

**TERRITORIAL STRUCTURE  
OF THE DENOMINATIONAL  
SPACE  
OF THE SOUTH-EAST  
BALTIC**

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*The South-East Baltic is a meeting place of three branches of Christianity: Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Lutheranism. Dominant in the Baltic region, these religious confessions define the cultural landscape of the area. At the same time, they have an indirect effect on socio-economic development. In this study, we aim to identify the main components of the territorial structure and the formation and transformation factors of the denominational space in the South-East Baltic. The complexity of the denominational structure of the local population stems from the centuries-long position of this region as a political buffer zone.*

*We calculate the potential denominational structure and the potential religious fractionalisation index at the level of basic territorial units and regions southeast of the Baltic Sea. Based on this, we identify the main components of the territorial structure of the denominational space, which includes three denominational shields and contact zones between them. From a practical viewpoint, these components suggest a new variant of the territorial differentiation of the Baltic region. This variant has only limited relevance to ethnic and socio-economic zoning.*

**Keywords:** denominational space, North-West Russia, Baltic States, Belarus

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The Baltic region is divided into three distinct parts as regards religious denominations: the Lutheran North and West, the Catholic South, and the Orthodox East. This cultural-geographical division of the region is very similar to that based on socio-economic parameters: the rich North, the moderately performing South,



and the relatively poor East. The three branches of Christianity converge south-east of the Baltic Sea, which makes their meeting place an ethnocultural buffer.

Our study aims to describe the territorial structure of the denominational space of the South-East Baltic and to identify factors governing its formation and transformation.

The study region includes the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Russia's North-West (Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad, Novgorod, Pskov, and Kaliningrad regions). In this study, we use a broader definition of the Baltic region, which includes the Republic of Belarus [1]. This made it possible to define the borders of the key structural components of the denominational space of the South-East Baltic in greater detail.

**State of knowledge.** Studies of denominational spaces (or religious landscapes) are often closely connected to the geographical investigation of the cultural diversity of the world [2; 3] large multi-denominational countries (the US [4], Russia [5]), or small territories with a complex ethno-denominational structure of the population [6–11, and others]. In the second case, studies into today's denominational geography are the key to solving political problems that arise when ethnocultural mosaics of territories are transformed by wars and migration. Usually, such works examine long-term changes in religious landscapes [12; 13].

Many researchers pay attention to the countries of the former Socialist camp, which are undergoing ethno-denominational transformations caused by accelerating migration processes that often have a strong national component. Most studies into the changing denominational structure of the population in the Baltic region focus on the ethno-political problems of the development of countries and territories. This applies chiefly to the Baltic States [14–16]. However, there is literature considering the current changes in the denominational space of Russia and other post-Soviet countries [5; 17; 18].

Most studies in denominational geography are historical-geographical investigations. Some of the works focusing on the region employ statistics of the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries (inspection reports and data from the Russian Imperial Census of 1897) and of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century [19–22, and others]. Some researchers have focused on the denominational geography of the Republic of Belarus [23], and the Saint Petersburg [24] and Pskov [25; 26] regions. Earlier, we conducted a historical-geographical analysis of changes in the ethnic composition of the basic territorial units (dis-

tricts, counties) of North-West Russia [27], Estonia, and Latvia [28] from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until today. This analysis laid the groundwork for this research.

**Sources and conceptual framework.** In our study, we employed data from the first Russian Imperial Census of 1897, the Soviet censuses of 1959 and 1989, the Russian federal census of 2010<sup>1</sup>, the Belarusian census of 2009, and the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian censuses of 2011<sup>2</sup>. Recent statistics were processed at the level of basic territorial units – municipalities in the Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus, and Lithuania, counties in Estonia, and districts in Latvia (as before 2009).

We relied on the traditional (ethnoreligious) understanding of denominational spaces. However, one of the founders of this approach, Pavel Puchkov, emphasised that, although religious communities should not be identified with ethnic ones [29], it is important to explore the connection between ethnic groups and religions.

