When Two Aspire to Become One: City-Twinning in Northern Europe

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When Two Aspire to Become One: City-Twinning in Northern Europe

Pertti Joenniemi* and Alexander Sergunin

Abstract

The contribution probes the burgeoning phenomenon of city twinning by engaging with four city-pairs transcending and challenging the difference-producing impact of national borders in northern Europe (Imatra–Svetogorsk; Tornio–Haparanda; Valga–Valka; Narva–Ivangorod). It also aims at discussing the dynamics and meaning of twinning in a broader, more principled and critical perspective. Despite a number of obstacles, city twinning has more recently turned into an established form of overcoming of the divisive effects of borders. The model of cities re-imagining their borders, activating them through increased cooperation, not only changes the local landscapes but may entail broader state-related and European consequences as well.

Introduction

Twinning stands for shared citiness and figures as a manifestation of new urban forms. It testifies, as an aspect of regionalization, with considerable clarity that the order-producing impact of national borders is waning. Northern Europe is particularly distinct in regard to successful experimenting with twinning. In this region, twinning is one of the departures used by cities in aspiring for a distinct, visible, and favorable profile, and it is, in this sense, part and parcel of their policies of place-marketing and branding in the context of the increasingly intense and transnational regionalization.

In order to pass judgment on the relationship between the concept of twinning and how city-twinning has fared in practice, we have chosen to probe some particular city-pairs that employ such a departure and engage in twinning across national borders. Currently, there are four formally established city-pairs in Northern Europe: Tornio–Haparanda, Narva–Ivangorod, Imatra–Svetogorsk, and Valga–Valka. In addition, there is also the Kirkenes–Nikel pair, albeit still somewhat embryonic in character.

Our interrogation is general in nature in the sense of being directed at probing the different conceptual departures used by the city-actors reaching out, although at the same time it remains limited in spatial terms in being focused on those cases of twinning located in Northern Europe that share a joint border. Arguably, a qualitatively new type of city-twinning is gradually emerging in the region. More specifically, the aim here is one of exploring critically four particular cases using twinning in order to escape spatial as well as political and administrative fixations through a reaching across statist borders in order to form a rather unified entity.

Key Concepts

It should be noted, with the terminology applied here, that the very concept of “twin cities” figures as a rather vexed question in the research literature. Different schools suggest different interpretations and use various synonyms (often of a misleading character). To summarize the ongoing academic discussion, the following definitions of the concept can be identified.

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In the **domestic context**, twin cities are a special case of two cities or urban centers founded in close geographic proximity and then growing into each other over time. It should be noted, however, that with some exceptions (e.g. Porsgrunn and Skien, Fredriksstad and Sarpsborg in Norway), Northern Europe lacks this kind of twin city. Instead, there are a number of the so-called “satellite” cities in the region that have emerged in order to “groom” larger urban centers and/or fulfill specific functions (to host university campuses, techno-parks, industries, transport infrastructure, military bases, etc.): Sandnes–Stavanger (Norway), Severomorsk–Murmansk, and Severodvinsk–Arkhangelsk (Russia) are cases in point. The craving for larger and more competitive entities is bound to increase pressures towards mergers.

In the **international sense**, there are two—broad and narrow—definitions of the concept “twin cities/towns.” Under the broader understanding, the term “twin cities” has been employed to connote cooperative agreements between cities, towns, and even counties that are not neighbors but located at a considerable distance and even in separate countries to promote economic, commercial, and cultural ties (Stephen 2008). Most town twinning unfolds between cities facing similar social, economic, and political situations or sharing historical links. In Europe, a variety of terms are used, although “twin cities” appears to be the most common one. However, also terms such as sister, connected, double, trans-border, bi-national, neighbored, coupled, partner, and friendship are utilized in naming the city-pairs (Buursink 2001; Schultz 2002). In the case of Russia (similar to the Soviet time), along with twin-towns concept, the terms of brother (pobratimy) or related (porodnennye) cities are used.

