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# RUSSIAN BALTIC SEA REGIONS IN THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

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## THE GEOPOLITICAL EFFECT OF THE MARITIME FACTOR ON THE SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT OF POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: THE BALTIC CASE

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*The article explores the impact of geopolitical processes on the spatial organisation of society, a matter that has gained increasing importance in Russia. It focuses on the utilization of the World Ocean and its coastlines for resource extraction, logistics, military-strategic purposes, and settlement. Methodologically, this study combines modern socio-geographical approaches emphasising the role of the maritime factor in spatial development with classical geopolitical ideologemes drawing a line between the land and the sea. It stresses the fundamental possibility for territories, including states, not only to acquire synthetic continental-maritime attributes but also to transform the balance of these attributes under the influence of geopolitical determinants. The article analyses geopolitically induced changes in the maritime activities pursued by Russia in the post-Soviet period. The primary focus is on the situational territorial and economic shifts of 2014 and 2022, and their implications for Russian territories in the Baltic region. Pronounced inter-basin differences are described with respect to the coastalisation of the population. The study also evaluates the economic condition of key Russian maritime centres and their resilience to external influences, especially geopolitical challenges. The article offers a geopolitical justification for Russia's ongoing maritime endeavours, emphasizing the need for inter-basin, intermunicipal, and inter-regional integration. This integration should be accompanied by the establishment of coastal-intracontinental facilities, such as hubs, across Russia. It is imperative for the nation and its prominent corporations to actively engage in shaping the framework of emerging expansive international maritime socio-geographical structures, facilitating the shift toward global maritime polycentrism. The solution to these problems is closely linked to the priority goal of strengthening Russia's geostrategic standing in the Baltic region, particularly with a focus on its maritime components. These developments are*

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*anticipated within the context of the Russian Baltic Area, envisioned as a borderland with trans-basin geopolitical, economic-geographical, and geocultural bi-structural asymmetry.*

**Keywords:**

spatial development, coastal areas, marine regionalisation, maritime activity, geopolitics, Russia, Russian Baltic Area

**Introduction and problem setting**

The manifestations and consequences of today's massive geopolitical and geopolitical shifts are all-encompassing and multifaceted. These shifts include the drift of economic activity and power from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region [1], the nationalisation and regionalisation of politics and the economy [2] and, accordingly, the rise of 'new globalisation' and the formation of a multipolar world [3]. The change is also felt in such a seminal area of human endeavour as maritime activity, which seeks to harness the potential of sea basins for raw materials extraction, logistics, and strategic military and other uses whilst doing so with regard to settlement patterns and the spatial structure of the economy, as well as to the processes determined by the maritime factor [4].

The metamorphoses of the global world order give rise to violent conflicts, a vivid example of which is the special military operation in Ukraine. The struggle between incommensurable centres of political power is transforming maritime spaces into not only potential and actual theatres of war, but also a major arena, resource for, and object of, geopolitical rivalry.

All things maritime and their human geography aspect, which has been extensively investigated in Russia [5–7 and other works] and abroad, are becoming increasingly relevant whilst inevitably assuming a geopolitical dimension. The efforts of the academic community to conceptualise maritime geopolitics [8–14] are gaining substance and recognition despite remaining few. This equally applies to the infrequent attempts to provide an informed rationale for geopolitical factors in the development of coastal regions [15; 16]. At the same time, classical geopolitical approaches are coming to the fore in research. Characterised by a focus on the dualism and even contrariety between land and sea [17], close attention to the maritime strength of the state [18] and the recognition of the geostrategic significance of sea coasts [19; 20]. Geopolitics is an interdisciplinary research area that, despite being fuzzy in terms of scope, is directed clearly at spatial analysis. A solid definition of geopolitics interprets it as a science of rivalry of powers over territories [21]. When applied to Russia, geopolitics increasingly focuses on the background circumstances of national development, situations in selected regions and major aspects of spatial evolution.

This article seeks to examine the maritime features of post-Soviet Russia's spatial development by placing it in the context of current and persistent geopolitical circumstances. These maritime features are understood as the continuous coastalisation of population and the economy in response to maritime structures outpacing in their development their inland counterparts, as well as to the growing dependence on the resources and geostrategic function of the World Ocean.

I pay particular attention to the changes to the localisation of Russia's maritime economy efforts, brought about by the events of 2014 and 2022. Another focus is the effects of the coastalisation of population and the economic stability of the country's coastal cities, particularly those situated in the Baltic region — the epicentre of today's geopolitical tensions.