Most studies distinguish two major territorial components of a denominational (religious) space: the spiritual component (the religious affiliation of the believers) and the religious-cultural infrastructure [30]. Sometimes, researchers draw difference between confessional and religious spaces. They consider the former as a category that has such parameters as structure, dimensions, and morphology [6]. For example, Sergey Safronov [22] identifies the following macro-level elements of confessional spaces: 1) large denominational shields formed by the world religions (Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism); 2) contact area where the zones of influence of the world religions overlap.

The study region is dominated by only one world religion. However, three of its major branches are practised there: Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Lutheranism. In terms of geography, these branches can be likened to ‘minor confessional shields’. Their junctions coincide to an extent with the main ‘cultural rifts’ of the study region.

Denominational shields have major and minor cores. In the Baltic, there are two minor shield cores: the Catholic one in Lithu-

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<sup>1</sup> *Demoscope Weekly*, 2018, Institute of Demography of the National Research University "Higher School of Economics", available at: <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/search.php> (accessed 15.08.2018) (In Russ.).

<sup>2</sup> *Population statistics of Eastern Europe & former USSR*, 2018, available at: <http://pop-stat.mashke.org/> (accessed 15.08.2018).



ania and the Lutheran one in Estonia. In the east and south-east, the areas dominated by Lutheranism and Catholicism are bordered by the Orthodox shield with its core in the centre of the East European Plain (Russia and Belarus). Since confessional shields often overlap, it is important to distinguish clearly between their cores and contact zones. In studying the denominational structure of a population, researchers often employ an analogue of B. M. Ekkel's ethnic fractionalisation index (EFI) [31] – the religious fractionalisation index (RFI) [21]. Similarly to the EFI, the RFI can be calculated for any territorial unit using the formula:  $IRM=1 - \sum (P_i)^2$ , where  $P_i$  is the proportion of people practising  $i^{\text{th}}$  religion in the region ( $i=1,2,\dots$ ).

Earlier, we proposed to employ this index to identify two classes of contact zones: latent (RFI of 0.2–0.4) and pronounced ones (RFI of above 0.4) [21]. For example, an RFI of 0.2 describes a denominational structure where the proportion of people practising the dominant religion is approximately 90 % and an RFI of 0.4 a structure where each fourth is not affiliated with the dominant religion. We classify the areas with an RFI of below 0.2 as cores and those with a higher RFI as contact zones. Thus, the threshold for a territory to be classed as a denomination shield core is 90 % of the population practising a single religion (or those potentially affiliated with this religion).

When relevant official statistics are unavailable (for instance, religious affiliation was not monitored by the Soviet censuses of 1959 and 1989, and the post-Soviet Russian and Belarusian censuses of 2009 and 2010), specialists in denominational geography suggest computing the potential denominational composition of the population. Such a calculation relies on the traditional religious affiliations of ethnic groups populating the study area [22]. The potential religious fractionalisation index (PRFI) of an administrative unit can be computed in a similar way. Since, in our study, we analysed simultaneously the territories of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus, and the Baltic States, we employed this index.

***Orthodox Christians and Old Believers.*** The first branch of Christianity to appear in the region was Orthodox Christianity. On the territory of today's North-West Russia and Belarus, Orthodox Christianity became the dominant religion right after the Baptism of Rus' in 988. Later, it spread to the territory of today's East Latvia (Latgale), at the time controlled by Polotsk princes. However, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the area was taken over by German military orders.

Orthodox Christianity started to reclaim the Baltic (primarily, the territories of today's Estonia and Latvia) during the Livonian War of 1558–1583. In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the *Raskol*, Old Believers were migrating to the lands bordering on Russia, including the Western coast of Lake Peipus and Latgale.

The Russian Empire incorporated the Swedish provinces of Estland and Livonia after the Great Northern War of 1700–1721. This sparked a new wave of migration of Orthodox Christians (primarily, Russians) to these territories. A smaller number of Orthodox migrants arrived in Lithuania after the third partition of Poland in 1795. The Vilno province was home to many Belarusians practising Orthodox Christianity.

According to the Russian Imperial Census of 1897, the highest proportion of Orthodox Christians (Old Believers included) was in the Novgorod and Pskov provinces (above 95%). These territories constituted the core of the Orthodox Christianity shield. The proportion of Orthodox Christians was significantly smaller in Saint Petersburg (85.9%) and the Saint Petersburg province (78%). Orthodox Christians and Old Believers accounted for approximately 15% of the population on the territory of today's Estonia, 12.7% on that of today's Latvia, and 6.3% of today's Lithuania (table 1).