In the **narrow sense**, twin cities are border towns adjacent to each other. According to Buursink (1994), there are two sub-categories of neighbored border towns: double towns that aim at cooperation and supplementing each other, and town couples that often compete with each other. Schultz (2002) asserts that only double towns can be seen as real twins and sets a number of criteria for selecting twin towns. They should not only consist of border towns but also have the following characteristics:

- They should harbour a joint history as cities that have existed as administrative units in the past, prior to national borders separating them.
- Although previously separated by borders, this delimiting should have been traded for open borders.
- A preferable case consists of cities where a river both separates and connects the cities facing each other across the river (and, for this reason, they are called bridge towns).
- There should be connecting factors and features conducive to cooperation such as ethnic minorities as well as command of the neighbor’s language.
- There should be a certain level of institutionalization of cooperation between the twins in terms of unified administrative structures and common urban planning. The most advanced twin towns purport themselves as “Euro-cities” in emphasizing their European rather than national identity.

While agreeing with most of the above criteria, we nonetheless base our study on a somewhat different and more extensive definition of twin towns with adjacency and the breaking of spatial fixations in the form of national borders as our main point of departure. Whereas twinning is in most cases seen as residing in the application of a particular form of “urban logic,” it also inevitably provides the cities engaged in such activities with transnational and international features. It does so as they contribute, in varying degrees, to the formation of commonality reaching beyond national configurations (cf. Joenniemi and Sergunin 2008, 2009).
The concept of twinning is rather demanding and challenging. The concept has connotations of similitude and like-mindedness, and pertains to claims of an almost identical nature of the two entities involved. In pointing to shared and rather unified space, the concept goes far beyond a mere functionalist strategy of reaching across borders. The parties involved in twinning do not just cooperate with each other while at the same time retaining their rather different being (cf. Arreola 1996). Instead, they ride on notions pertaining to similarity from the very start and articulate, in terms of policies of representation and scale, their very being by (re)connecting the previously unconnected. Subsequently, they aim at reducing various functional restraints that tend to hide their rather identical nature, and therewith the border located in between the city pair is narrated—instead of accepting its usual divisive impact and partitioning effects—as something to be downgraded if not abolished. The border is turned, in the context of twinning, into a connective factor and a resource for a rather unified agglomeration to emerge.

Twinning thus amounts, once utilized as a departure for locally based cross-border cooperation, to a kind of emancipation if not mutiny, and it entails an element of a “laboratory” or an “experiment.” It does so from the very start in being transnational, and not just bi-national, in character. It is, in being transnational in character, very much at odds with the standard formula of nation-state building, i.e. configurations resting on similarity located inside and difference placed on the outside. The degree of alleged similarity in the context of twinning may vary—consisting either of being alike in the sense of shared citiness or having some specific bonds and “natural” properties supporting claims pertaining to far-reaching unity—but it amounts in both cases to a breach in the standard state-related discourse. It does so in boiling down to benign and complementary forms of difference, i.e. difference within similarity in having connotations of considerable unity and intimate connectedness reaching across national borders. It shows, if viewed in a traditional perspective, more strongly than some of the other concepts employed by cities reaching across national borders that the logic undergirding cities coming together in the context of their border-crossing activities may conflict considerably to a large degree with the way states usually outline and constitute their borders and border-related regions.

One may thus suspect—and do so precisely because of the inherently offensive connotations inherent in the concept—that the city-pairs employing twinning as their departure amount to political dreamscape. They stand for visions rather than exemplify cases of strong and concrete transnational integration. Arguably, they have adopted evocative names and coined tempting visions of togetherness, but the energy created and released through the use of such narratives and imagineering tends in the end to boil down to very little. Notably, the obstacles may also reside with the cities themselves due to a lack of transformative potential and preparedness to challenge their own cultural horizon and territorial belonging. In sum, naming does not automatically translate to tangible togetherness and concrete integration. Hence, due to its rather challenging nature as a cross-border endeavour, twinning may be too demanding to start with and actually belong—together with a considerable number of other proposals and visions launched since the end of the Cold War (cf. O’Dowd 2003)—to dreams and visions almost impossible to implement in terms of actual togetherness and unification.

