managing the challenges of EU border security? What role do unsubstantiated fears and stereotypes play in EU border security policy? To answer these questions, I examine the following issues: 1) the psychology of EU-Russian border security; 2) the comparative socioeconomic characteristics of borderland territories; 3) comparative crime rates and transborder criminal activity; and 4) the less tangible costs created by the strict border regime.

### **Mutual Perceptions and Border Security**

In a 2007 Pew Research Center survey, 58 percent of Polish respondents held negative perceptions of Russia, as did 62 percent of Finnish respondents in a 2004 survey conducted by Gallup International. Such negative perceptions of Russia are also common in the Baltic states. At the same time, according to a 2006 survey by the Moscow-based Levada Center, Russians consistently consider their Baltic and Polish EU neighbors to be some of Russia's greatest "enemies."

Border protection is in part a function of such psychological barriers. It is often a defensive action against external environments perceived to be potentially hostile. Opening the EU-Russian border might thus be considered a serious threat to inhabitants of the EU (and, even perhaps, of Russia). In Russia's smaller neighboring states in particular,

the threat of a rapidly growing mass influx of Russians is equated with an invasion, occupation, or “ethnocultural expansion.”

Such negative perceptions are widespread among political elites and the mass media. They are rather conservative and can long survive, even after the essential situation has changed. Russia is still sometimes portrayed in the EU as a poor country with a high crime rate, while the Baltic states and Poland are perceived by Russia as outposts of NATO aggression eastwards. The Russian government even appears to fear close regional cross-border cooperation because of the potential for separatism in provinces that engage in it.

## **Comparative Socioeconomic Characteristics of Borderland Territories**

Regardless of their psychological foundations, justifications for a closed EU-Russian border based on objective factors like economic inequality and crime do not withstand scrutiny. First, disparities in per capita economic indicators such as wages do not support the argument that a strict border regime is necessary to stop the flow of population from “poorer” states to wealthier ones.

Various adjacent regions along the EU-Russian border do differ on key social and economic indices such as gross domestic product per capita and average wages, with the EU side coming out on top in virtually all cases. However, over the last decade this advantage has been diminishing and, on the whole, is not that wide. According to official data, average wages on the Finnish side of the border in 2000 were 15 to 25 times greater than on the Russian side. By 2006, this gap decreased dramatically, with the average wage on the Finnish side only six to nine times higher than that on the Russian side. In the same period, the average wage advantage on the Estonian side of the borderland, considerably less to begin with, shrank in half (from 3-6:1 to 1.5-3:1); on the Lithuanian side, it shrank by more than half (4:1 to 1.6:1) and on the Polish side, by more than three times (6.3:1 to 2:1).

Notably, even significant differences in wages and incomes do not necessarily generate uncontrolled massive migration. Although the disparity in salaries between Finnish and Russian borderland areas is no less than that between the United States and Mexico, only dozens of illegal aliens are arrested annually by border guards patrolling Finland’s eastern frontier; in the Baltic states and Poland, the number of violators apprehended is no more than several hundred. The vast majority of those caught are inhabitants of borderland areas, not illegal migrants trying to reside in the EU. The relatively tranquil experience of the German-Poland borderland, which in the 1990s resembled the U.S.-Mexico border, also demonstrates that large wage gaps and even high levels of illegal cross-border activity do not necessarily have traumatic effects on states that open their borders.

## **Transborder Criminal Activities**

According to official data, the crime rate in Russian border regions is, in almost all cases, no higher than in neighboring EU borderlands. This can be explained in part by a poorly-functioning official system for tracking crime in Russia. Nonetheless, the rate of serious crimes in any Russian western border region is still currently two or even three times lower than it was in 2000.

Transborder criminal activities by organized groups, such as the so-called “Russian

mafia,” are also not a persuasive argument for maintaining a strict border regime. Many members of such groups (which not only include Russian nationals) have a wide range of possibilities to legally enter the EU in spite of Schengen restrictions. The EU also has non-visa regimes with Mexico and other Latin American states with strong and aggressive criminal groups. Finally, criminals make up only a paltry share (less than one percent) of the total number of cross-border travelers.