Table 1

**The proportion of Orthodox Christians and Old Believers among the religious population (the potential proportion of Orthodox Christians is given in parentheses),%<sup>3</sup>**

	1897	1959	1989	2010/2011
Saint Petersburg / Leningrad	85.9	(92.7)	(95.1)	(95.8)
Leningrad region /				
Saint Petersburg province	78.0	(96.4)	(97.4)	(96.9)
Novgorod region / province	98.3	(98.9)	(98.5)	(98.0)
Pskov region / province	95.2	(98.7)	(98.6)	(98.3)
Kaliningrad region		(94.1)	(95.5)	(94.6)
Estonia	14.9	(22.6)	(35.7)	35.2 (28.8)
Latvia	12.7	(31.3)	(42.6)	(32.7)
Lithuania	6.3	(10.4)	(12.5)	4.9 (7.7)

<sup>3</sup> Calculated by the authors based on: *Demoscope Weekly*, 2018, Institute of Demography of the National Research University "Higher School of Economics", available at: <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/search.php>; *Population statistics of Eastern Europe & former USSR*, 2018, available at: <http://pop-stat.mashke.org> (accessed 15.08.2018).



In the Soviet period, the major factor behind the transformation of the potential denominational structure of Estonia's, Latvia's, and Lithuania's population was Russians, Belarusians, and, to a lesser degree, Ukrainians migrating into the Baltic republics. Thus, the proportion of potential Orthodox Christian population was rapidly increasing, particularly, in Estonia and Latvia. At the same time, all the regions of Russia's North-West were becoming the cores of Orthodoxy-dominated territories.

In the post-Soviet period, the outflow of Russian speakers from the Baltics was accompanied by a reduction in the proportion of potential Orthodox Christian population. Here, it is important to consider the correlation between the actual and potential denominational structure of Estonia's and Latvia's population. The 2011 census taken in the two countries contained a question about religion. In Estonia, 54.1 % of respondents said that they were not affiliated with any religion, 2.4 % could not identify their affiliation, and 14.4 % refused to answer<sup>4</sup>. Among those who did not identify themselves as atheists or non-religious, 35.2 % said that they were Orthodox Christians (35.2 %), which is above the proportion of potential Orthodox population (28.8 %) in the country. It is reasonable to assume that Orthodox Christianity is a consolidating force for Estonia's Russian speakers. However, the situation is different in Lithuania, where Russian speakers have been secularised to a greater extent than Lithuanians have been.

**Roman Catholics.** The spread of Catholicism in the region began as late as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. At first, it was driven by German military orders (the Knights of the Sword from 1202 and the Livonian Order from 1237). The Catholic expansion broke in the east against the Orthodox shield and created a cultural barrier that has survived to this day, coinciding with Russia's western border.

However, the Catholic shield was to undergo serious changes. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Lithuania started to adopt Catholicism (following the 1385 Union of Krewo). The process was completed in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century after the signing of the 1569 Union of Lublin, which established the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The new state occupied most of the Baltic. However, following the Polish–Swedish war of 1621–1626, the Commonwealth lost Livonia, i. e. most of the territories of today's Estonia and Latvia with the exception of Latgale. Under Swedish rule, Lutheranism replaced Catholicism in Estland and Livonia.

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<sup>4</sup> *Population statistics of Eastern Europe & former USSR*, 2011, available at: <http://pop-stat.mashke.org/estonia-religion2011.htm> (accessed 25.08.2018).

