



Border management in flux: Comparative lessons from the Norway- Russia and Finland-Russia borders (2015–2023)

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Summary

This policy brief provides a comparative analysis of border management practices at the Norway-Russia and Finland-Russia borders, focusing on how these have evolved in response to key events between 2015 and 2023. Drawing on the 2015 “refugee crisis” and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the brief explores how both countries adapted their border control practices, policies, and relevant collaborations. As external borders of the Schengen Area and NATO members (with Finland joining in 2023), Norway and Finland present distinct approaches to border control, shaped by differing geopolitical contexts and local dynamics, including the fact that Finland’s border with Russia is also a European Union (EU) external border. The findings highlight lessons learned from the 2015 so-called “refugee crisis”, such as preparedness and inter-agency cooperation, and how these lessons have influenced current border security measures. Policy recommendations emphasize the importance of proactive local engagement, cross-border cooperation, knowledge exchange, and flexibility in addressing evolving security challenges.

Main points

- Norwegian-Russian and Finnish-Russian border dynamics and management strategies have evolved differently over the past years, with distinct impacts of the refugee arrivals in 2015, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.
- Norway's experience with the 2015 refugee influx led to improved border coordination and preparedness, particularly in collaboration between local and national authorities.
- Finland responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine with stricter measures, including border closures, halting cross-border cooperation, and constructing a border fence, reflecting heightened security concerns.
- Despite growing tensions with Russia, maintaining border-control cooperation and flexibility in policies and practices will be crucial for both Norway and Finland to respond to future crises and security challenges effectively

Context and Background

Norway. The Norway-Russia border spans 198 kilometers, with the Storskog checkpoint being the only official crossing point. As part of the Schengen Area, Norway manages this external border in line with European regulations, while adhering to the 1949 bilateral border agreement between Norway and Russia, which regulates broader border activities. Border control is carried out by three main actors: the police, the military through the Garrison of Sør-Varanger (GSV), and the Norwegian Border Commissioner. The police oversee person checks at the Storskog checkpoint, while the GSV, on behalf of the police, monitors and patrols areas outside of Storskog to prevent unauthorized crossings. The GSV also maintain Norway's defence at the border, ensuring the assertion of sovereignty. Together, these three actors work in close cooperation, each fulfilling a specialized role that contributes to comprehensive border management and security. Over the past thirty years and up until the war, local Norwegian-Russian relations have been strengthened, supported by various "people-to-people" initiatives aimed at fostering cross-cultural cooperation between local communities on both sides. Travel and interaction for border residents has been eased through legislative changes in both Russia and Norway, encouraging personal and trade exchange. Relations between border staff and officers at both sides have also grown increasingly friendly. However, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea strained these relations, and since then, cross-border traffic has decreased.

In 2015, over 5,000 asylum seekers unexpectedly crossed from Russia into Norway at the Storskog checkpoint, overwhelming Norwegian border management and triggering sudden responses in regulations and practices (Moe and Rowe, 2016). This sudden influx, first framed as a humanitarian crisis by Norwegian authorities (Jumbert et al., 2023), has in hindsight been interpreted as a strategic move by Russia (NRK, 2023), as it exposed vulnerabilities in Norway's border preparedness and internal collaboration during a period of heightened geopolitical tensions. The crisis also sparked internal debates, but led to a strengthening of coordination among the local actors involved, and between local and national levels. It also led to infrastructural changes such as the establishment of a refugee reception centre close to the border, and the construction of a (largely symbolic) 200-meter-long border fence. As discussed below, the 2015 event can be seen as a wake-up call, emphasizing the role of Russian border relations as part of wider geopolitical tensions, illustrating how migration can be perceived as a source of instability, even in a stable, high-income country like Norway.

Finland. Finland's accession to the European Union (EU) in 1994 and the Schengen Area in 2001 transformed its 1,340 kilometers border with Russia into an EU external border. The management of the external border became a shared responsibility between Finland and the EU, including the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex. In addition, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) aims to promote stability and security at the external borders through various cross-border cooperation programmes.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Finnish-Russian border was highly regarded for its effective management and advanced surveillance, with strong cooperation between Finnish and Russian border guards (Prokkola, 2013). Moreover, from 2007 to February 2022, Finnish-Russian cross-border cooperation was facilitated

through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Programmes (ENPI 2007-2013) and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI 2014-2022). The cross-border cooperation programmes aimed to address socio-economic disparities, environmental protection, and border management challenges, for example related to traffic management (Koch, 2017).

