

Russia's Baltic regions have received considerable scholarly attention throughout the country's contemporary history, with recent years being no exception. Yet, the year 2022 — probably for the first time since the demise of the USSR — saw dramatic changes in the geopolitical standing of Russian regions, particularly the northwestern ones lying on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

Despite the many years of cooling in relations between Russia and the West, Russian Baltic regions continued to function as the proverbial window to Europe until the beginning of the special military operation and the sanctions against Russia, which surpassed the earlier imposed ones in scale. Most joint ventures benefiting from the advantageous coastal position and the well-known neighbourhood effect carried on their operations; the construction of new facilities fostered growth in the cargo handled by Baltic seaports. The severance of traditional international trade ties, which occurred in 2022, created a situation where Russia's Northwest, for the first time, was a laggard rather than a front-runner in terms of economic performance. To a significant extent, this resulted from logistics restructuring and international companies exiting Russia.

This state of affairs inevitably brings the prospects of the Russian Baltic regions to the forefront of scholarly attention and calls for a close analysis of the territory's features and factors in its socio-economic development. This scope of interdisciplinary problems is the focus of this themed issue of the journal, which showcases articles by experts in geography, economics and political science.

The contributors to the issue concentrate intently on the state of affairs observed in 2022 and 2023 in Russia's Baltic regions. At the same time, many elements of the situation seen in the macro-region are determined by long-term development factors and global trends, which are discussed in some of the articles. This also holds for the opening article by A. G. Druzhinin. He examines the impact of the sea factor on Russia's spatial development under the influence of geopolitical circumstances. His article delves into the conditions and trends in the socio-economic performance of Russia's distinct macro-region — the Baltic area.

The section investigating the development of the country's Baltic regions in the new geopolitical landscape continues with the article by Y. M. Zverev. His work examines the economic and military security of the area and the restructuring of economic ties, including the curtailment of cross-border cooperation.

Further on, P. Ye. Smirnov examines the geopolitical consequences of Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO for Russia's standing in the Baltic region. The second section of the issue looks at the economy of Russia's Baltic regions, concentrating on two urgent problems: the adaptation of Russian territories to the severance of international economic ties and the territories' capacity for science and innovations.

The contribution by D. B. Kuvalin and Yu. A. Shcherbanin shows how and why Baltic seaports have adapted to the new environment, managing to carry on successful operations. The article co-authored by A. S. Mikhaylov, D. D. Maksimenko, M. R. Maksimenko and M. M. Filatov stresses the need for restructuring cooperation ties in research and academia, namely those that previously involved 'unfriendly' countries. The concluding

article is noteworthy as it offers a comparative assessment of innovation development in Northwest Russia: despite a certain commonality of trends and factors of socio-economic development observed across Russia's Baltic territories, each has specific features.

Owing to its exclave status, Kaliningrad occupies a distinctive position among Russia's Baltic regions. The challenges in economic development faced in 2022 were not the first instances of difficulties arising from strained relations with neighbouring EU countries. Well before the special military operation, Russian authorities grappled with issues related to Russian cargo transit through Lithuania. Notably, the Ust-Luga — Baltiysk train ferry service, which has seen substantial demand since 2022, was inaugurated as early as 2006.

Another section of the issue is devoted exclusively to the Kaliningrad region. The article by V. A. Kolosov and A. B. Sebentsov looks at how the functions of borders affect the restructuring of the region's economy, emphasising the role of the border as either a barrier or a stimulus for transformation. In her contribution, L.G. Gumenyuk focuses on the prospects of Kaliningrad's manufacturing industry.

The issue concludes with an article highlighting the significance of investigating Russian territories at a level of not only regions but also municipalities, with the latter revealing the contrasts between urban and rural areas. Moreover, this approach makes it possible to describe the formation of urban agglomerations and accurately assess the impact of a territory's geographical position and economic specialisation on its socio-economic development.

When analysing the geopolitical and geo-economic situation of Russia's Baltic regions, contributors to the issue emphasise the considerable degree of uncertainty regarding any future scenario and the obvious need to diversify national and regional economic ties irrespective of future developments. They also see it as crucial to foster interregional ties and cooperation whilst facilitating economic restructuring in pursuit of technological excellence.

The twenty months that have passed since February 2022 have demonstrated that the economy of Russia's Baltic regions and the nation as a whole can adapt to the new external environment. It seems that the studied regions will be able to continue to benefit from their traditional competitive advantages, including being home to the country's second most important urban agglomeration with its standing as a centre for science and technology and welcoming seaside location. Enjoying proximity to Central Russia and Greater Moscow — the economic nucleus of the nation, the St. Petersburg agglomeration still has the potential to emerge as a maritime hub. Pressing home these competitive advantages would be impossible without involvement from Russian businesses and public authorities, not to mention their effective cooperation. Although economic policy was not among the themes of the issue, all the articles presented in this instalment formulate recommendations on appropriate economic measures and describe further steps to adapt Russia's Baltic regions to the new geopolitical and geo-economic conditions whilst ensuring their socio-economic development.

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