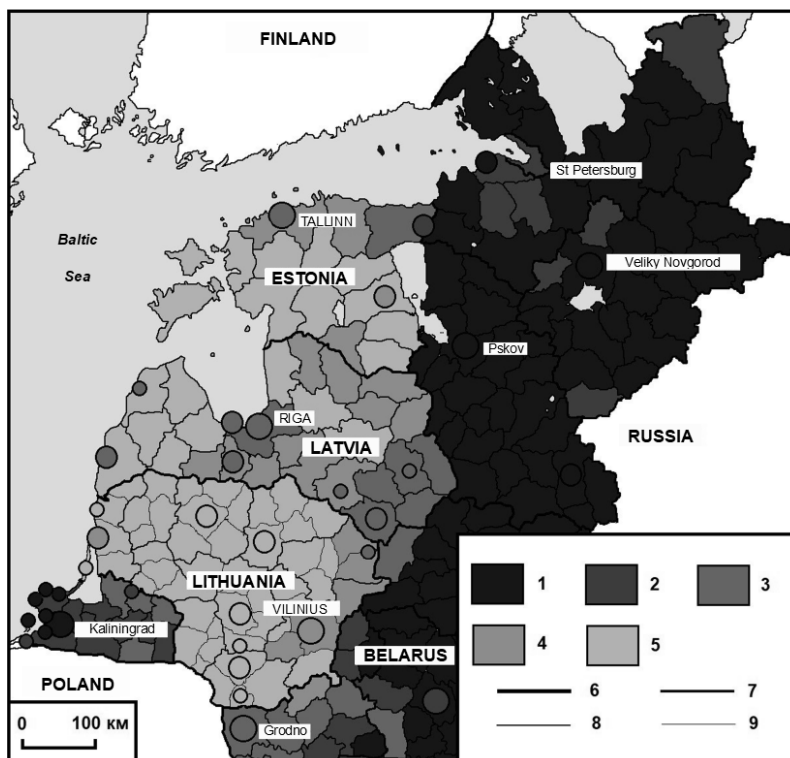


Fig. 1. The proportion of potential Orthodox Christians, % (as in 2009 in the Republic of Belarus, 2010 in Russia, 2011 in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; prepared by the authors).

The proportion of the potential Orthodox population (%):

1 –  $\geq 95.0$ ; 2 – 90.0–94.9; 3 – 25.0–89.9; 4 – 10.0–24.9; 5 –  $\leq 9.9$ .

Borders: 6 – of states and regions (Russia and Belarus); 7 – counties (Estonia and Lithuania); 8 – districts (Russia, Belarus, and Latvia);

9 – municipalities (Lithuania).

As a result, the Catholic core of the region shifted to Lithuania. Moreover, the Catholic shield moved southward to establish itself in Lithuania and Latgale (at the time, parts of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth). After the partitions of Poland (1772 and 1795), this region remained Catholic. The only exception was the former Duchy of Courland, which adopted Lutheranism.

According to the first Russian imperial census, which was carried out in 1897, the proportion of Catholics was the highest in the Kovno and Vilno provinces (75.8%, today's Lithuania) and in Latgale, the western part of the Vitebsk province (50%, today's eastern Latvia) [12]. In Russia's North-West, an increased proportion of Catholics was observed in Saint Petersburg (4.2%), which was accounted for by the Western Europeans settling in the capital (table 2).

Table 2

**The proportion of Roman Catholics among the religious population  
(the potential proportion of Roman Catholics is given  
in parentheses), %<sup>5</sup>**

	1897	1959	1989	2010/2011
Saint Petersburg / Leningrad	4.2	(0.6)	(0.2)	(0.1)
Leningrad region / Saint Petersburg province	1.4	(0.3)	(0.2)	(0.1)
Novgorod region / province	0.3	(0.1)	(0.1)	(0.1)
Pskov region / province	0.8	(0.1)	(0.2)	(0.1)
Kaliningrad region		(4.2)	(2.6)	(1.4)
Estonia	0.4	(0.3)	(0.4)	0.9 (0.3)
Latvia	20.2	(12.4)	(10.2)	(11.3)
Lithuania	75.8	(87.8)	(86.6)	92.2 (91.7)

In the Soviet and post-Soviet period, the proportion of Catholics in North-West Russia was insignificant. The percentage of Latgale Catholics in Latvia rapidly reduced. In Latvia, a high rate of natural increase in the autochthonous population caused the growth in the proportion of Catholics. A slight excess of the percentage of Catholics in Lithuania (calculated as a proportion of people who specified their religious affiliation) over that of potential Catholics testifies to the important role religion plays in the self-identification of Lithuanians.