City-Twinning: The Institutional Dimension

Twinning has, from the very beginning, been associated with various forms of institutionalization. In the first place, the latter has been there in order to find sources of financing but also in order to coordinate various activities and to gain recognition. Within Europe, town twinning (in the broader sense) is supported by the European Union, i.e. twinning has a recognized position as part of European integration. The current EU support of twinning is channelled for the period 2007–2013 through the program “Europe for Citizens,” which aims to support a broad range of activities and organizations in the pursuit of “active European citizenship.”

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions also endeavours to promote twinning initiatives and exchanges between European towns and communities. For CEMR, twinning does not merely stand out as
a tool to promote peace and stability in the region but is also depicted as a way of enhancing a single European identity and citizenship (Council of European Municipalities and Regions 2007, 3).

EUROCITIES constitutes a network consisting of major European cities. It brings together the local governments of 134 large cities in 34 European countries. The network’s activities address a wide range of policies concerning economic development and cohesion policy, the provision of public services, climate change, energy, transport, employment, culture, education, information, and knowledge society as well as governance and international cooperation (Eurocities 2004).

METREX (Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas) has 50 members and offers a platform for the exchange of knowledge, expertise, and experience regarding metropolitan affairs (http://www.eurometrex.org/EN/index.asp).

The Baltic Metropoles network (BaltMet) represents 11 capitals and metropolitan cities around the Baltic Sea: Berlin, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Malmö, Oslo, Riga, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Vilnius, and Warsaw. One of the BaltMet’s key priorities consists of the implementation of the recent EU Strategy and Action Plan for the Baltic Sea region in areas such as growth, employment, environment, education, competitiveness, innovation, and change (City Twins Co-operation Network 2009a).

As far as twinning in narrow sense is concerned, the twin cities have established an organization of their own. The City Twins Association (CTA) was established in December 2006 as a result of a City Twins Cooperation Network project (2004–2006). Fourteen cities are associated with the CTA, including four pairs located in Northern Europe: Valka–Valga (Latvia–Estonia), Imatra–Svetogorsk (Finland–Russia), Narva–Ivangorod (Estonia–Russia) and Tornio–Haparanda (Finland–Sweden). According to the CTA Strategy for 2010–2020, the association is concentrated on developing cooperation between the bordering twinning cities in the following sectors:

- cooperation between the city administrations;
- local industrial development;
- promotion of labor mobility;
- social and health issues;
- border crossing;
- education and training;
- cultural cooperation;
- cooperation of the third sector/citizens;
- promotion of interests of the city twins at different political levels (national, EU) (City Twins Co-operation Network 2009b).

Some of the city-pairs have been more successful than others. The CTA views Tornio–Haparanda and Imatra–Svetogorsk as belonging to the more advanced cases whereas Narva–Ivangorod is thought of as a “rather loose” city pair. Some stand out as well functioning, while others represent more efforts of purporting themselves as attractive, i.e. political dreamscapes rather than realities. Kirkenes in northern Norway and Nikel in the Murmansk Region constitute the latest case of city twinning with an agreement signed in June 2008 between the two communities. Quite probably, the Kirkenes–Nikel pair also joins, in due time, the CTA, and it remains to be seen how the newcomers then succeed in making use of their recently declared connectedness across the Norwegian–Russian border. In any case, their decision to
become city twins seems to indicate that the concept of twinning has retained its attractiveness in Northern Europe.

