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GEOPOLITICS OF SMALL STEPS: GERMAN POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS IN BELARUS IN 2014—2020

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The article analyses the activities of German political foundations in Belarus between 2014 and 2020, using the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation as case studies. The study is grounded in the framework of neoclassical realism, which conceptualises foundations as actors capable of autonomous action while operating within the broader contours of German foreign policy. The study examines their public events, analytical publications, and interactions with Belarusian society and state institutions in the period leading up to the political crisis of 2020. The Ebert Foundation focused primarily on socio-economic reforms, emphasising what it characterised as the 'obsolescence' of the Belarusian economic model, an argument that, in its view, created a basis for seeking Western support. The Adenauer Foundation, by contrast, concentrated on security issues. The study concludes that only some activities of the foundations were directed at promoting internal change within the Belarusian political regime. In practice, the geopolitical logic came to the fore, as both foundations sought to influence the regional order, most notably by promoting the notion of Belarusian 'neutrality', which could contribute to weakening Russia's military and political position in the Baltic region, including with regard to the Kaliningrad region. The research did not reveal sufficient public evidence to suggest that the foundations played a decisive role in the development of organisational structures within the Belarusian opposition during the 2020 crisis. Instead, their priorities often lay in building transnational expert networks aimed at advancing pro-Western geopolitical narratives in Belarus. These findings call into question the widespread assumption that German political foundations function primarily as 'democratisation' actors constrained by ideological templates, suggesting instead that they operate as flexible and pragmatic actors pursuing geopolitical objectives.

Keywords:
Belarus, humanitarian influence, German political foundations, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, geopolitics, neutrality

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In the context of the confrontation between Russia and NATO, developments in Belarus have had a significant impact on the geostrategic balance in the Baltic region. Following the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Minsk sought to capitalise on its role as a negotiation platform in order to enhance its international standing and diversify its external relations. At a time when the position of the European Union remained largely inert, with cooperation with Belarus having been frozen after the end of the previous cycle of rapprochement between Belarus and the West in 2010, German political foundations assumed a more visible role. The largest among them, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, emerged as key actors in a new phase of rapprochement between Minsk, the Federal Republic of Germany and the EU. This process ultimately culminated in 2020 in the most significant political crisis in Belarus's modern history.

The Belarusian authorities drew their own conclusions regarding the causes of the 2020 crisis. In particular, in 2021, President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko stated that evidence had been found of funding by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation for "independent trade unions and destructive non-governmental organisations," and called on officials to "record where society is being destabilised under the guise of good deeds".[1]

In 2021—2022, a 'cleansing' of Western influence infrastructure was carried out in the republic, yet Minsk's inclination towards establishing ties with the West has persisted. At the same time, there have been informal signals from Western actors indicating a possible abandonment of the policy of isolating Belarus and a return to a strategy of its 'engagement'.[2] Having lost official contacts in Minsk, German foundations actively work with the Belarusian opposition, supporting emigrant political centres. This work is oriented toward a longer term, aiming to exert influence through indirect methods, including promoting among target groups in Belarusian society narratives about Belarus as part of the 'European family', which allegedly has historically suffered from Russian oppression. These theses were reiterated in an article by the Director for Belarus at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Wallenstein, in 2023 [2].

Overall, events and publications from 2014 to 2020 constitute a substantial body of public material for analysing the operational practices of German foundations in Belarus, their interaction with local authorities, and their role in shaping and implementing the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany. This article seeks to address the issues identified by contributing to the scholarly discussion on the effectiveness of foundation activities, the degree of coordination among them, and the broader mechanisms of indirect political influence in

[1] Meeting with local officials on current socio-political issues, 2021, *President of the Republic of Belarus*, URL: https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-aktivom-mestnoy-vertikali-po-aktualnym-voprosam-obshchestvenno-politicheskoy-obstanovki (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] On contacts with the USA, see: Higgins, A., Dapkus, T. 2025, A Quick, Quiet Trip to Belarus Signals a Turn in U. S. Policy, *The New York Times*, 15.02.2025, URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/world/europe/belarus-us-prisoners-diplomacy.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

international relations. The central research question examines whether German party-affiliated political foundations function primarily as ideologically driven agents of 'democratisation' or whether their actions are guided predominantly by geopolitical considerations.