**Protestants.** The Lutheran component of the regional denominational space emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, following the Polish–Swedish war of 1621–1626, when the Kingdom of Sweden incorporated Estland and Livonia. Lutheranism was adopted in the Duchy of Courland, which remained under the control of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the same century, the Treaty of Stolbovo granted lands south-west of the Gulf of Finland, called Ingria, to Sweden. Later, that territory was populated by Savakot and Äyrämöiset. These ethnic groups from Lutheran Finland were collectively referred to as the Ingrians. After Ingria became part of the Russian Empire, the Finns remained on the land. In 1940–1947, they underwent a series of deportations [21].

<sup>5</sup> Calculated by the authors based on: *Demoscope Weekly*, 2018, Institute of Demography of the National Research University "Higher School of Economics", available at: <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/search.php>; *Population statistics of Eastern Europe & former USSR*, 2018, available at: <http://pop-stat.mashke.org> (accessed 15.08.2018).



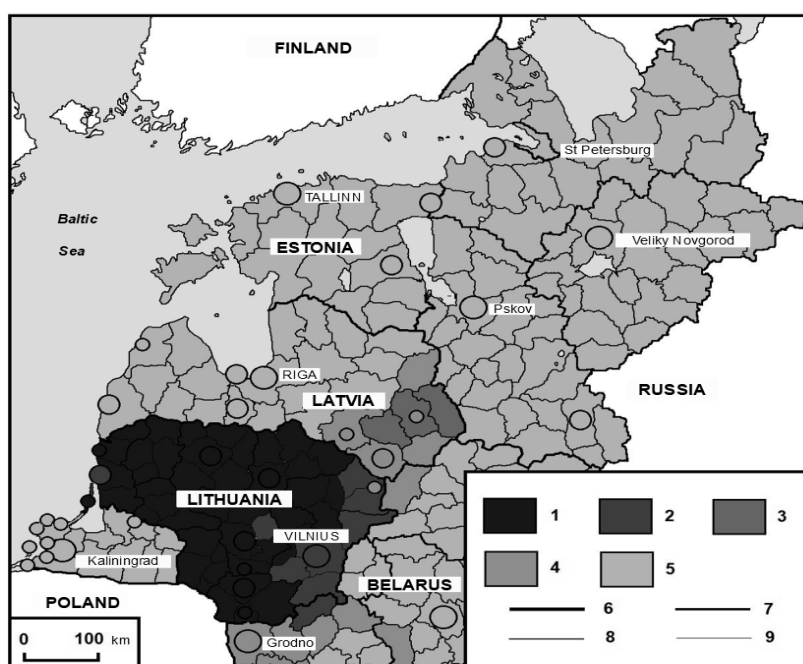


Fig. 2. The proportion of potential Catholics, % (as of 2009 in the Republics of Belarus, as of 2010 in Russia, and 2011 in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; prepared by the authors).

The proportion of potential Catholics (%): 1 –  $\geq 90.0$ ; 2 – 70.0–89.9;  
3 – 50.0–69.9; 4 – 10.0–49.9; 5 –  $\leq 9.9$ .

Borders: 6 of states and regions (Russia and Belarus);  
7 counties (Estonia and Lithuania); 8 districts (Russia, Belarus, and Latvia);  
9 municipalities (Lithuania).

A new wave of migrations of Lutherans (Estonians and Latvian from the Estland and Livonian provinces) to the Saint Petersburg and Pskov provinces occurred in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the 1897 Russian imperial census, the proportion of Protestants (primarily, Lutherans) was the highest in the Estland (89.7%), Livonian (79.6%), and Courland (76.2%) provinces<sup>6</sup>. The proportion of Protestants (most of them, Ingrian Finns and Estonians) was considerable in the Saint Petersburg province and the capital (table 3).

<sup>6</sup> The first general census of the population of the Russian Empire in 1897, the distribution of the population by religion and region, 1905, *Demoscope Weekly*, available at: [http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\\_rel\\_97.php?reg=0](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_rel_97.php?reg=0) (accessed 20.08.2018) (in Russ.).