The Model of Tornio–Haparanda

The two cities are situated on either side of the border consisting of the Torne River in the northernmost part of the Baltic Sea region. The town of Tornio was initially established by the Swedish King in 1621 on the western side of the Torne River, to become part of the Grand Duchy of Finland in 1809. On the Swedish side, a new town, Haparanda, was established in 1821 as a replacement of the loss of Tornio. In this sense, Haparanda came into being precisely because of the appearance of the border. It is also to be noted that in terms of historical memory, the Tornio–Haparanda configuration stands out as a case of “duplicated cities” (Buursink 2001; Ehlers 2001). They do not have a joint history in the sense of having been part of a unified whole—except that prior to Finnish and Swedish state-building, the region was a rather unified one consisting of Finnish-speakers and a Saami population—and, over time, they have also varied in size as well as wealth, although more recently the differences in living standard have been leveled out.

Tornio with its 25,000 inhabitants is larger than Haparanda, which has some 10,000 inhabitants, although the relationship is in most respects quite symmetric. Tornio also has a rather coherent Finnish-speaking population (some 20% speak good or very good Swedish (Zalamans 2001)), whereas the population is more mixed in Haparanda with three different language groups basically of similar size. There are the “Tornedalians,” who are the native population with Swedish citizenship, albeit with Finnish or “Meänkieli” (usually seen as a particular dialect of Finnish) as their language, the purely Swedish-speaking Swedes, and then the native Finns with Finnish as their language, although with a competence in Swedish and perhaps also “Meänkieli” (cf. Lunden and Zalamans 2001; Zalamans 2003). Tornio–Haparanda is hence, in being culturally quite diversified, more than just a “bi-national city” premised on Finnishness and Swedishness. Overall, cultural differences transcending nationally premised unity have been there already for a considerable period of time and have constituted—particularly in the case of Haparanda—an integral part of the essence of the cities from the very start.

Similarly, the exploitation of vicinity and borders as a resource is not a new phenomenon in the case of Tornio–Haparanda. Being divided only by a stretch of wetland, and with a tradition of many informal contacts on the level of the inhabitants reaching far back in history, the two cities started formal cooperation already in the 1960s through the establishment of a joint swimming hall. Since then, interest in cooperation has gradually amounted to developing a very explicit strategy of transboundary cooperation, including joint planning and organization (Provincia Bothniensis) in 1985 (Kujala 2000). That is to say that a twin-city strategy was coined in a top-down manner and has been implemented from 1987 onwards, and it has over time brought about a considerable degree of mutual trust and well-functioning relations of cooperation. These have been conducive both to the identity of the entity created and to solving a considerable number of rather practical problems. The latter range from a joint rescue and ambulance service to a tourist service, employment information agencies, joint schools, educational facilities, and a common library with citizens also provided with the choice of picking the facility to their liking.

In particular, the parties pride themselves on a hotel complex with a bar table stretching across the national border and on a local golf course straddling not just the national boundaries but also the difference embedded in the fact that Finland and Sweden belong to different time zones (the story being that “even the shortest putt may take an hour to complete”). These properties have often been viewed as the very expression of the common space created through endeavours of city-twinning.

The more recent developments pertain to a new and joint city core that bridges the two cities in a very concrete fashion. Significantly, the two towns have gradually succeeded in attracting a considerable
amount of investments and businesses. The newly established IKEA furniture mall as part of the city core is a case in point.

On a very concrete plane, a unified area and a joint core have been created by constructing unifying roads and connecting pathways as well as the establishment of a common circle bus line. A further example of cooperation of a rather practical and functional kind consists of the installment of letterboxes of the neighboring postal administration with letters consequently being treated as domestic mail (and therefore not circulated by sending them first to the capitals to be delivered according to the usual border-dependent rules). The establishment of such a short cut through moves of re-scaling and de-bordering is, of course—in addition to the more practical gains—loaded with considerable symbolic significance in pointing to the far-reaching unity. In other words, the divisive effects of national borders have been radically circumvented as a consequence of twinning.