The empirical basis of the article consists of official publications by Belarusian and German governmental bodies, reports and analytical documents of the German Friedrich Ebert and Konrad Adenauer Foundations, as well as media publications and public statements by foundation representatives and official figures.

The analysis of the empirical material employed a range of methods. Event analysis was used to organise the foundations' activities in chronological sequence against the broader timeline of international political developments. Discourse analysis was applied to examine publications and speeches by representatives of the foundations, as well as by officials of the Republic of Belarus (RB). In addition, the comparative method was employed to identify the specific characteristics of the foundations' activities in Belarus.

Theory of foundation studies

The causes of the crisis in Belarus in 2020 have become the subject of research [3],[1] but the problem of specific actors influencing the political process in the republic in the years preceding the crisis, as well as the factors constituting them, has been insufficiently studied. At the same time, German political foundations in the context of FRG foreign policy have long been in the focus of scholarly attention, both from a historical-political perspective [4; 5] and in a comparative context [6].

A substantial body of literature has emerged examining the regional presence of political foundations as key instruments of Germany's 'soft power' in the Baltic States [7], as participants in 'democratisation' processes and promoters of German interests in Latin America [8], as well as in the Mediterranean region and Greece in the context of the Eurozone crisis [9], and in North Africa, particularly Tunisia during the Arab Spring [10]. Research on the Ukrainian case demonstrates that, over the long term, such foundations contribute to transformations of the political system by acting as agents of socialisation and as instruments for the diffusion of norms [11]. One of the few studies addressing the Belarusian case likewise identifies similarities between the approaches adopted by German political foundations and those employed by American non-governmental organisations in their activities in the Republic of Belarus [12].

There is considerable scholarly interest in examining the toolkit of political foundations as a means of advancing Germany's geo-economic interests, particularly in relation to the transition to renewable energy [13; 14]. A substantial body of literature also focuses on assessing the successes and shortcomings of foundations in "democratising" other countries [15; 16]. However, the geopolitical dimension of foundation activity remains insufficiently explored. A number

[1] Sutyrin, V. V. 2020, Perestroika po-belorusski: logika sistemnogo krizisa, *RSMI*, URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/perestroyka-po-belorusski-logika-sistemnogo-krizisa/ (accessed 17.09.2020).

of studies, including recent contributions, proceed from the conventional assumption that German foundations are unable to operate fully in accordance with a geopolitical logic, as they are ideologically constrained and required to adapt both to their 'parent' parties in Germany and to local partners [17].

The marginalisation of the geopolitical perspective is evident even in broader analyses of political foundations. They are commonly conceptualised as instruments of societal and state development [18], as constructors of hegemony [19], or as actors involved in knowledge production and discourse management [20], rather than as agents operating within explicitly geopolitical frameworks. Overcoming this gap raises the issue of studying foundations as an instrument for the political appropriation and control by non-military means, including within the context of discursive and interstate competition. Belarus, despite lacking access to the sea, possesses significant geostrategic importance for the Baltic region. Given its proximity to the Kaliningrad region and its extensive border with Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic States, it can be argued that the 'Belarusian balcony' seriously influences strategic calculations in the region. Economically, until 2020 Belarus was deeply integrated into trade with the Baltic Sea countries, relying on land transit through Poland and seaports in the Baltic states for the export of its products. At the same time, the evolution of the political process in the republic remained conservative, marked by continuity in its interaction with Russia and the preservation of Soviet legacies in politics and culture, particularly when compared with its closest western neighbours. The juxtaposition of 'democratising' and geopolitical overtones in the work of German foundations in Belarus appears epistemically unproductive. There is no compelling reason to reject the thesis that 'democratisation' within EU policy has entailed an expansion of influence, including geopolitical influence, on the part of its sponsors, a point aptly captured in conceptualisations of the European Union as an empire [21; 22]. The conventional tendency to view the EU and Germany primarily as value-based or civilian actors [23] does not provide sufficient grounds for excluding geopolitical motivations from analytical frameworks.