Table 3

**The proportion of Protestants among the religious population  
(the potential proportion of Protestants given in the parentheses),%<sup>7</sup>**

	1897	1959	1989	2010/2011
Saint Petersburg / Leningrad	7.5	(0.5)	(0.3)	(0.2)
Leningrad region / Saint Petersburg province	19.9	(2.2)	(1.0)	(0.5)
Novgorod region / province	0.9	(0.6)	(0.3)	(0.2)
Pskov region / province	2.0	(0.8)	(0.4)	(0.2)
Kaliningrad region		(0.3)	(0.3)	(0.9)
Estonia	84.0	(76.3)	(63.0)	27.2 (69.9)
Latvia	59.1	(54.4)	(45.5)	(54.4)
Lithuania	3.4	(0.7)	(0.2)	1.9 (0.1)

In the USSR, the contact zone between the Orthodox and Lutheran shields shifted to the Baltics. The proportion of potential Protestants in Russia's North-West reduced to insignificant levels. In Estonia and Latvia, it was rapidly decreasing until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the post-Soviet period, the outflow of Russian speakers from Estonia and Latvia caused an increase in the proportion of potential Protestants. However, secularisation and the spread of atheism, observed in Protestant communities in the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries, occurred at a higher rate. A 2011 analysis of the denominational structure of Estonia shows that this conclusion is accurate. Among the respondents who specified their religious affiliation, fewer people identified themselves as Lutherans than as Orthodox Christians. The total proportion of Protestants among those who did not identify themselves as either atheists or non-religious reached 27.2% (and that of Lutherans 21.6%). Therefore, in our cartographic analysis at the level of basic administrative units, we relied on the proportion of potential Protestants rather than the actual numbers revealed by the 2011 survey (fig. 3).

<sup>7</sup> Calculated by the authors based on: *Demoscope Weekly*, 2018, Institute of Demography of the National Research University "Higher School of Economics", available at: <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/search.php>; *Population statistics of Eastern Europe & former USSR*, 2018, available at: <http://pop-stat.mashke.org> (accessed 15.08.2018).

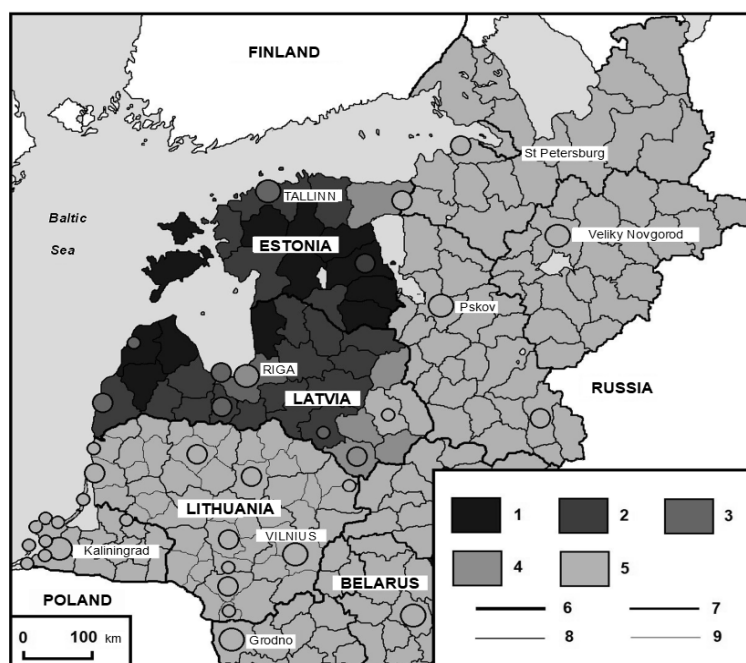


Fig. 3. The proportion of potential Protestants, %  
(as of 2009 in the Republics of Belarus, as of 2010 in Russia, and 2011  
in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; prepared by the authors).

The proportion of potential Protestants (%): 1 –  $\geq 90.0$ ; 2 – 70.0–89.9;  
3 – 50.0–69.9; 4 – 10.0–49.9; 5 –  $\leq 9.9$ .

Borders: 6 – of states and regions (Russia and Belarus);  
7 – counties (Estonia and Lithuania); 8 – districts (Russia, Belarus, and Latvia);  
9 – municipalities (Lithuania).

*Major components of the territorial structure of denominational space.* At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian regions within the borders of the then provinces and the Baltics within today's borders were classified as follows based on the religious fractionalisation index (table 4).