Relations between the EU and Russia began to shift after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, with the EU imposing sanctions against Russian officials and on trade with varying effects (Giumelli, 2017). Nevertheless, in 2015, former Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb advocated for the continued support of EU cross-border cooperation programmes along the Finnish-Russian border to help stabilize and normalize relations (YLE News, 2015). Despite the annexation of Crimea, the EU Commission did not suspend ENI cross-border cooperation programmes with Russia, even throughout the 2015 migrant crisis which saw an increased influx of refugees from Afghanistan and Syria attempting to cross the Finnish-Russian border.

Methods

This policy brief draws on two separate studies focusing on Norwegian and Finnish border management. For Norway, the fieldwork was conducted as part of the INFLUX project, by Talleraas, in Sør-Varanger - the only Norwegian municipality bordering Russia. In November and December 2023, eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals involved in border control, surveillance, and migration management. The interviewees included representatives from the Norwegian Army, the police, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and other local actors. The fieldwork also included site visits to border control and surveillance facilities, such as the Storskog checkpoint, where daily work practices were observed and discussed, providing additional informal insights. Data collection was supplemented by internal and public documents on border control and institutional developments, particularly concerning the 2015 refugee influx and relevant evaluations. To track border crossing trends, data has been provided from the Police, although evolving collection practices limits the detail available for certain years.

The Finnish fieldwork, conducted by Koch, draws from research on Finnish-Russian border cooperation, conducted between 2014 and 2018, which included interviews with relevant actors in EU-funded cross-border cooperation programmes from several orders of government, including EU, national, provincial and project stakeholders. Interviewees included stakeholders from the European Union External Action Service, the European Commission, the Finnish Foreign Ministry, and regional offices in Oulu, Lappeenranta and Rovaniemi. The fieldwork was complemented by relevant document analysis pertaining to Finnish-Russian cross-border cooperation, including strategies from Frontex and the Finnish Border Guard (FBG). Contextually, the research in particular focused on the changing dynamics following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. More recent data is included based on the FBG report from 2023 which is relevant to capture shifting border security dynamics since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, which also directly spurred Finland's application to join NATO in 2022 and led to membership in 2023.

Methods and Findings

1) Changes in border dynamics following the Russian invasion of Ukraine

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Norway adjusted its border control measures, though these changes were less dramatic than in Finland. Due to lingering COVID-19 restrictions, border crossings had not returned to pre-pandemic levels (Figure 1 below). However, Russia's mobilization triggered concerns about increased crossings, also potential irregular or humanitarian, crossings into Norway. Norwegian authorities, in coordination with the border Police and the GSV responded by increasing preparedness, including deploying a police helicopter to monitor the border outside the Storskog checkpoint. Though some unusual crossings were reported, both irregular and regular - such as wealthier Russians leaving in luxury cars - the expected surge of migrants never fully materialized.

As Russia imposed stricter exit controls on its own citizens, in line with the Russian mobilization of soldiers, this reduced cross-border movement at Storskog. Restrictions from Norway has also decreased border crossing. Yet, in and since 2022, Norway was slower than other European countries in tightening border and visa restrictions

for Russian travellers. The border has remained open, yet for increasingly narrow categories of travellers. This cautious approach reflects Norwegian desires to maintain pragmatic relations with Russia, while balancing national security concerns.

Figures 1 and 2 show traffic on the Norwegian-Russian and Finnish-Russian borders, over time (in person). While crossings contrast starkly in volume, the same pattern can be observed. Covid restrictions clearly reduced travel across the border, but these data do not reveal changes in types of travellers, such as the sudden peak in refugee arrivals to Norway in 2015, or the variance in Russian travellers and visas in 2022.

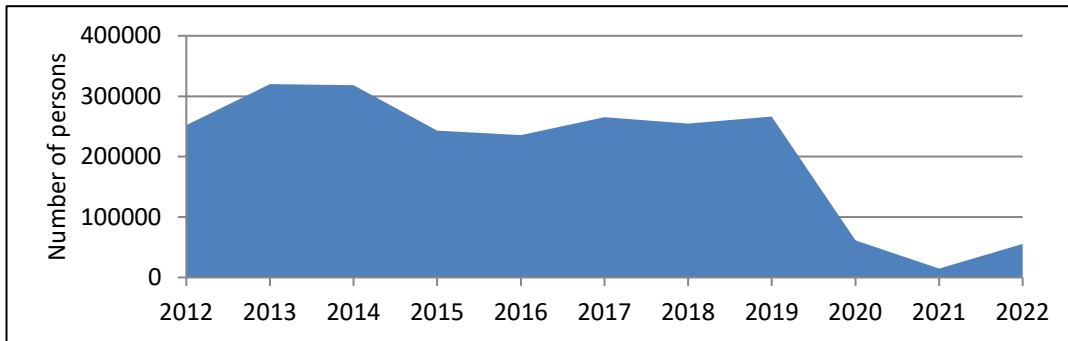


Figure 1: Traffic on the Norwegian-Russian border (persons). (The Police at Storskog Border Station; 2023)

Finnish-Russian relations also changed in February 2022. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the implementation of EU bilateral and regional cooperation programmes with Russia was re-assessed and suspended (Council of the European Union, 2024). Finnish-Russian cross-border traffic declined from 12 million to 8.5 million annually between 2015 and 2019 (Figure 2), dropping to just shy of one million in 2021. The decrease in 2015 is a result of the temporary border closures in response to the migrant crisis. Post-pandemic border crossings did not recover due to the invasion of Ukraine and related closures of eastern border crossing points in late 2023.

