

RUSSIA AND THE RUSSIAN TOURIST IN FINNISH TOURISM STRATEGIES—THE CASE OF THE KARELIAN REGION

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ABSTRACT

The Finnish travel sector needs more information about Russian tourists, because their importance has increased in Finland. In recent years, Russians have become the largest group of foreign tourists in Finnish accommodation establishments. For example, a total of 231,453 overnight stays were reported for Russian tourists in January 2011. This was almost 51 per cent of all overnight stays. Also, in 2009 the proportion of Russian tourists contributing to Finland's two-billion-euro income from international tourists was 31 per cent.

The main purpose of this study is to describe how Russia and Russian tourists have reacted to tourist-related strategies in Finland generally, and especially in Karelia, which is a Finno-Russian cross-border region. The qualitative research is based on official Finnish tourism strategies and the Karelia region's official tourism strategies (n=5).

According to the results, one of the advantages of Finland is its close proximity to Russia, which means easy access for Russian tourists. The main strategic goal in Finland generally and especially in the Karelia region, is to extensively exploit Russia's markets and the purchasing power of Russians. The strategic goals emphasise such things as infrastructure, services development and co-operation between the different actors in Finland and Russia. Knowing the mutual history of Finland and Russia is remarkable that Russian tourists are mentioned by name in tourism strategies.

Keywords: *Russia, Russian, service management, tourism, tourists*

INTRODUCTION

Finnish people tend to think differently than Russians. Before Finland gained independence in 1917, it had been a part of the Russian Empire for 108 years. In the middle of the 20th century Finland fought the Winter War and the Continuation War against the Soviet Union. As a result of the wars, Finland lost, for example, most of the province of Karelia (Map 1).

According to Andersen (2003), when a Finn and a Russian say "Karelia" they often mean two different areas. For the Finnish people Karelia (Karjala) means the region "Karelia" shown on the left in Map 1. This region was part of the Swedish-Finnish Kingdom from 1323/1617 to 1721/1743, part of the Grand Duchy of Finland between 1809 and 1918 and part of independent Finland 1918–1939 and 1941–1944. As a result of World War II, most of what Finnish people define as Karelia was incorporated into the USSR to become parts of the Leningrad *oblast'* and the semi-autonomous "Karelian Republic", its population having withdrawn to Finland. As of today, the region still remains in the Russian Federation. For Russians Karelia usually means the "Republic of Karelia", which is a federal subject of Russia. This region is shown in Map 1 as "East Karelia". Most of this territory has traditionally been under Russian influence. (Andersen 2003.)

Nowadays South Karelia consists of 12 municipalities and two cities (Lappeenranta and Imatra) and North Karelia consists of nine municipalities and five cities (Joensuu, Kitee, Lieksa, Nurmes and Oulunkumpu). The distance from Lappeenranta and Imatra to St Petersburg is about 210 kilometres. In the Karelian region, there are about 2,000 lakes and two thirds of the area is covered by forest. There are also three national parks and numerous Orthodox churches and chapels. In the South Karelia region there is a transportation canal, which connects Lake Saimaa to the Gulf of Finland (43 km). This canal is an administratively special part of Russia for which reason there are also special regulations for vessels travelling to Finland through the canal. (Visit Karelia 2011.) Although the forest industry employs many people, North Karelia's rate of unemployment (14.7%) is nevertheless one of the biggest in Finland (average 7.9%). (Statistics Finland 2011a.)

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