Under these conditions, it is appropriate, alongside the prevailing leftist interpretations of the activities of German foundations as liberal modernisers or imperialist constructors of hegemony (depending on the observer's position), to examine the foundations through the lens of realism within the framework of neoclassical realism [24; 25]. In this regard, the theoretical framework of the analysis looks as follows. States remain the primary actors in international relations in conditions close to anarchic. However, their actions are determined not only by systemic (objective) factors such as the balance of forces on the international stage, the size and resource base of armed forces, economic power, and military expenditures, but also by geopolitical factors related to spatial positioning and subjective factors involving elites' perception of threats, decision-making systems, and the distribution of political forces within the state.

The interpretation of national interests and the international political environment is shaped by policy-forming circles operating within specific political, socio-cultural, and informational–psychological contexts. External influence on this environment, which the author conceptualises as cultural-humanitarian influence [26], can indirectly reshape a state's domestic and foreign

policy trajectory. In this context, non-governmental organisations, particularly political foundations, are capable of exerting influence by cultivating and coordinating elite-to-elite contacts, promoting specific narratives, and facilitating the 'socialisation' of elites. Regarding the mechanisms of such influence, it is worth noting that epistemic communities and transnational expert networks play a crucial role in shaping political discourse, including the discourse of threats and the identity of decision-makers [27; 28]. German foundations often prefer to work precisely with this audience, paying less attention to mass groups, and Belarus is no exception.

At the same time, accepting the optics of neoclassical realism at the theoretical level, one must resolve a contradiction. In the literature, there are numerous attempts to oppose foundations and the state (not only the 'target' state as an object of influence but also the 'parent' state), derived from the idea that foundations operate in the field of 'civil society'. Such concepts were particularly popular in the previous two decades: foundations were cast in the roles of actors of 'global civil society' [29] or constructors of a 'global agora' [30].

However, empirical research indicates that German political foundations may diverge from the official state line at the tactical level while remaining strategically aligned with it [31]. Funded from the federal budget, these foundations play a systemic role in the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany, complementing official diplomatic efforts. This role is enabled precisely by their formally non-state and ostensibly 'civil' legal status. As a result, their tolerance for the risks associated with intervention in sensitive areas of foreign states is higher, allowing them to operate with greater flexibility and speed than state bureaucracies.

These institutions also cultivate specific cadres characterised by an intermediary and ideological mindset, who tend to perceive themselves as less constrained than formal officials. Consequently, political foundations can engage with diverse segments of political elites and opposition groups, operate in countries where official diplomatic presence is limited, and establish pressure networks as well as channels for information gathering.

The roots of this established system of operation trace back to the denazification of West Germany. Party-affiliated political foundations were created for political education with the aim of democratisation in the context of a "semi-sovereign state" [32]. Foreign operations by the foundations began as early as the 1950s and were linked to the anti-communist agenda in Latin America [33], later evolving into the 'democratisation' of the Iberian Peninsula.

In the aftermath of the demise of the USSR, German political foundations began to explore the post-Soviet space, initially concentrating on the Baltic region. Their subsequent expansion, however, was not confined to areas of historical German presence along the Baltic Sea. It rapidly extended inland to Ukraine and Belarus, territories that have traditionally functioned as borderlands between the German and Russian geopolitical spheres.

Despite this, researchers continued to view foundations primarily through the prism of 'democratisation', following the dominant intellectual fashion. Subject-specific studies on the geopolitical shift in the activities of German foundations have only recently begun to appear. For example, surveys of foundation

employees have documented their geopolitical motivations [17]. Nevertheless, an 'insider' view is insufficient, and the 'outsider' view based on the analysis of the foundations' main public theses and events is also essential.

