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# PROJECT APPROACH TO TRANSBOUNDARY TOURISM-AND-RECREATION REGION BUILDING: THE CASE OF KARELIA

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*This article considers international projects as a factor in building and developing transboundary tourism-and-recreation regions. The Karelian part of the Russian-Finnish border and the adjoining areas of Russia and Finland were the model site for the study. The research aims to measure the contribution of international projects run in 1990–2020 to transboundary region building in the Karelian borderlands. The analysis of 80 international municipal projects shows that they gave a boost to region building and development in the study area. Common trends and specific features of international projects carried out in Karelian municipalities have been identified in the context of transboundary tourism-and-recreation region building. The findings add to a comprehensive picture of how international tourism projects may forward the building and development of transboundary tourism-and-recreation regions. The results of the study can be used in research into international cooperation and tourism. The proposed approach may serve as a tool of a regional economic policy on tourism and thus broaden the scope of possible managerial decisions.*

**Keywords:**

municipality, Republic of Karelia, tourism projects, Karelian borderlands, Finland, transboundary tourism-and-recreation region

## **Introduction**

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Since the 1990s, new opportunities for transboundary cooperation and the involvement of Russia's northwestern regions in integration processes have paved the way for transboundary region building, including that driven by tourism. Several transboundary tourism-and-recreation regions (TTRR) of different levels and orders have emerged along the western border of the country. Tourism projects are seen as an effective tool to speed up integration and region building in the Baltic, and this work aims to quantify the contribution that international tourism projects run in 1990–2020 made to tourism-and-recreation region building in the Karelian borderlands.

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## **Tourism projects and TTRRs: theoretical aspects**

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Considerable research groundwork has been laid for the investigation of TTRR development in the Baltic Sea region. The literature has drawn particular attention to the TTRRs that bring together Russia, Poland, and Lithuania [1], Russia, Estonia, and Latvia [2; 3], and Russia and Finland [5; 6].

Despite a growing research interest in the effect of transboundary cooperation and international projects on tourism development [7–13], the influence of tourism projects on TTRR building remains poorly studied. Most studies focus on the results of individual international projects, particularly those seeking to create and develop transboundary tourist roots both as a tool to improve the competitiveness of adjoining international territories and as a stage in the formation of transboundary tourism-and-recreation spaces [14–17]. The literature considers the development of individual types of tourism [18] and the role of tourism in transboundary region building [19]. Works examining multilevel cooperation management as well as the specific features, opportunities, and limitations of tourism projects in the light of destination development [27; 28] have considerably advanced knowledge in the field.

In the context of this research, of importance are studies of international tourism projects as a tool to promote TTRR building in the Baltic Sea region [20–25]. Several works analyse Baltic non-tourism projects through the lens of constructivism (see [26], for example).

Nevertheless, earlier studies do not do international tourism projects enough justice, especially when accelerating the development of TTRRs is concerned. Firstly, these works are highly fragmented (they concentrate on individual projects). Secondly, they are geographically dispersed (they explore different border regions of North-West Russia). Thirdly, they tend to limit themselves to the time frame of cross-border cooperation projects (from 2007 onwards) and do not take into account the impact of earlier project activities. Finally, the literature does not examine TTRR building in the Karelian borderlands. The current contribution seeks to fill this gap in research, being the first study to place international tourism projects run in the Baltic region in 1990–2020 in the context of municipal-level TTRR building in the Karelian borderlands.

## **Methodology**

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The Karelian borderlands with their existing and emerging tourism-and-recreation regions of different hierarchical levels and orders have served as the model site for the study. Geographically, this site covers the Karelian section of the Russian-Finish border and the adjacent territories of Russia (Republic of Karelia) and Finland.

This work describes an approach to considering international tourism projects run in the Karelian borderland in 1990–2020 as a tool to facilitate TTRR

building. To this end, 80 international tourism projects supported by various Programmes (TACIS, INTERREG, Karelia ENPI CBC, Karelia ENI CBC, and others) have been analysed with a focus on:

- the border position of Karelian municipalities;
- their contribution to TTRR building in the Karelian borderlands.