**The maritime features of post-Soviet Russia's maritime development and its major geopolitics-induced metamorphoses.** Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Russia has strived as an independent geopolitical entity towards incorporation into maritime geopolitical structures. This involved, for example, forging ties with leading European sea powers, and borrowing and cultivating marine navigation technology. Yet, the country remains an antipode and opponent of the sea, increasingly recognised as such since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Halford Mackinder published his seminal works. The seven decades of Soviet rule were marked both by pronounced continental tendencies (see, for instance, [22]) and extensive (and mostly successful) efforts to launch a *quasiglobalist maritime project*. The ideological framework for this project was provided in the 1976 publication of Admiral Sergey Gorshkov titled *The Marine Power of the State* [23], which postulated the marine-continental status of the USSR. Many of these successes, however, were nullified by the national geopolitical catastrophe of 1991. Examples thereof include the seaport system in the southwest of the country and the Baltic republics, Black Sea Shipping, which was the largest navigation organisation in the USSR, fishing zones in the World Ocean, etc. [24].

*The growing coastalisation* tendency characteristic of post-Soviet Russia<sup>1</sup> occurred against the background of the conflicting combination of economically motivated *geopolitical conformism* at the global level, the attempts to strengthen the national maritime jurisdiction specified in the World Ocean federal target programme of 1998,<sup>2</sup> and the retention and restoration of the sphere

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis from the human geography perspective, see [25; 26].

<sup>2</sup> On the World Ocean federal target programme: A resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation of 10.08.1998 № 919, 2002, *Portal pravovoy informatsii [Legal Information Database]*, URL: <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102054870&rtdk=3> (accessed 11.07.2023).

of Eurasian influence. Geopolitical conformism manifested itself in recognising the leadership of an exogenous dominating centre of power and the aspiration to integrate into the geoeconomic structures built by this centre. The most considerable success in maritime jurisdiction expansion was the recognition of a 52,000 sq. m enclave as Russia's continental shelf in March 2014.<sup>1</sup> A principal Eurasian initiative is the Caspian Pipeline Consortium project aimed at facilitating hydrocarbon transit from Kazakhstan. Maritime infrastructure has been developing along with related industries: since 1994, the cargo turnover of Russian seaports has increased eightfold; from 1997 to 2021, an export-oriented underwater gas transportation system was established; the creation of industrial port complexes has intensified [26]. Russia's maritime activity, however, was becoming more internationalised, with a visible westernisation tendency. Particularly, it depended on third states for market outlets, logistics, services and technology, which contributed to the Western tilt characteristic of the country's spatial development.

At the subnational level, coastalisation or the shift towards an oceanic economy, as Pyotr Savitsky termed the process a century ago, is evident in the active engagement of coastal territories in the formation of transboundary maritime regionalisation structures. This trend, accurately described in [28], has been most pronounced in the Baltic region, with a substantial geopolitical element [27]. All these trends affected the architecture of the Russian space, producing *a change in its economic and settlement proportion towards coastal territories*, which was evident at the level of trends and average figures. The Eurocentric and north-western dimension had the upper hand in this process.

Remarkably, as early as the second half of the 1990s, the principal coastal territories of Russia's western borderlands — St. Petersburg, the Leningrad region, Krasnodar Krai and the Kaliningrad region [29] — became consistent contributors to the federal budget. As the maritime activity, particularly in the hydrocarbon industry, gained momentum the list grew to include the Sakhalin and Astrakhan regions [30]. GRP was increasing across the country, with Russia's coastal regions<sup>2</sup> remaining in the lead. Leaving aside Crimea, which became part of the country in 2014, the GRP of Russia's coastal regions, according to Rosstat, was 13.8 % in 2000, 14.9 % in 2008, 16.7 % in 2014 and 18.1 % in 2020. Notably, this shift induced by the stable growth of sea ports'

<sup>1</sup> The UN Commission recognized the enclave of the Sea of Okhotsk as part of the Russian continental shelf, 15.03.2014, TASS, URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/1047596> (accessed 11.07.2023).