Friedrich Ebert Foundation

In the first half of the 1990s, numerous German agencies and NGOs started their operation in Belarus: the DAAD, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Robert Bosch Foundation, the Carl Duisberg Centre, the Max Planck Institute, and others [34, p. 126]. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (hereinafter FES) has been active in Belarus since 1993. In 2011, amidst another crisis in Minsk-EU relations, the Belarusian side refused to renew the registration of the foundation's representative office in the republic. However, the foundation continued its work in Belarus from its office in Kyiv.

The main priorities declared by the FES in Belarus are democracy and the rule of law, workers' rights, trade unions, the Belarusian economic model, political dialogue with Germany and other European countries based on European values of democracy and human rights, and strengthening peace and security in the region.[1]

In October 2014, the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs had a meeting with a member of the FES board, discussing, among other things, issues of regional security.[2] That same year, the Foundation published a report authored by two experts from Belarus and Ukraine [35]. This kind of 'multilingualism' is typical of FES events and publications on Belarus. The selection of experts, the setting of the agenda for events, and the editing of publications remain under the control of the Foundation staff, enabling them to orchestrate the public discourse while avoiding accusations of propaganda or interference in internal affairs. The ideology lies in providing a platform for diverse viewpoints, thereby securing the Foundation's role as a moderator of discourse and the boundaries of what is permissible. Thus, the positions of both co-authors on sensitive issues, such as Crimea, were aligned and situated within broader Western political narratives. The report asserted that the "Russian factor has always weighed down normal political dialogue" between Ukraine and Belarus [35, p. 13]. Both authors discussed the topic of the Eastern Partnership as a platform for dialogue between Belarus and Ukraine. The idea of Ukraine as an "advocate for Belarus in relations with the West, and Belarus as a mediator in Ukrainian-Russian dialogue", was put forward [35, p. 38].

The FES in Belarus paid considerable attention to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), particularly the nuances of its perception and concerns within Belarusian policy-forming circles. In 2015, the Foundation published a report

[1] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Belarus, 2025, URL: https://belarus.fes.de/ru/index.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] Meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, U. Makey, and the former Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, former Prime Minister of the federal state of Brandenburg, M. Platzeck Source, 2024, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 03.10.2024, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/be/press/news_mfa/ad0c1907d1218cee.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

on internal contradictions within the Union [36]. The authors noted divergences between the Russian view of the EAEU's future as a supposed 'geopolitical project' and the views of Belarus and Kazakhstan, focused on extracting concrete economic benefits. In the section written by the Belarusian co-author, it was claimed that Russian ideas of political integration are perceived in Belarus and Kazakhstan as a "direct threat to national sovereignty," but in the future, "the Kremlin will again turn to the idea of urgent political integration in the EAEU" [36, p. 16—17]. Furthermore, in the event of refusal to pursue further integration, the author forecast "the danger of destabilisation of Belarus due to pressure from Russia, as in Ukraine" [Ibid.].

In cooperation with the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, the FES supported the holding of an international seminar "The Ukrainian Crisis — a Challenge to the European Security System" at the Belarusian State University in March 2015. During the event, Belarusian experts voiced theses that the negotiation platform in Minsk was a merit of Belarusian diplomacy, and that the neutral position of Belarus towards East and West was beneficial.[1]

On 2 February 2016, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, held a meeting with the head of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's regional office in Kyiv, Stefan Meuser, and the Ambassador of Germany to Belarus, Peter Dettmar.[2] In the same month, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation published a report [37], co-authored by Meuser, which effectively outlined a programme for the Foundation's activities in the Belarusian direction up to the 2020 crisis. The report noted that Belarusian society displayed "modest enthusiasm for European experiments with an uncertain outcome". At the same time, it argued that regional dynamics and Minsk's economic interests rendered an EU "policy of small steps" both feasible and advisable. Rather than advocating maximalist strategies centred on regime change, the report proposed the construction of a "stable infrastructure of dialogue with Belarus", involving active engagement with civil society. This engagement was envisaged across specific issue areas, including the economy, the rule of law, social guarantees, education, and dialogue between the EU and the EAEU.