Seven of 18 municipalities of the Republic of Karelia lie at the national border (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Administrative division of the Republic of Karelia [29]

Today, the Karelian borderlands have several fully developed and emerging TTRRs of different levels and orders (for more detail, see [5]). Within the study area, 11 Russian municipalities have been involved in TTRR building. These are the *Sortavala*, *Lahdenpohja*, *Suoyarvi*, *Pitkjaranta*, *Priäzä*, *Kalevala*,

Petrozavodsk, *Kostomuksha* city districts and parts of the *Loukhi*, Prionezhsky, and Olonets municipalities. Five municipalities participate on the Finnish side — *North Karelia*, some areas of North and South Savo, Kainuu, and the north-easternmost part of *Northern Ostrobothnia* (here and below the names of border municipalities are given in italics). I focus, however, on the Russian part of the area.

This study uses data from open web resources of cross-border cooperation programmes, the official website of the Republic of Karelia, strategies of the Republic of Karelia for the development of international and cross-border cooperation, relevant Russian and international studies, and official websites of international projects in tourism. I do not investigate municipal activity during calls for application; instead, I concentrate on projects that have been selected to receive support. The study does not take into account current projects launched within the European Neighbourhood Instrument and scheduled for 2020—2022.

The research utilises analysis of terminology and employs the methods of comparison, analogy, and time series analysis. Median values are calculated.

### **The border position of Karelia municipalities and tourism projects: an advantage or a circumstance of little importance**

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Since transboundary tourism-and-recreation region building is the domain of border municipalities of neighbouring countries, this section will view international tourism projects run in the Republic of Karelia from the perspective of its border position. While examining the border position of Karelian municipalities in terms of its positive and negative effects on tourism and recreation, researcher S. Stepanova [29] has overlooked the project approach. This section seeks to fill this lacuna by addressing the question of how the border location of a municipality affects its participation in international projects, as compared to inland areas of the same region.

For this purpose, I have analysed a vast array of data on the practical implementation of international tourism projects in 1990—2020 at a municipal level. Analysis of the median values of quantitative measures shows that the seven border municipalities significantly outperform the 11 inland regions when it comes to tourism projects (table 1). A major regional tourist destination, the Petrozavodsk city district is the leader by far: it participates in 60.5% of all local projects. That is why data for the regional capital is not included in the calculation.

Table 1

**Qualitative measures of participation in projects by Karelian municipalities  
in 1990–2020**

Municipality	measures, medians		
	total project number	project beneficiaries*	project engagement**
all municipalities	10	1	4
border municipalities	10	2	5
inland municipalities	8	0	4

*Comment:* \* the number of times the municipality was the only Russian partner in a project; \*\* the number of times the municipality participated in the Programmes (TACIS, Interreg, other Programmes, Karelia ENPI CBC, Karelia ENI CBC – five in total)

Ranking all municipalities in the region using the measures above makes it possible to single out seven that have been most active in tourism projects: the Petrozavodsk city district, the *Sortavala*, *Olonets*, *Loukhi*, *Pitkjaranta*, *Suoyarvi*, and *Muyezersky* municipalities. Four territories are classified as moderately engaged: *Priäžä*, *Medvezhegorsk*, and *Pudozh* municipalities and the *Kostomuksha* city district. Regional capital excluded, 67% of the most engaged municipalities lie at the national border.

Dividing project implementation into two periods – funded exclusively by the EU (1990–2006) and co-funded by the Russian Federation (Karelia CBC, 2007–2020) – helps rank border territories (table 2). The considerable engagement of Petrozavodsk in international tourism projects is accounted for by the ‘metropolitan’ status of the municipality and a high concentration of research excellence and potential applicants.

Table 2

**Tourism project run in the Republic of Karelia, municipal level, %**

Municipalities	proportion, %	
	1990–2006	2007–2020
Petrozavodsk	16.3	21.9
without participation of border municipalities	20.4	21.9
with participation of border municipalities	63.3	56.3*
including:		
- Petrozavodsk only	30.6	9.4
- border municipalities + Petrozavodsk	18.4	12.5
- border municipalities + other municipalities	14.3	34.4
with participation from other municipalities**	34.7	56.3

*Comments:* \* the 0.1% difference is explained by rounding off the numbers; \*\* an aggregate measure (without participation from border municipalities + border municipalities + other municipalities)

The data analysis shows that border municipalities (BM) account for a significant proportion of international tourism projects (over 56.3%) run during the period of this study (1990—2020). At the same time, engagement of the region's inland municipalities is growing. On average (median values), in 1990—2006, BMs were involved in seven tourism projects, whereas inland municipalities only in three. In 2007—2020, each group of municipalities took part in five projects.