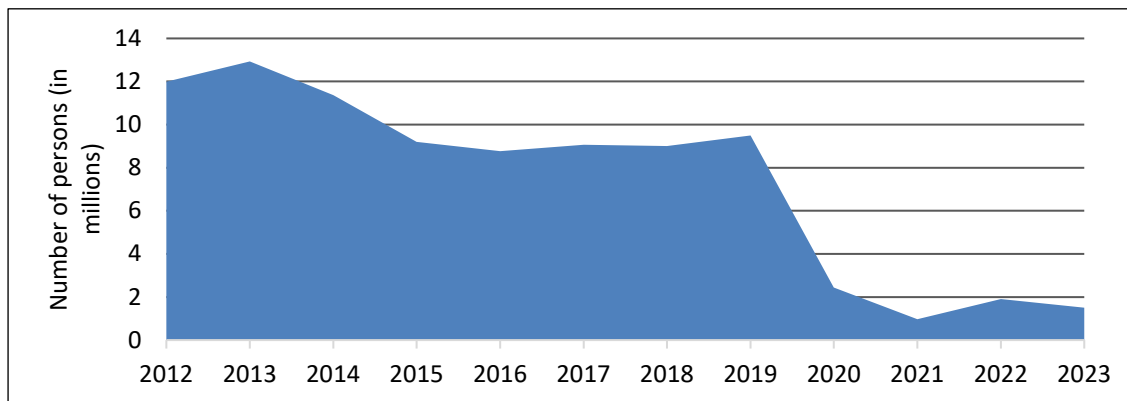


Figure 2: Traffic on the Finnish-Russian border (persons) (Finnish Border Guard 2018; 2020; 2023).

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Finland restricted non-essential travel for Russian citizens from September 3, 2022, while permitting those with Schengen visas or for work purposes. Russia also restricted travel for Finnish citizens. Accusing Russia of “instrumentalising” migration, Finland closed all border crossing points at the eastern border in November 2023 (Finnish Border Guard, 2024). Furthermore, Finland began constructing a 200 km border fence in 2022 to enhance border surveillance and manage “disruptions” (Finnish Border Guard, n.d.). The fence aims to reduce Finland’s reliance on Russian border control and address potential illegal migration. As of April 2024, all border crossing points between Finland and Russia remain closed (Finnish Government 2024). Finland claims that Russia “deliberately funnelled undocumented asylum seekers to Finnish border crossings” and President Stubb argues that “the government’s move to close the checkpoints at the end of last year had prevented chaos on the border” (Yle News, 2024).

2) Collaboration dynamics over time

Collaboration among the Norwegian border control actors (Police, GSV, Border Commissioner) has generally been strong, but with increased awareness and coordination over time, and particularly after 2015. Relations between Russian and Norwegian border control actors, previously friendly with a steady increase in joint activities such as football matches and visits, slightly started to decrease in 2008 because of the Russian invasion of Georgia. Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, relations became more strained, and even more so in recent years, following the 2015 influx and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Norwegian-Russian border control collaboration remains important, but it has in recent years largely been limited to professional activities, overseen by the Border Commissioner.

The GSV's role, with conscripts conducting patrols, has over time become more demanding, and to some extent stressful, as the Norwegian border's strategic and geopolitical importance has increased. While collaboration among Norwegian agencies has not fundamentally changed, there has been a heightened focus on maintaining shared situational awareness. Other actors, such as those involved in asylum processing, also remain vigilant and prepared for potential changes in migration flows, adjusting their readiness to respond swiftly to future "crises". The border between Finland and Russia is one of the EU and Schengen Area's longest external land borders, highlighting its strategic significance. The participation of Finnish border authorities in Frontex-led operations is presented by the FBG as a testament to the quality of Finland's border security framework and management (Prokkola 2012). Additionally, effective cooperation between Finnish and Russian border authorities has been emphasized in past communications from the FBG.

Cross-border cooperation programmes funded by the EU have also been involved in border management-related capacity, particularly to improve trade and transit between the two countries. For example, the South-East Finland-Russia programme focused on improving key border crossings such as Imatra in southeastern Finland, which often faced traffic congestion (Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency, 2023). However, due to the current geopolitical situation, these border crossings were closed last year, and cross-border cooperation has been suspended, halting further development and collaboration initiatives with Russia.