As for drug trafficking, it is true that a large volume of heroin is smuggled through Russia’s western frontiers to the EU, while a significant quantity of synthetic drugs is trafficked in the opposite direction. However, the efficiency of national border security systems against drug trafficking is already very low. The 2007 United Nations World Drug Report estimates that there are at least 100,000 heroin addicts in the EU states bordering Russia. An average addict consumes at least 0.25 grams of heroin per day, so at least 9 metric tons (9,000 kilograms) of heroin can be expected to flow into the EU every year. In 2006, however, only 115 kilograms of heroin or its raw opium equivalent were seized at the EU-Russia border. This is no more than 1.3 percent of total opiates smuggled across this border and most likely far less, as a large volume of drugs is trafficked westward through the Baltic states and Poland. Current border restrictions thus do little to discourage drug trafficking. It is hard to imagine a tighter border regime being much more effective, while an open border could hardly make the situation much worse.

Finally, there are no terrorist groups clearly based in Russia or other post-Soviet states that target the EU for attack. If there were, it would in any case be far easier to use extremists who already reside in the EU than ones who have to obtain visas or try to illegally enter.

In the end, crime in Russia cannot be considered a persuasive justification for maintaining the “Schengen curtain” at the Russian border. Strengthening cooperation between Russia and EU states on law enforcement is a more promising alternative. Easing the visa regime could even be an attractive carrot to help obtain such cooperation.

## **The Less Tangible Costs of the EU-Russian Border Regime**

For neighboring EU states, at least, Russia is probably the most attractive economic partner for the EU. In 2007, their trade turnover with Russia was worth more than 250 billion dollars. There are 10 to 15 million border crossings a year at EU-Russian borders, most of them across the Russian-Finnish frontier.

However, the rigid border regime still seriously restricts productive cross-border activity. It is relatively easy for inhabitants of Russia’s borderland regions to obtain a Schengen visa (there are consulates of neighboring EU states in each), as well as of Moscow and a few other cities and regions. Outside these areas, though, the current visa regime is costly and cumbersome. People living far away from consulates have to spend several hundred euros in addition to their consular fee, and often several days away from home. Extra expenses and inconveniences influence the choice of hundreds of thousands of Russian tourists, who prefer to go to Croatia, Turkey, Egypt, or even Tunisia instead of countries in the Schengen zone. More abstractly, the “Schengen curtain” also hinders many Russians from developing real understandings of the advantages of European democratic models of governance over current Russian political realities, rather than just stereotypes.

It should also be taken into account that even a “mild” visa regime slows down cross-border economic contacts. The time spent obtaining visas is time lost on transborder communication. While there may be 10 to 15 million crossings annually across EU-Russian borders, people cross the Russian-Ukrainian and Russian-Belarusian borders more frequently because there are no visa regimes between Russia and its western post-Soviet neighbors.

Russian border and visa policies are inconvenient for many EU citizens and trade partners as well. The procedure to obtain a Russian visa is cumbersome, further hindering the development of full-fledged bilateral ties. Border control and customs procedures at EU-Russia borders can take several hours to several days. Clearing vehicles takes a dozen times longer than at the U.S.-Canada border, where the procedure takes on average several minutes per vehicle.

Finally, rules of entrance to Russia’s border zone are equivalent in some ways to an internal visa regime. The EU-Russian sector includes the towns of Ivangorod, Gdov, Sovetsk, Neman, Bagrationovsk, Mamonovo, and Baltiysk. Both foreigners and Russians living outside the border zone are required to get permission from a local branch of the Border Guard Service in advance of their visit, in some cases up to 30 days before. This procedure slows the development of these potentially thriving border towns.

## **Conclusion**

Predominantly negative perceptions between neighboring EU states and Russia need to be addressed. Objectively, however, problems of economic inequality and crime do not pose a serious challenge to EU security or cannot be solved by strict border regimes. There is not a huge difference between salaries or crime rates in adjacent Russian and EU border regions; opening the border between them will not cause social chaos. The number of illegal migrants apprehended along this border is also not large. Drug trafficking and other types of cross-border organized criminal activities are serious problems, but border protection and visa regimes do not effectively prevent these crimes.

Instead of maintaining ineffective barriers, both sides should work on increasing law enforcement cooperation, improving mutual perceptions, easing the visa regime (especially for Russians living far from consulates), and making border control and customs procedures more convenient for travelers. Opening borders could potentially serve as an incentive for Russia to strengthen its collaboration with the EU in law enforcement. It could also indirectly support an increase in democratic sentiment in Russia. Finally, it will make a fundamental contribution to the development of economic cooperation between the EU and its most economically attractive neighbor.

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