Period-specific examination at the municipal level helps identify trends in the engagement of territories in international projects in tourism. Project involvement increased in 2007—2020 in the *Kostomuksha* city district (from three to eleven projects against the median value of five), just as it did in the *Kalevala* municipality (from three to six). As to the inland municipalities, project engagement became more prominent in the Belomorsk, Kem, Prionezhsky (an increase from one to five projects) and Priäžä (four and seven) municipalities. The *Sortavala* municipality remained steadily active in international tourism project throughout the period, whereas engagement of the other four BMs decreased. Projects carried out within the ENI Cross-border Cooperation Programme (2014—2020) open avenues for the involvement of all regional municipalities in project activities, as evidenced by KA1020 Business and information cooperation in the area of booking of small accommodation online (WilDacha) or KA4007 Kalitka — the development of cross-border gastronomic tourism. Note that the number of projects carried out in the two periods was not the same, and even though this measure should be used with some reservations, it gives a clear picture of project engagement trends at the municipal level.

Overall, in the study's time frame of 1990—2020, the border municipalities of the Republic of Karelia had a more visible role in international projects than the region's inland territories. Still, from 2007, there was a trend towards greater involvement of inland municipalities in international tourism projects and lesser engagement of the region's border municipalities. The values that were characteristic of BMs in 1990—2006 were achieved by inland municipalities in 2007—2020. Active involvement of BMs in project activities in 1990—2006 can be explained by the novelty value of integration processes for Russia's northwestern border regions. Municipal-level analysis shows that seven territories, including the regional capital, were the most active in international tourism projects. Four of them are border municipalities. Within the period studied, the *Sortavala* municipality retained its position of the most active participant of international tourism projects. The *Kostomuksha* and *Kalevala* municipalities increased their activity as tourism project partners, whereas other municipalities reduced their participation in international projects. The leadership of the *Sortavala* municipality is a result of its developed economy and advantageous geographical position. Firstly, the municipality's Vyartsilya-Niirala road crossing point, which reached its full capacity in 1995, has enjoyed a simplified crossing procedure since 1992. Today, it accounts for 70% of the cross-border traffic at the Karelian stretch of the Russian-Finnish border. Secondly, the distance between the centre of the *Sortav-*

ala municipality and the centre of North Karelia, Joensuu, is about 120 km. An additional benefit is the history of the North Ladoga region [30], which is a strong factor in local cross-border ties.

### International projects and TTRR building in the Karelian borderlands: the municipal level

The Karelian borderlands have three fully developed and emerging TTRRs of different hierarchical levels and orders. They bring together municipalities on both sides of the Russian-Finnish border (fig. 2).

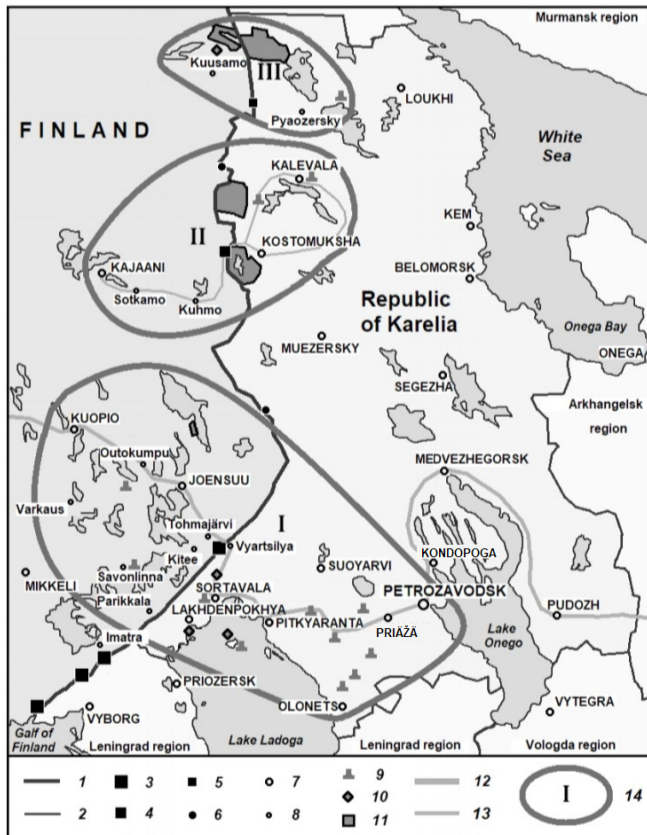


Fig. 2. Transboundary tourism-and-recreation regions spanning bordering areas of Finland and the Republic of Karelia (prepared by Manakov) [5]