It should be noted, however, that some broader developments have in the first place facilitated a lowering of the border. In fact, the border has not been much of an obstacle since the 1960s owing to intense Nordic cooperation. It has been quite easy for Nordic citizens to transgress, and with Finland and Sweden joining the EU in 1995 the border became almost invisible. EU membership has further spurred cooperation by labeling various endeavours as European rather than local. Likewise, increased EU financial means have been available to promote twinning.

Yet should also be noted that the locally premised togetherness of Tornio–Haparanda has grown so intense that it actually challenges various forms of administrative and legal departures premised on national belonging. Finnishness and Swedishness have, in the case of Tornio–Haparanda, to compete seriously implying that it then also tests the ability of the locals to project themselves beyond their usual linguistic, cultural, and political borders.

This was indicated by the fact that the epithet of a "twin city" has on occasions been substituted by the one of "EuroCity" with the latter being employed for a while since the beginning of the 1990s. The usage of such an alternative marker quite obviously points to efforts of developing an alternative to the concept of twinning, as the latter seemed at least initially to meet considerable local resistance particularly on the Swedish side. Commonality could hence be purported in less site-specific terms and presented instead as part and parcel of a broader Europeanness. This approach was in particular applied by Provincia Bothniensis as a marketing strategy in aspiring for added visibility and closer commercial ties, and the efforts of anchoring oneself in Europeanness rather than national belonging, nordicity or just pointing to detached local entities coming together as city twins. It may be noted, however, that the concept of twinning has returned as a key marker. It has again become dominant over the recent years, as the initial resistance to togetherness in the form of twinning has by and large faded away.

The efforts of creating a far-reaching commonality have also been restricted in that Finland has gone over to the Euro, whereas Sweden has stayed with its national currency. This state of affairs implies that Tornio and Haparanda remain divided due to the existence of different national currencies. However, considerable efforts to bridging this divide have taken place as the Euro seems to have turned into a valid currency also on the Swedish side of the national borders, and the Swedish krona is equally a valid currency on the side of Tornio. Moreover, Haparanda has locally made the decision to use euros extensively in its calculations and budgeting, among other things in order to facilitate the planning and implementation of joint projects with Tornio. Both issues—the toning down of the label of a EuroCity and the bolstering of the position of the Euro as a joint currency—have profound symbolic importance in allowing the re-imagined cities to be increasingly seen as being integrated and unified along the lines of broader European development.

Obviously, the projecting of oneself into a new and far-reaching unity has not been easy, and the problems seem mostly to have been discernible among the Swedish-speaking inhabitants of Haparanda. They tend to feel that the down-playing of differences favors Finnish-speakers too much on both sides of the border.
Lundén and Zalamans (2001, 36) also point out that there is a legacy on the Swedish side to view Finland as “poor, dangerous or irredentist.” To re-read the previous otherness and to incorporate it into a joint we-ness in the context of twinning is thus a demanding challenge.

In other words, although the whole trend is positive, the twin city does not fully function—at least not yet—as a unified city in a proper sense of the word. Overall, a previously divisive border now predominantly connects and facilitates far-reaching cooperation, albeit some resistance still prevails.

**Narva-Ivangorod: A Case of Partition**

Among the various paired cities, Narva and Ivanogorod have either been part of a joint configuration or stood opposite to each other. Their histories as border-related sites where a major connective route has crossed a river tend to be complex as well as tragic. The city sites have functioned as a single composite settlement for nearly three and a half centuries, first under Swedish rule in the 16th century and then later during the tsarist period with Moscow having conquered Narva during the Livonian Wars. After a brief period of Bolshevik control during late 1918 to early 1919, both towns were incorporated into Estonia under the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Tartu.

Their togetherness in the context of Estonia was altered by the outbreak of World War II. The Estonian population was either evacuated from the Narva region by the Nazi army or deported to Siberia by the Soviet authorities, and the immigration of Russian-speakers followed. Administratively, the conjoined status of the two cities changed in 1945, with Ivanogorod becoming part of a Russian Republic, although they continued to form a rather closely connected functional and cultural space despite the drawing of an administrative border.