<sup>2</sup> These include St. Petersburg, the Leningrad Region, the Kaliningrad Region, Krasnodar Krai, Rostov Region, Astrakhan Region, the Republic of Dagestan, Arkhangelsk Region, the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Murmansk Region, the Primorsky Krai, the Sakhalin Region, Kamchatka Krai, Magadan Region, and Chukotka Autonomous Okrug [31].

turnover, which reached 10.5 %<sup>1</sup> in the first six months of 2023, followed the crisis of 2008 — the starting point of a radical change in global economic and geopolitical trends [32; 33]. The increase continued in the post-Crimean period, which witnessed the dismantling of the Russia — the West system that emerged over the previous quarter century.

Provoked by the growing activity of the EU and NATO, Russia's aspiration to maintain and extend the security perimeter in the Baltic Sea area led at first to the virtual geoeconomic blockade of the Crimean peninsula by the Western countries in 2014. The interdiction affected Crimea's marine economy by limiting the volume of cargo that could be handled at the local ports [34]. In 2021, a series of steps followed that were taken by the globalist forces to undermine Russia's marine economic capacity, their culmination being the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage of 26 September 2022). This profound transformation in the geopolitical landscape of the country's maritime, mainly economic, activities is a significant external challenge. Although this change seems to have prompted a substantial update to the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation,<sup>2</sup> carried out in the summer of 2022, we firmly believe that it *does not imply the necessity, let alone the inevitability, of any substantial continentalisation.*

Naturally, problematic situations of varying scope are emerging, encompassing a decline in import- and sea transport-dependent motor vehicle assembly in the country's Northwest. A notable symptom is the output of the processing industries of the Kaliningrad region plummeting to 80.5 % in 2022 year-on-year. Additionally, there's a short-term decrease in the turnover of the Great Port of St. Petersburg, down by 37.5 % in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the increasingly strained Russian—Turkish relations are likely to complicate Russia's subsea pipeline exports of natural gas through and through.

The total number of Russia's coastal regions faced with socio-economic, transport-logistic and military-political complications has increased due to the military escalation in Ukraine. Now, these are not only the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, but also the Baltic exclave and the territories of Novorossiia. There is inevitably a shift in economic activity favouring Russia's inland territories [35]. However, the current situation, where *the sea itself as a*

<sup>1</sup> The cargo turnover of Russian seaports in the first half of 2023 increased by 10.5 %, 10.07.2023, TASS, URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/18238249> (accessed 12.07.2023).

<sup>2</sup> On the approval of the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation: Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 31.07.2022, № 512, 2022, *Official Internet portal of legal information*, URL: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202207310001> (accessed 17.07.2023).

<sup>3</sup> Cargo turnover of Russian seaports for 12 months of 2022, 2023, *Russian Seaports Association*, URL: <https://www.morport.com/rus/news/gruzooborot-morskikh-portov-rossii-za-12-mesyacev-2022-g> (accessed 12.07.2023).

*geo-economic phenomenon begins to exhibit non-Western multipolar features, stimulates Russian maritime activity.* Taking place within Russia's jurisdiction, this process affects a vast area comprising the waters of the country's economic zone and its continental shelf. This expanse can be conceptualised as the land-sea structure of Maritime Russia, which relies on coastal settlement and particularly coastal cities with their capacity for an increase in the population replacement rate.

### **Population coastalisation: geopolitical factors**

The coastalisation of the population and settlements is a fundamental characteristic of the land-sea organisation of society, which applies to post-Soviet Russia as well (see [7; 16; 36; 37]). Notably, as census data suggest, the population of 74 Russian towns (including those in Crimea) situated in coastal areas or the mouths of major navigable rivers has increased by 10.5% since 1989. In contrast, the overall urban population in the country has remained nearly constant, at 99.9% of the 1989 census figure. The coastal urban population of Russia has seen a significant increase over the three inter-census periods, even without factoring in Crimea (Table 1).

*Table 1*

**Population change in Russian coastal cities, 1989–2021**

Years	1989–2002	2002–2010	2010–2021	1989–2021
<i>1,000 people</i>				
<i>Total</i>	–233	348	1234	1349
Crimea excluded	–173	354	1140	1321
<i>%</i>				
<i>Total</i>	98.0	102.7	109.5	110.5
Crimea excluded	98.5	103.0	109.4	111.0

\* Prepared by the author based on the All-Union and Russian censuses of 1989, 2002, 2010 and 2021.<sup>1</sup>

A reflection of the growing role of the maritime factor in Russian society and the economy, post-Soviet coastalisation proved to have distinctive spatial, i.e. basin-specific, features. In geopolitical terms, these characteristics primarily manifested in the chronologically asynchronous dominance of the Baltic region as regards population growth. Although St. Petersburg accounted for 90% of the