Borders: (1) national, (2) between Russian regions; International road border-crossing points: (3) large, (4) medium, (5) small; (6) simplified procedure checkpoints; (7) centres of regions in Finland and administrative districts in Russia; (8) other cities; (9) cultural and historic landmarks; (10) natural landmarks; (11) national parks and reserves; transboundary tourism routes: (12) Blue Road, (13) Kantele Tour Route; (14) transboundary tourism and recreation regions: (I) South Karelian (mid-Russian-Finnish) mesoregion, (II) Mid-Karelian second-order microregion, (III) North Karelian third-order microregion



Transboundary tourism-and-recreation regions of the Karelian borderlands [5]:

(I) South Karelian (mid-Russian-Finnish) mesoregion: *Sortavala*, *Lahnpohtja*, *Suoyarvi*, *Pitkjaranta*, *Priäžä*, parts of *Prionezhsky* and *Olonets*, and the *Petrozavodsk* city district (Russia); *North Karelia*, *North Savo*, and most of *South Savo* (Finland);

(II) Mid-Karelian second-order microregion: the *Kostomuksha* city district and the *Kalevala* municipality (Russia); *Kainuu* (Finland);

(III) North Karelian third-order microregion: the border territories of the *Loukhi* municipality (Russia) and *North Ostrobothnia* (Finland).

Thus, 11 of 18 municipalities of the Republic of Karelia take part in TTRR-building; most of them are border territories. On the Finnish side, the process has participation from five territories, most of which lie at the national border. Out of seven border municipalities of the Republic of Karelia, only the *Muysersky* municipality is not involved in TTRR building.

Comparing the rankings of the region's municipalities by participation in international tourism projects and the engagement of municipalities in TTRR building reveals several patterns. The *Petrozavodsk* city district, the *Sortavala*, *Suoyarvi*, *Loukhi*, *Pitkjaranta*, and *Olonets* municipalities top the list. The *Kostomuksha* and *Priäžä* municipalities, which increased their participation in international tourism projects in the second period (2007—2020) are approaching the top, too.

The study of the effect of international tourism projects run in the Republic of Karelia on TTRR building assumes that projects in the following areas contributed the most to the process: the creation and development of transboundary tourist routes; the formation of common areas and tourism spaces (for example, nature reserves); the expansion of development corridors; the development of contact network and a shared online platform.

Since almost all international tourism projects are aimed, directly or indirectly, at forging contacts, expanding cooperation networks, and promoting tourism and recreation, these areas are taken into account only when they constitute the main or complex goal/objective of a project.

TTRR building is the domain of border municipalities. Thus, this section considers only those projects that attracted at least one BM (52 projects, or 65% of the total). The findings indicate that, in 1990—2020, most of the projects (75%) contributed to TTRR building. A stronger effect on TTRR building is associated with projects carried out within the Karelia CBC programmes (table 3).

Table 3

**Projects with participation from the BMs of the Republic of Karelia (1990–2020)  
and TTRR building**

Project goal (main or complex)	period, %*		
	1990–2020	1990–2006	2007–2020
creation and development transboundary tourist routes	19.2	15.2	26.3
formation of common zones and tourism spaces	23.1	18.2	31.6
development corridors	5.8	9.1	0
contact network development	19.2	15.2	26.3
creation of a common online space	7.8	3.0	15.8
other goals/objectives of the project	24.9	45.4	0
TOTAL	100	100	100

*Comment:* \* the proportion of projects with BM participation

It seems that the greatest contribution to TTRR development is made by the first two project areas: transboundary tourist routes (a dozen routes was created in the study's time frame) and common zones/space, whose proportion increased from 33.4% in 1990–2006 to 57.9% in 2007–2020. Below, I refer to these areas as *TTRR-building components*. These facts point to a trend towards greater cohesion at the Karelian stretch of the Russian-Finnish border. At the same time, expansion of development corridors is associated with larger investment projects aimed at the improvement of transboundary transport corridors and border crossing infrastructure. Projects carried out in the first period focused primarily on transboundary cohesion between the neighbouring states in terms of transport and logistics. In the second period, with infrastructure significantly enhanced, this aspect receded from the foreground of cooperation.