Instead, since 2023, the FBG has received additional support from Frontex, bolstering not only surveillance capacity along the Finnish-Russian border but also rapidly mobilizing resources to enhance EU external border security (Frontex, 2023).

3) Lessons learned from the 2015 "crisis" and their impact in 2022

The 2015 refugee crisis at the Storskog border led to significant changes in preparedness and response strategies at, and beyond, the Norwegian border. Border control at Storskog, before largely seen as a localized issue, became a national priority. Authorities have since underlined the importance of listening to local insights and communication routines have been adjusted, though, some local actors still express a lack of appreciation from capital-based institutions, and while certain improvements are constant, they believe larger changes are overdue, e.g. concerning the infrastructure at Storskog border checkpoint.

Moreover, for many, the 2015 event shifted their mindset. From focusing on close, cultural and friendly exchanges, to increased skepticism, by some expressed as realism, by others as paranoia. For the GSV, this shift came earlier, as the military focus sharpened already with the 2008 and 2024 events. While Norway remains cautious about overreacting to potential Russian hybrid threats, including and beyond migration dynamics, the experience from 2015 has instilled greater awareness and readiness, which also has affected post-2022 policies, practices and mindsets concerning the border.

In contrast, the "refugee crisis" of 2015/2016 had a modest impact on Finland's border security compared to the significant post-2022 geopolitical transformations. While some Arctic border crossing points between Finland and Russia were temporarily closed to international travellers during 2016, Finnish and Russian citizens were still permitted to cross (UNHCR, 2016). Although there were accusations in 2015/2016 that Russia was deliberately sending refugees across the Finnish border as a form of political pressure (YLE News, 2016), the current geopolitical context represents a sharp departure from Finland's previous policy approach towards the shared border.

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent security concerns, Finland's border policy has shifted

dramatically. The decision to close all eastern border crossings in late 2023 and fortify parts of the border with fences marks a clear reorientation of Finnish-Russian relations. This change is compounded by Finland's accession to NATO in 2023, positioning Russia as an adversary—a stark contrast to the 2015/2016 period, during which cooperation with Russia on border management was still possible. The current tensions reflect a deeper transformation in Finland's strategic posture, one that is distinct even from the Cold War era. During the Cold War, Finland pursued a policy of neutrality, carefully avoiding provocation of its Soviet neighbour.

In the present context, Finland's relationship with Russia has deteriorated beyond what was seen during 2015/16, as the geopolitical landscape in Europe has shifted with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Finland finds itself in a profoundly altered security environment, culminating in NATO membership. This transformation underscores not only the changing nature of border security in Finland but also the broader realignment of Finland's foreign, security and defence policy, which has moved away from Cold War-era pragmatism and post-Cold War collaboration toward a more assertive stance within the Euro-Atlantic security framework.

Conclusions

This brief highlights the evolving border management practices at the Norway-Russia and Finland-Russia borders, especially following the events in 2015 and 2022. Some key differences surface: Norway learned from the 2015 “crisis”, which did not affect Finland to the same extent, and Norway has since strengthened its coordination and preparedness. In terms of 2022 responses, it is also clear that Finland reacted more strongly by initially restricting cross-border travel before closing its eastern border crossing points, suspending the participation of Russia in the implementation of EU CBC programmes, and constructing a border barrier fence along portions of the shared border with Russia. In contrast, while Norwegian border reactions came earlier on, it has maintained an open border and continued cross-border control collaboration, under its long-standing border agreement with Russia, and possibly due to an interest in preserving local cross-border relations.

These similar, but slightly different, approaches reflect not only border control practices but also broader security concerns and geopolitical considerations. This highlights a need for continued discussions and knowledge exchange among Norwegian and Finnish border stakeholders, including practitioners and policymakers, taking into account strategic goals for future border security.

Policy recommendations

- **Involve local actors early:** Local border control stakeholders should be included in decision-making early on, to ensure better crisis management in both Norway and Finland.
- **Encourage discussions on strategy:** Norwegian and Finnish authorities and local border actors should increase knowledge exchange, also in terms of strategic border governance, including security and geopolitical concerns.
- **Ensure flexibility:** Actors in both countries should maintain their readiness to adapt to new challenges, like sudden changes in migration flows or potential security threats.
- **Improve infrastructure and surveillance:** Norwegian central authorities should continue to listen to local actors, and consider upgrading border infrastructure, especially at Storskog, while Finland should regularly assess the impact of its border closures on residents living in the border regions.

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General contact information

The recommendations in this Policy Brief is based on results from the research project INFLUX, with funds from NordForsk (ref.no 161678). Collaborators in INFLUX are shown in the bottom line.

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