The core of the Orthodox shield comprised the Novgorod and Pskov regions (an RFI of below 0.2). Latent contact zones (an RFI of 0.2–0.4) were found in the Saint Petersburg province, Saint Petersburg, and Estonia (within today's borders). The capital and its province were situated on the edge of the territory dominated by Orthodox Christianity, superimposed by the Lutheran shield. At the time, Estonia was the periphery of the Protestant (Lutheran) shield, partly superimposed by the Orthodox shield. The counties that bordered Saint Petersburg on the south and were populated by Lutheran Ingrian Finns constituted a pronounced contact zone.

Table 4

**Religious fractionalisation index of 1897 and the potential religious fractionalisation index of 1959, 1989, and 2010/2011<sup>8</sup>**

	1897	1959	1989	2010/2011
Saint Petersburg / Leningrad	0.2539	0.1415	0.0956	0.0828
Leningrad region / Saint Petersburg province	0.3512	0.0692	0.0507	0.0604
Novgorod region / province	0.0333	0.0218	0.0299	0.0402
Pskov region / province	0.0932	0.0266	0.0270	0.0332
Kaliningrad region		0.1126	0.0867	0.1046
Estonia	0.2718	0.3672	0.4757	0.4290
Latvia	0.5935	0.5911	0.6005	0.5843
Lithuania	0.4043	0.2180	0.2343	0.1525

Today's territories of Lithuania and Latvia could also be considered as pronounced contact zones (RFI of above 0.4). Mostly Catholic Lithuania was superimposed by the Orthodox shield, whereas Latvia became the meeting place of all three regional denominational shields: Lutheran, Orthodox, and Catholic.

When pinpointing the minor cores of the Lutheran and Catholic shields at the level of counties, we found out a number of interesting facts. Lutheranism-dominated territories had three minor cores: in the east of the Estland province and in the central parts of the Livonian and Courland provinces. These cores lay in the interior yet peripheral parts of the provinces, at a distance from the administrative and economic centres [21]. The minor core of Catholicism-dominated territories situated in the Kovno province, whereas the Vilno province and Latgale (the western part of the Vitebsk province) constituted pronounced contact zones.

In the Soviet and post-Soviet period, all the regions of Russia's North-West became part of the Orthodox core. This was explained by a steep reduction in the proportion of traditionally non-Orthodox ethnic groups. At the same time, Lithuania turned into a multi-denominational country, having become, together with Poland, part of the major core of the Catholic shield. In the Soviet period, Estonia became a pronounced contact zone. Just as Latvia, it is today one of the most multi-denominational countries of the Baltic region.

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<sup>8</sup> Calculated by the authors based on: *Demoscope Weekly*, 2018, Institute of Demography of the National Research University "Higher School of Economics", available at: <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/search.php>; *Population statistics of Eastern Europe & former USSR*, 2018, available at: <http://pop-stat.mashke.org> (accessed 15.08.2018).

An analysis of the micro-level PRFI makes it possible to identify the boundaries of denominational shields in the South-East Baltic (fig. 4).

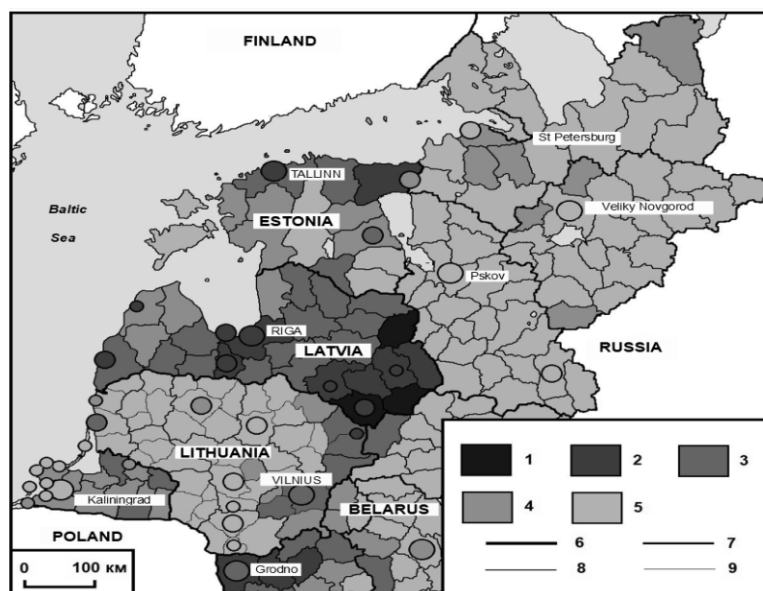


Fig. 4. Potential Religious Fractionalisation Index (as of 2009 in the Republics of Belarus, as of 2010 in Russia, and 2011 in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; prepared by the authors).