Municipal-level analysis indicates a connection between the proportion of the TTRR-building component in a municipality's projects and inclusion of this municipality in TTRR (table 4). Over half of tourism projects run by Karelian BMs and constituent municipalities of TTRRs concentrated on the two goals in question (51.4 and 54.5%, respectively). Absolute values of the proportions of TTRR-building components in border municipalities range between 42.8% (*Loukhi*) and 60% (*Kalevala*).

Table 4

## Goals of tourism projects at a municipal level, 1990 – 2020

Municipalities	project area (main and/or complex), %, median values				
	transboundary tourist routes	common zones and tourism spaces	contact network development	common online space	other goals/objectives of the project
BMs	21.4	30	18.2	18.2	12.0
inland municipalities	24	0	17.4	28	26.15
inland municipalities included in TTRRs** (11)	26.5	28	18.2	18.2	21.4
municipalities not included in TTRRs	18.5	0	22.5	41.4	20.8

*Comment:* \* excluding Petrozavodsk city district.

High values of the TTRR-building component in the Pitkjaranta and Priäžä (45.4%) as well as the Olonets and Prionezhsky municipalities (32%) can be explained by the municipalities' proximity to the *Sortavala*, the history of the territory, and location on the Blue Highway international tourist route, which connects the Nordic countries through the Republic of Karelia to Russia's inland regions. At the same time, a considerable share of projects carried out in these municipalities had other goals (27 – 33%).

Still, in BMs, the average proportion of projects pursuing goals other than facilitating TTRR building is smaller than in the other municipalities. For instance, such projects comprise 7.1% of those carried out in the *Kostomuksha* district in 1990 – 2020; 9 – 10% of those run in *Suoyarvi* and *Kalevala*; 12.5%, in *Sortavala*; 15.4%, in *Loukhi*; and a record high of 22.2%, in the *Lahdenpohja* municipality.

The proportion of the TTRR-building component is the lowest in inland municipalities and those that lie farther away from the state border. The explanation here is purely geographical. The percentage of the TTRR-building component is the smallest in the *Pudozh* municipality (10%) where projects pursuing other goals account for the unprecedented 60%.

Remarkably, inland municipalities of the region and districts that are not included in any TTRRs, which have so far not had an opportunity to create a proper transboundary space, show strong interest in the development of shared online platforms (28 and 41.4% respectively).

As long as fully developed and emerging TTRRs in the Karelian borderlands are considered, most projects cover the South Karelian (mid-Russian-Finnish) mesoregion (43.6% of the total number of projects aimed at TTRR building and 32.7% of the number of projects with BM participation). The next large group comprises projects carried out with participation from municipalities from different TTRRs (35.9% and 26.9%). Projects carried out in the second-order Mid-Karelian microregion and the *Muuzersky* municipality account for comparable small proportions (7.7% and 5.8%). The third-order North Karelian microregion attracted only 5.1% and 3.8% of the projects.

## **Conclusion**

The findings clearly indicate that international tourism projects carried out in the study's time frame (1990–2020) have played an important role in the development of TTRRs in the Karelian borderlands. Exploring the phenomenon at the municipal level made it possible to identify several common trends in the context of TTRR building, along with specific features of international tourism projects run in Karelia (the results are ranked by relevance to the aim of the study):

- 1) there is a connection between the proportion of the TTRR-building component in a municipality's projects and municipal engagement in a TTRR in 1990–2020;
- 2) there is a trend towards stronger cohesion between territories of the neighbouring states in the Karelian borderlands; it is clearly a product of tourism project activities;
- 3) five areas (main and/or complex goals of the projects) have been selected as criteria for identifying a project as facilitating TTRR building in the Karelian borderlands;
- 4) the Petrozavodsk city district and the Sortavala municipality outperformed other regional territories in the studied period;
- 5) border position has a major effect on the engagement of municipalities in project activities.

The findings provide a full picture of the contribution of international tourism projects to the emergence and development of transboundary tourism-and-recreation regions in the Karelian borderlands. The proposed approach has a practical application, since it can be used as a tool of regional economic policy on tourism, helping increase the scope of possible managerial decisions.

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