<sup>1</sup> Results of the All-Russian Population Census 2020. Vol. 1: Population Size and Distribution, 2022, *Rosstat*, [https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom1\\_Chislennost\\_i\\_razmeshchenie\\_naseleniya](https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom1_Chislennost_i_razmeshchenie_naseleniya) (accessed 15.07.2023).

increase, the population of the Kaliningrad region went up by 20 % from 1989 to 2021. Similar trends were observed in the Black Sea-Azov region and the Caspian region, with the latter driven exclusively by Dagestan. In the Russian Far East, the population of coastal cities stabilised after a 17 % reduction of the 1990s. The only coastal area where depopulation became a steady trend was the Arctic basin (Table 2).

Table 2

**Population of Russian coastal cities in Russia (by maritime basins)  
and their proportion in the national coastal population  
in 1989–2021, 1,000 people / %**

Region	1989	2002	2010	2021
Baltic Sea	5306/41.2	5336/41.1	5524/42.5	6333/44.4
Black Sea-Azov*	3227/25.0	3337/26.4	3361/25.9	3829/26.8
Arctic	1510/11.7	1218/9.6	1162/8.9	1003/7.0
Caspian	993/7.7	1185/9.4	1379/10.6	1501/10.5
Russian Pacific	1854/14.4	1583/13.5	1567/12.1	1575/11.3
<i>Total</i>	12 890/100.0	12 659/100.0	12 993/100.0	14 261/100.0

\* Prepared by the author based on the All-Union and Russian censuses of 1989, 2002, 2010 and 2021.<sup>1</sup>

*Comment:* \* the all-year total for the basin includes Crimea.

Initially, geopolitics had a role in shaping the demographic landscape, particularly in the Baltic region. It supplemented and tuned up the prevailing centripetal, i.e. capital-oriented, migration trend. Particularly, in 2010–2021, St. Petersburg comprised 70 % of the total population growth in Russian coastal areas. This increase was due to inertia: it continued regardless of the emerging tension between Russia and the largest EU states. At the same time, it was a product of the Eurocentric mindset of a part of Russian society, which added to the effect of the already existing core-periphery gradient. Subsequent geopolitical events, coupled with economic and natural factors, prompted the population of Russia's Far East to concentrate in the Vladivostok agglomeration, this process becoming evident as early as the 2010s. A notable example is the population growth by 11 % in the town of Bolshoy Kamen, home to a major shipbuilding company, Zvezda, which was observed between 2010 and 2021.

<sup>1</sup> Results of the All-Russian Population Census 2020. Vol. 1: Population Size and Distribution, 2022, *Rosstat*, [https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom1\\_Chislennost\\_i\\_razmeshchenie\\_naseleniya](https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom1_Chislennost_i_razmeshchenie_naseleniya) (accessed 15.07.2023).



The rivalry between the centres of power created a *geopolitics-induced increment* characteristic of the population growth in Russian coastal cities. The ‘Crimean stage’ of this process added 910 thousand people to the coastal network structure of Russian urban centres. Moreover, migration led to a 12% increase in the population since 2014. The current stage, linked to the special military operation in Ukraine, involves the inclusion of another nine coastal urban settlements in the Russian political-geographic space. The country’s maritime frontier becomes more substantial in demographics, with geopolitical risks rising accordingly. This reinforces the significance of nodes and drivers of maritime activity in withstanding external influences, primarily in the economic sphere.

**Russia’s principal maritime hubs amid geopolitical turbulence:  
the potential for economic stability within the Russian space**

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The economic exploration of the World Ocean always begins, as Yulian Sauskin wrote, ‘from its coasts’ [38, p. 214], and the most intensive and diversified maritime activities concentrate in relatively compact areas. A century ago, when contemplating ‘powerful territorial possession’ (or, put in modern terms, the geopolitical determinants of national development) in the context of Russia, Veniamin Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky [19] described pivotal structures in the country’s space, which he termed ‘colonisation strongholds’. When applied to the issues of the World Ocean and the specifics of today’s maritime-oriented Russia, this approach makes it possible to identify the country’s principal maritime hubs [39]. The growing confrontation between the ‘centres of power’, including in water areas, considerably enhances their territorial-economic and geostrategic standing. This brings to the forefront the question of to what degree maritime hubs are capable of withstanding external (sometimes overwhelming and disruptive) influences, which have been extensively discussed within regional studies [40; 41].