This commonality changed considerably in 1991 with the Narva River now delimiting a de facto state border. The two entities—with the new border being institutionalized and an international border-crossing set up on the bridge connecting the two towns—can thus be analytically slotted in the category of “partitioned cities” (Buursink 2001, 8).

The divorce between the two cities was in many ways, in view of their previously far-reaching togetherness, quite drastic as well as contentious. The appearance of a rather divisive border has in the local discourse strengthened contrasting notions such as “we” and “they.” Neighbors are “there, over the bridge” and “on the other side of the border.” At large, and despite the broadly shared ethnic and linguistic background of the inhabitants, there was at least initially a growing orientation on both sides away from the border to be detected (Berg, Boman and Kolossov 2006, 8; Brednikova 2007, 60). It also appears that the Estonian membership in the EU and NATO further accentuated the split.

The deterioration of a rather connected city space into two different ones created feelings of a loss, and a variety of plans and projects were proposed primarily by the leadership of Narva for togetherness to be bolstered. Some common activities and projects have appeared specifically under the heading of “twin cities” in the spheres of culture, tourism, employment policies, facilitation of border-crossing, coordination of spatial planning, and improvements in infrastructure. There were plans to establish a joint tourist route covering the Narva and Ivanogorod fortresses on their respective side of the river, development of a historical promenade along the both sides of the Narva River, and construction of an aqua park in the border area. These plans, however, were hindered by the global crisis-related troubles, but have nonetheless been implemented to a degree.

Being part of the CTA has been quite conducive to the process of Narva and Ivanogorod coming together. The brand of twin cities increasingly conveys an innovative and open image that is very different from that which prevailed in the early 1990s. Cooperation has been facilitated within a broader frame part of EU-Russia relations in the sense that a specific visa-exchange arrangement has come into being between Narva
and Ivangoord: now both sides can issue up to 4,000 multi-entry visas annually to border residents who have compelling needs to cross the border regularly (Joenniemi 2008, 11).

Yet, the main obstacle to the emergence of communality seems to involve the existence of a considerable mental and identity-related distance. Boman and Berg (2007, 206) note that there is no perception of local cross-border historical–cultural identity: “People in Narva possess some kind of ‘Narvian’ identity which is not Russian anymore, but has not become Estonian either.”

Twinning thus unavoidably turns into a rather contentious theme. This explains why the label of twin city has predominantly gained connotations of de-politicization and interest-oriented cooperation of a very practical and mundane kind. It has been deliberately narrowed down to apply to explicitly functional issues such as city planning and various interest-related contacts between the respective administrations, and has not been brought to any major extent into the public sphere. Interestingly, if linked to various broader discourses on Europeanization, it would be conducive to a transcending of the various local and national deadlocks and tensions. To some extent, this appears to have taken place, and the concept hence appears to enjoy sufficient legitimacy in the overall discourse. The very concrete problems that both Narva and Ivangoord have encountered and have to deal with in being located at the border have clearly contributed to this. Twinning thus seems, in appearing as a kind of “third” and Europe-related option, in recent years to have been able to generate some—albeit limited—features of communality across the border (cf. Brednikova 2007, 62).

The Case of Imatra–Svetogorsk

For quite some time, Imatra and Svetogorsk occupied a rather special case in the sphere of EU–Russia relations. The two cities, located on their respective sides of the Finnish–Russian border, were as such unique in terms of their location in constituting the only place on the EU–Russia border where both rail and automobile border crossings existed. Prior to the EU enlargement of 2004—with Narva–Ivangorod now forming a similar case—they stood out as the only region located immediately at the EU–Russian frontier with the boundary separating two adjacent urban settlements from each other.