Potential Religious Fractionalisation Index: 1 –  $\geq 0.600$ ; 2 –  $0.400-0.599$ ;  
3 –  $0.200-0.399$ ; 4 –  $0.100-0.199$ ; 5 –  $\leq 0.099$ .

Borders: 6 – of states and regions (Russia and Belarus);

7 – counties (Estonia and Lithuania); 8 – districts (Russia, Belarus, and Latvia);

9 – municipalities (Lithuania).

The region's 'thickest' denominational shield is the Orthodox one. Today, its core includes all Russian regions and almost all regions of the Republic of Belarus (the only exception is the Grodno region). However, the external boundaries of the Orthodox area lie beyond the borders of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. The contact zones of the Orthodox Christian shield do not coincide with the borders of Russia, Estonia, and Latvia. Ida-Viru County (Estonia) and Latgale (Eastern Latvia) constitute the interior periphery of the Orthodox shield. The capitals of Estonia and Latvia and their environs, as well as some other cities in these countries, can be classified as the external periphery of the Orthodox component of the denominational space. The contact zone comprises most of Estonia and a considerable part of Latvia.



At the Lithuanian – Belarusian border, the boundary of the Orthodox shield changes its nature. Part of the contact zone lies in the east of Lithuania (including Vilnius). However, south of Lithuania, in the Grodno region, the Catholic shield superimposes the Orthodox one and creates a contact zone in Belarus.

The second ‘thickest’ shield is Catholic. Its core comprises most of Lithuania (with the exception of its eastern periphery and Vilnius). Nevertheless, the Catholic shield continues in Latgale, a region that serves as a pronounced contact zone or, more precisely, the meeting point of three religions: Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Lutheranism. Another contact zone is the extension of the Catholic area in the Grodno region of Belarus. The Catholic-Orthodox boundary in the West (Russia’s Kaliningrad region) and the Protestant-Orthodox boundary in the north (Latvia’s Kurzeme, Zemgale, and Selonia) function as a barrier.

The ‘thinnest’ denominational shield in the region is the Protestant (Lutheran) one. Covering Estonia and most of Latvia (without Latgale), it is an extension of the ‘great’ shield that includes the neighbouring Nordic countries (Sweden and Finland). Southeast of the Baltic Sea, this shield does not have expressed cores. The area has characteristics of a ‘contact zone’, which become pronounced in capitals and large cities. On the one hand, the ‘thinness’ of the Protestant shield is explained by the active expansion of Orthodox Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the other hand, it is a result of many Protestants having turned away from religion, or, in other words, of the local population becoming increasingly secular and atheistic.

**Conclusions.** The South-East Baltic has the most complex denominational composition across the Baltic region. This territory is the meeting place of three branches of Christianity that define the cultural landscape of the area: Lutheranism, Orthodox Christianity, and Catholicism. Our study identified the major components of the territorial structure of the regional denominational space, including three denominational shields and contact zones between them. The most pronounced zone of denominational contact within the study region is Latgale, where all three major religions are practised.

The oldest and thickest denominational shield in the study region is the Orthodox one. Its core includes the regions of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. The edges of the shield advance into Estonia and Latvia, both countries accommodating zones of denominational contact. The second oldest and

thickest denominational shield is Catholic. Its core lies in Lithuania and its edges form salients in Latgale (Eastern Latvia) and the Grodno region of Belarus. The youngest and thinnest denominational shield in the region is the Protestant one. Its major component is Lutheran religion, which gained ground on the territories of today's Estonia and Latvia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although this denominational shield does not have pronounced cores, it has many zones of contact with the Orthodox shield. The gradual dissolution of this denominational shield is a result of potential Protestants (Estonians and Latvians) turning away from religion.

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