Conducted following the logic of the key plot methods, my analysis demonstrates that the economies of coastal municipalities comprising disparate maritime hubs responded differently to the turbulent events of 2014 and 2015 (Table 3). The same diversity in reaction was observed during the COVID-19 restriction and the situational degradation of global markets crucial for Russian exports.



Table 3

**Dynamics of taxable income of individuals and individual entrepreneurs  
in selected key municipalities of Russia's maritime hubs, million roubles**

Municipality	2013	2014	2015	2015/2013	2019	2020	2021	2021/2019	2021/2013	In per mille of the national total	
										2013	2021
<i>Russian Baltic region</i>											
Kaliningrad	131,191	152,807	161,189	1.23	154,368	185,951	228,537	1.48	1.74	6.73	5.92
Baltiysk	5,060	5,593	5,875	1.11	4,611	5,097	6,600	1.43	1.50	0.26	0.17
<i>Pacific Russia</i>											
Vladivostok	152,347	153,878	160,853	1.06	232,875	276,539	291,431	1.25	1.91	7.82	7.56
Bolshoy Kamen	8,424	6,381	7,302	0.87	12,579	18,171	19,634	1.56	2.33	0.43	0.51
<i>Russian North (Arctic)</i>											
Arkhangelsk	77,709	90,338	98,705	1.27	112,077	109,882	142,131	1.27	1.82	3.99	3.68
Severodvinsk	44,791	51,157	55,767	1.25	74,823	76,710	91,570	1.22	2.04	2.30	2.37
<i>Russian Caspian region</i>											
Makhachkala	116,336	69,687	70,448	0.61	153,336	146,150	124,168	0.81	1.06	5.97	3.22
Kaspiysk	8,117	5,558	8,509	1.05	15,342	15,788	13,340	0.87	1.64	0.42	0.35
<i>Russian Black Sea region</i>											
Novorossiysk	62,280	61,832	69,913	1.12	83,030	101,078	106,914	1.29	1.72	3.20	2.77
Anapa	18,851	21,849	25,896	1.37	38,516	49,230	55,179	1.43	2.93	0.96	1.43

\* Prepared by the author using Rosstat data.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Volume of social payments to the population and taxable cash incomes of the population broken down by municipal entities. Statistical series, 2023, Rosstat, URL: [https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/urov\\_munst.htm](https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/urov_munst.htm) (accessed 04.08.2023).

A sensitive reaction to the deteriorating global situation was characteristic of the Caspian towns of Dagestan, which depend heavily on inter-regional financial transfers. Vladivostok and Novorossiysk experienced a downturn during the periods of decline; Kaliningrad, however, proved to be more resilient. As anticipated, the overall economic balance, evaluated based on the taxable income of individuals and business entities, has shifted since 2013 towards Vladivostok and Bolshoy Kamen (the eastern track, shipbuilding), Severodvinsk and Arkhangelsk (the northern track), and particularly Anapa (the Black Sea track, recreation). Although the year 2022 brought about a more dramatic change in the geopolitical conditions of Russia's spatial-economic dynamics, relevant statistics are not yet available. Against this background, the contribution of certain regions to the overall national statistics decreased throughout the study period. This illustrates the broader trend of the modern economy shifting towards inland centres, a process accelerated by the special military operation. The future coastalisation of the economy is contingent on substantial maritime projects — industrial, recreational, and settlement-focused, including those in shipbuilding. Current geopolitical challenges, risks and limitations add urgency to the search for approaches and measures aimed at raising the profile of the sea factor and ensuring its more efficient utilisation. When doing so, the following spatial structures and processes cannot be taken out of the equation.

1. It is essential to build new effectively functioning Russian maritime hubs and decentralise the existing ones. This must be done at both federal and regional levels. In the former case, this concerns the Bukhta Sever port on the Taymyr peninsula, whose prospects are linked to oil extraction and transport within the flagship project of Rosneft—Vostok Oil;<sup>1</sup> in the latter, the restoration of the port infrastructure of Mariupol and Berdyansk.

2. There is a need for consistent diversification in the structure of maritime hubs' economies, such as reinforcing their principal function of a logistics facility with industrial and service specialisations, including those linked to import substitution. This will expedite the establishment of industrial port complexes, a concept initially envisioned as early as the 1960s—1980s [42]. It is likely to transform them into multifunctional port facilities with industrial, educational, and research capabilities. The most likely candidate for the latter is St. Petersburg, albeit such projects can be implemented in Kaliningrad, Sevastopol, Vladivostok and, with reservations, Arkhangelsk.