In the context of the classification regarding “partitioned” and “duplicated” cities, the case of Imatra–Svetogorsk contains elements of both. It used to be an integrated entity within the Russian Empire and then in the independent Finland after 1917. However, as a result of, first, the Soviet–Finnish “Winter war” of 1939–1940 and then World War II, the Finnish–Russian border was redrawn, and the previously coherent industrial center of Enso was split by the new border. In that context, the main part of the area remained on the Finnish side, although a large pulp and paper factory remained on the Soviet side. With the previous population having moved over to the Finnish side, it took some time before the area was re-populated. In January 1949, the city of Svetogorsk (i.e. the City of Light Hills) came into being. Similarly, Imatra evolved into a more coherent municipal entity.

As a consequence, for a long time, the two cities had the character of “border cities” with very little if any contacts between them. Yet it may be noted that some cooperation gradually emerged even in the Soviet period. It started in 1972 when a large construction project was launched as a joint Finnish–Russian endeavour in order to reconstruct the Svetogorsk paper combine.

The twin city concept appeared in the vocabularies in the late 1990s, mainly due to advice provided by various consultants. In 2001, Imatra and Svetogorsk signed a cooperation agreement and decided to opt—based on EU-related financing—for a common development strategy, although it appears that the two cities have never declared themselves formally as constituting a twin city. In 2000, a pilot project to develop the twin-cities strategy for the short term (2002–2003) and long term (2006–2010) was started under the aegis of the Tacis program.
The general aim of twinning has been of “improving the welfare of the inhabitants of the both towns” (Hurskainen 2005, 132), i.e. to facilitate border-crossing and communality in order to bolster the use of the resources available to the two increasingly conjoined urban settlements.

The key decision-making body of twinning has consisted of a steering group with key members of respective administrations of the two towns onboard. In addition to the local input, the institutional setup includes a commission with representatives of various ministries in Finland and Russia taking part (although in practice, the latter body has yielded very little and has in reality been abandoned). As to the organizational structures, it may also be noted that the Russo-Finnish centers for small- and medium-sized enterprises support operations exist in Imatra and Svetogorsk.

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

Other concrete aspects of togetherness consisted of the interaction created by projects such as modernization of the Svetogorsk, construction of the cross-border point between Imatra and Svetogorsk, improvement of waste-water-treatment systems, energy, health, and social security services in Svetogorsk, checking as well as measuring the quality of water and fish stocks in the Vuoksi River, educational contacts, development of the tourist infrastructure, and bolstering the competence of the municipal governments. The international arts festival “Vuoksa,” pointing to efforts of creating joint inhabited space, is held annually in Imatra and Svetogorsk. There are also some new plans (under the EU–Russian “neighborhood partnership” program) to build a freeway that bypasses Svetogorsk and Imatra to eliminate the bottlenecks on the Russian–Finnish border and improve the transport communication system between the two countries.

The introduction of the visa facilitated regime for the residents of the Finnish and Russian border regions in 2007 was also conducive for more intensive people-to-people contacts and twin-city arrangement’s progress.

To summarize, the overall setting of the Imatra–Svetogorsk pair has been conducive to cooperation, but it has not raised issues pertaining to local identities to any major degree. The cross-border cooperation is increasingly regarded as an asset for these peripheral cities to bolster their relative positions.

Valga–Valka: Divided by National Belonging

The Estonian town of Valga (situated in South Estonia; 15,300 inhabitants) and the Latvian town of Valka (located in North-Latvia; 7,100 inhabitants) have a long history of togetherness and connectedness. They left a mark in the historical records already in 1286 with the appearance of the German-sounding name of Walk. The Polish rule amounted to city rights being achieved in 1584, for this then to be followed in 1626 by the city becoming part of Estonia during Swedish rule. Some 100 years later, it became integrated into the Russian Empire. Throughout this part of its history, the city, while carrying the name Walk, was for the most part united and inhabited by both Estonians and Latvians.

