

Lake Peipsi

– a transboundary lake on the future border of the European Union

by Gulnara Roll

Lake Peipsi is shared by Estonia and Russia. When Estonia joins the European Union in the near future, it will form the border between Russia and the EU. This new situation raises complicated questions as to how regional development and management of natural resources in the Lake Peipsi basin will be affected. Many people in the region, as well as international initiatives, are working to find answers.



Lake Peipsi, known in Russian as Chudskoe, constitutes a large part of the border between Russia and Estonia which was re-established in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union (see map). The lake Peipsi is Europe's largest international lake, connected to the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea via the Narva River. Its natural amenities are unique, being shallow, eutrophic, and biologically very productive. Wetland areas around Lake Peipsi have been recognized as being of international importance.

The Estonian-Russian Transboundary Water Commission

To manage their shared water basin, Russia and Estonia established a Joint Transboundary Water Commission in 1997, based on an agreement between both governments. The Commission has proved to be an important body for resolving differences and co-ordinating action between the governments, as well as helping international initiatives.

A changing political situation

The Estonian government has set 1 January 2003 as the deadline for the country to be fully prepared to enter the European Union. This means that Estonian laws and the administrative system have to be adapted to EU requirements by that date. As part of this work, the Estonian Water Act is being revised to harmonise with the EU Water Framework Directive. River Basin Management Plans for all water basins in Estonia are to be elaborated by 2004. An added complication for the river basin management plan for Peipsi/Narva is the fact that half the lake is in the Russian Federation and managed under Russian legislation.

Both the EU Water Framework Directive and the Russian Water Code are based on a river basin approach. In spite of similarities in the water-related legislation, there are differences in specific water management practices. These include standards and procedures, monitoring, environmental data and information, as well as institutional organisation.

These differences are expected to increase in the future and may create more points of conflict between the two parties. Managing the lake basin under these circumstances is not an easy task.

Preparing the Lake Peipsi Management Plan

Representatives of more than 100 international water management projects met recently at the International

Water Conference of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) in Budapest, Hungary. Management of international waters in conditions of uncertainty and transition was a major topic at the conference. The commitment of riparian governments was concluded to be crucial for successful implementation of water management projects. The importance of developing water basin networks – joining all stakeholders in management of the international waters – was also highlighted. In a constantly changing situation, fixing a long-term work plan is impossible. However, it is believed that by establishing networks where changes in the water management system are communicated, project objectives can still be achieved.

Important aspects of the Lake Peipsi Basin Management Plan, which will be supported by the GEF, will be to involve various stakeholders and develop networks. The GEF programme will assist the governments of Estonia and Russia, as well as the Estonian-Russian Transboundary Water Commission, in preparing and starting implementation of the Lake Peipsi Management Plan. This plan will build on ongoing water management projects in the basin currently supported by the Danish and Swedish governments and by the European Union. Methodological and research support will be provided by a three-year EU research programme on Integrated Strategies for the Management of Transboundary Waters on the Eastern European Fringe – The Pilot Study of Lake Peipsi and its Drainage Basin (MANTRA-East), where ten research institutes from five European countries will take part.

The experience gained in the Peipsi basin will, hopefully, also be fruitful for other international basins in the Eastern Baltic Sea area.

About Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe

- Lake Peipsi is the fourth largest lake in Europe.
- The area of the lake is 3,550 km²: with 44 per cent Estonian territory; the remaining 56 per cent belongs to the Russian Federation.
- The lake is shallow with an average depth of 7.1 m (maximum depth 15 m) and biologically it is very productive.
- The local economy depends on the use of natural resources. Main activities in the region are fishing, recreation, subsistence farming, and forestry.
- Major environmental issues are water eutrophication and fish resource management.

Author

Dr Gulnara Roll is the director of the NGO Center for Transboundary Cooperation, CTC, in Tartu, Estonia. She has studied environmental policy and works with the management of international transboundary environmental projects.

Further information

The website of CTC for information on various activities www.lake-peipsi.net

The website of the Estonian Ministry of Environment: www.envir.ee/eng/index.html

The website of the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with an overview of Estonia's Accession Negotiations with the EU: www.vm.ee/euro/english