3. Coordinated development of maritime hubs within selected sea basins, for which there are ample geopolitical reasons in the Russian Black Sea and Baltic areas, will benefit from a network of maritime centres with elements of speciali-

<sup>1</sup> About the enterprise, 2023, *Rosneft*, URL: [https://vostokoil.rosneft.ru/about/Glance/OperationalStructure/Dobicha\\_i\\_razrabotka/Vostochnaja\\_Sibir/vostokoil/](https://vostokoil.rosneft.ru/about/Glance/OperationalStructure/Dobicha_i_razrabotka/Vostochnaja_Sibir/vostokoil/) (accessed 16.07.2023).

sation and hierarchy throughout Russia's marine border areas. This network may enjoy considerable autonomy, which will contribute to its resilience to exogenous geostrategic risk, including the still hypothetical possibility of a blockade imposed by external forces on water areas neighbouring Russia and having a transport significance for the country.

4. It is advisable to increase the economic potential of Russian maritime hubs in terms of workforce, market share and production facilities by extending their influence to adjacent territories as part of agglomeration and inter-municipal and interregional integration. For example, the modernisation of federal motorways adjacent to Rostov-on-Don caused the demographic capacity of the expanded agglomeration to increase by one-third, reaching 2.5 million people. Linking the agglomeration to Donetsk and Mariupol will form a space unified in economic and settlement terms with at least 4.5 million residents.

5. Closer attention should be paid to building integrated coastal structures encompassing vast areas in Russia: in the southern and northwestern 'intermaria', in the Western and Eastern Siberia and, in a broader context, along the White Sea—Black Sea, Baltic Sea—Black Sea and the Baltic Sea—Sea of Japan routes. This process should involve the massive heartlands of the country's major sea ports [31].

The logic of creating *large Russian continental maritime spaces* in the new geopolitical landscape necessitates the conceptual reconstruction of transboundary basin structures of Russia's marine border areas, particularly in the west, including the Baltic area. Russia should seek transboundary and trans-basin interaction predominantly with the friendly Eurasian states.

### **Maritime regionalisation in the space of geoeconomic interaction and geopolitical confrontation: the phenomenon of the Russian Baltic area**

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Closely linked to Eurointegration, the formation of the Baltic region as a transboundary maritime entity spanned almost the whole post-Soviet period [43—45]. In the military-political sphere, it was accompanied by the enlargement of NATO. Russian coastal territories participated in the so-called Baltic integration in the capacity of a 'friendly alien', a periphery, a space of globalist expansion and the principal transport corridor within the Russia—West system.

The current geopolitical reformatting of the Baltic region commenced not on 24 February 2002 but five or six years earlier, as evidenced by contributions from Russian [46; 47] and international [48] researchers. In these conditions, the Russian—European barrier is becoming increasingly tangible both on land and at

sea. The macro-region is adopting a bi-structural design that both offers coastal areas new opportunities, such as saturating the local food market with Russian goods [49], and presents them with risks [50].

As rightly noted in [51], the proclaimed *Zeitenwende* in the Baltic region has become a thing of the past, a completely unrealised ideologeme, whilst the ‘space of cooperation’ has rapidly militarised. The new geopolitical landscape calls for revising the status of Russian Baltic territories as autonomous and geopolitically distinctive entities — a view prevalent throughout the past thirty years. The corresponding reconceptualisation of all Russian marine border areas with a focus on affiliation with Russia and its jurisdiction rather than on transboundary opportunities may manifest itself in the *Russian Baltic* geo-concept, a term that has been recently gaining currency [54–56]. To compare, the ideas of Pacific Russia [52] and the Russian Black Sea area [53] have already been described in the literature.