Estonia and Latvia both gained independence in 1918, although they were unable to agree upon a joint border and, in this context, the belongingness of the city. The international arbitrage conclusively established the border between Estonia and Latvia by drawing a line along a stream running through the city with ethnicity as the main criterion for dividing the previously rather unified city.
The two towns remained divided until World War II. In 1945, the previous barriers were taken down as part of Sovietization, although a variety of ethnic and cultural lines of division prevailed. The only concrete border remaining was the administrative border with the two cities belonging to different Soviet republics. Valga–Valka was seen as a Soviet town that was furnished with a unified administration, joint educational facilities, common health care, and a transportation system.

In 1991, the largely unified entity was once again divided into two separate towns. The dividing line was re-installed, difference fenced outside a nationally premised border, and the cities were, much to their own surprise, obliged to build up their respective and separate administrations. Both have had problems with the quality of drinking-water and had to construct their own sewage-treatment plants. It should be noted that Valka in particular suffered economically from the changes among other reasons because the industry of the town lost its previous markets. In addition, the Russian population or the “Aliens,” i.e. people without citizenship (some 35% of the population in Valga, while the respective figure is 25% in the case of Valka), had to apply for a visa (Zalamans 2008, 5).

The situation changed only gradually towards the mid-1990s. Both sides revised their views on urban difference and re-conceptualized their cities in terms of increased local communality as expressed through the officially accepted unitary logo “one city, two countries,” one developed jointly in a special agreement (concluded in 2005).

Subsequently, relatively strong cross-border networks have developed in areas such as spatial planning, tourism, education, health care, culture, and sports. A joint secretariat has emerged, and a cross-border bus line was established as a rather concrete sign of the formation of common space, although it was short-lived due to a lack of passengers interested in taking a cross-border ride.

Under the impact of Europeaness, the border has in the new context been increasingly conceptualized as a resource. It has been depicted as a unifying factor, for example, in the sense that twinning has provided the ground for applying for some EU-related grants. Moreover, Europeaness had quite concrete and drastic effects towards the end of 2007 with both Estonia and Latvia finally joining Schengen.

The change in character of the border implies that in principle, Valga–Valka has more recently become comparable to the case of Tornio–Haparanda. This is so, as state formation has declined in importance as a core constitutive departure, although it remains there in an administrative sense. Now, culture and language seem to divide rather than unite, as Estonian and Latvian are quite different as languages, and mostly the joint language employed consists of Russian in the older generation and English in the case of the younger generation (Zalamans 2008).

In any case, the symbolic space of “one city and two countries” remains in place, and now the question is to what extent the two adjacent urban configurations are willing and able to make use of their unique location and experiences.

Concluding Remarks

There appears to be, in all the four cases probed, considerable elements of twinning present in the sense that the city-pairs present in Northern Europe do not just aim for bridging and intensified cooperation as “border cities.” They also display efforts of creating—to varying degrees—communality and joint space, thereby providing the ground for the usage of the concept of a “twin city.” A rather broad repertoire of other representations remain available as well, but it seems that there exists increased space and interest in employing precisely that conceptual departure, and despite the various quite demanding and challenging connotations attached to the concept of “twinning.”

Overall, the experiences gained in Northern Europe of twinning can be assessed as being positive. The introduction of the concept—one allowing for the difference of the other to be viewed as benign and
complementary in nature and positioned within a broader sphere of commonality—has enabled several cities to use their location at contiguous borders in order to opt for new forms of being and acting. The provision of a new and broader twist to the concept of the twin city and reproducing it in a trans-border context constitutes one specific aspect of a changing and increasingly integrated political landscape. The coalescing of cities adds, in a form of its own, to the strengthening of communality, mutual trust, and cooperation in the region, and provides border-related cities as relative small entities with the option of impacting a broader setting. Twinning adds, in view of the more recent experiences, an interesting notion to the understanding of “Europe,” and it does so as one way of extending EU-related Europeanness beyond the borders of the EU. It also testifies, in a broader perspective, to the potential inherent in the concept of “city-ness” as particularly prone to cooperation transcending statist borders.

References