I regard as more adequate the narrow definition of this taxon, which encompasses St. Petersburg and two Baltic regions of Russia or, at a lower administrative level, their fifteen municipalities bordering the sea. These territories are home to 6.8 million people, or 4.6 % of the national population, most of whom reside on the northern coast of the Gulf of Finland. There is a dramatic difference in the economic performance, i.e. the taxable income of individuals and individual entrepreneurs, of the Kaliningrad exclave, accounting for a mere 8 %, and the other Russian Baltic territories. Therefore, the Russian Baltic area is bi-centric and asymmetric in demographic and economic terms. Moreover, which is particularly important as far as the sea factor is considered, it is a trans-basin area boasting its own *maritime infrastructure*. The sea ports comprising the latter have been increasing their throughput in the post-Soviet period; furthermore, they have been linked by transport services, including aviation since February 2022, and benefit from the high sea status, according to the UN Convention.<sup>1</sup> Partly excluded from the former space of Baltic integration but still open to the idea of pursuing it in a mid- and long-term perspective, the Russian Baltic region and particularly its Kaliningrad exclave must rely even more strongly on *coastalisation* in its socio-economic development.

This inevitable change, determined by path dependence, the available infrastructure and human capital, is complicated by both the current geopolitical landscape and the overall long-term geoeconomic trend towards redistributing Russia’s maritime activity in favour of non-Western coasts. The geopolitical

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1994, *UN*, URL: [https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl\\_conv/conventions/pdf/lawsea.pdf](https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pdf/lawsea.pdf) (accessed 18.07.2023).

situation hinders the execution of flagship coastal projects, such as the facility for ethane-containing gas processing and LNG production under construction in Ust-Luga by Gazprom<sup>1</sup> or the cruise terminal in Pionersky.<sup>2</sup>

Since the mid-2000s, the significance of the Baltic ports for the country in terms of logistics has been declining: the port turnover increased by a factor of 2.06 nationwide, but only by 1.37 in the Russian Baltic area between 2005 and 2022; it grew by a factor of 1.42 and 1.14 from 2013 to 2022, respectively. A similar, albeit less prominent, situation has been observed in fish processing. The migration support for the economy is likely to decline, with the trend being already discernible. This reduction will affect the construction industry of coastal urban agglomerations in the Russian Baltic area, which can counter the trend by taking the following measures to support and enhance its maritime functionality: 1) conversion to the transport systems and markets of friendly nations; 2) increasing internal inter-basin connectivity, including along the Baltiysk—Ust Luga route; 3) promoting the territories as destination for recreation and tourism; 4) emerging as centres for research, technology, culture and education at the core of Maritime Russia. Kaliningrad has the greatest potential for tourism development: the number of people staying at the region's hotels and other types of accommodation increased 4.7 times between 2014 and 2022, compared to 2.7 times across the country.<sup>3</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The universal and diverse impact of the sea factor on the economy, human settlement and the military-strategic sphere has been increasingly shaped by the geopolitical landscape. The key factor here is the growing confrontation between Russia and the West, taking place against the radical reformatting of the world order. The geopolitical determinant of the conditions, manifestations and effects of coastalisation, which has been crucial for Russia's spatial development, is most pronounced in the borderlands of transboundary marine regions, similar to those found in the Baltic area.

The geopolitical and correspondent geoeconomic change has led to the reformatting of Russia's maritime activities and the transformation of the overall land-

<sup>1</sup> Linde's withdrawal from the Baltic LNG project in Ust-Luga and the problems of RusKhimAlliance, 07.07.2023, *TEK-ALL*, URL: <https://www.tek-all.ru/news/id10005-vihod-linde-iz-proekta-baltiyskiy-spg-v-ust-luge-i-problemi-ooo-rushimalyans/> (accessed 19.07.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Never-ending port construction. Why the terminal in Pionerskoye cannot be completed for two years, 05.11.2013, *RBC*, URL: <https://kaliningrad.rbc.ru/kalininkgrad/05/11/2021/617fcf9d9a7947682664af34> (accessed 19.07.2023).

<sup>3</sup> Hotels and other accommodation, 2023, *Rosstat*, URL: <https://rosstat.gov.ru/statistics/turizm> (accessed 18.07.2023).

sea organisation of the country. Russian maritime economy is becoming more autonomous, diversified (including in spatial terms), efficient and complex. The coastalisation and continentalisation trends are merging to create vast integrated spaces in the format of Russian intermaria of varying scales. These processes are stimulating the identification and conceptualisation of the resource-driven, economic and geopolitical megastructure of Maritime Russia, which includes the Russian Baltic area, the Russian Black Sea area, Caspian Russia, the Russian Arctic and Pacific Russia.

Today, international processes are adopting an increasingly visible basin-specific dimension, and the socio-economic situation of coastal territories is becoming an element of geopolitical security. The major coastalisation trend, which has been crucial for post-Soviet Russia, should continue. It should be supported by scientific analysis, particularly in human geography.

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