The analysis included several insightful observations, for instance, that "the search for material benefit from international cooperation" is the central idea of Belarusian foreign policy. The report contained a warning against overly ambitious EU policy towards Belarus, which would "awaken unfulfillable hopes in the progressive part of Belarusian society" (clearly referring to Belarusian Euro-integration, which Germany did not support, unlike Polish intentions within the Eastern Partnership [38]). The authors, in a spirit of pragmatism bordering on cynicism, characteristic more of private political analysis, stated that Belarus "lacks the critical mass and internal pressure for a revolutionary situation to

[1] The Ukrainian crisis as a threat to the national security of the Republic of Belarus, 2015, *RISS*, 20.03.2015, URL: https://www.riss.ru/analitica/ukrainskiy-krizis-kak-ugroza-natsionalnoy-bezopasnosti-respubliki-belarus/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] Meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Makei with S. Meuser and P. Dettmar, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 02.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/be/press/news_mfa/b3b140e62c94398b.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

arise" [37, p. 5]. Therefore, it was proposed to adopt a more moderate approach, creating conditions that increase the likelihood of 'positive' social and economic transformations towards democratisation.

A task was formulated to convince Minsk that the West is not an enemy, and that representatives of civil society are not agents of subversive activity, but rather partners of the state [37, p. 6].[1] More specifically, the report proposed establishing dialogue with selected segments of the Belarusian state apparatus around the issue of economic modernisation, on the grounds that the Belarusian economic model was allegedly "worn out". The authors recommended supporting dialogue between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union, highlighting the potential of such a framework to constrain Russia's capacity for unilateral action. It was further suggested that facilitating a shift in dialogue between Minsk and Moscow towards an EU—EAEU format could create opportunities to strengthen Minsk's position in areas where its interests converge with those of the EU and the Federal Republic of Germany.

At the same time, from 2015 to 2020, the FES engaged experts and supported events organised by the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, one of its main contractors in Belarus, known for radical anti-Russian outbursts. Reports prepared under the umbrella of the centre and presented in Minsk with the FES support were aimed at propagating the idea of an alleged 'Russian military threat' to Belarus, as well as discrediting Eurasian integration as disadvantageous and dangerous from Minsk's perspective.[2]

In 2017, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation published a report by the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies on economic reforms in Belarus, which argued that "recession and currency shocks in the Russian economy and their consequences for Belarus have highlighted the need to diversify trade and economic ties". The report was heavily framed around references to alleged pressure from Russia, which was said to compel Minsk to adopt protective measures. These measures were defined primarily in terms of economic liberalisation and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, objectives that, according to the authors, could not be achieved without Western financial and technical assistance [39, p. 4].

In April 2017, the FES, together with another Belarusian partner, the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, held an international conference marking the 25th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Belarus and Germany. The German party emphasised Belarus's belonging to Europe and its potential to become a "bridge for interaction between the EAEU

[1] Given that a significant portion of organisations in the Belarusian civil society either received regular grants from Western foundations or operated in Belarus from the territories of the Baltic states, Poland, and the Czech Republic, such a task meant creating new entry points for foreign interests and narratives into the Belarusian state apparatus.

[2] Presentation of the report "Belarus in the EAEU: One Year Later," 2016, *Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies*, 21.03.2016, URL: https://www.forstrategy.org/ru/events/20160321 (accessed 20.05.2025); Presentation of the reports "EU and the East in 2030" and "The New Geopolitical Strategy of Russia," 2015, Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, 24.11.2015, URL: https://www.forstrategy.org/ru/events/20151124 (accessed 20.05.2025).

and Germany".[1] In October, the Foundation, jointly with the Centre, organised a conference "The Eurasian Economic Union: Experience and Prospects of Regional Integration," where issues of EU-EAEU cooperation were again discussed.[2]

Meetings between Belarusian diplomats and representatives of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation became a de facto integral component of interministerial contacts and interparliamentary dialogue between Belarus and Germany. In February 2017, a working visit to Germany by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko, took place within the framework of Belarusian–German interministerial consultations. During the visit, a meeting was held with Matthias Platzeck, a member of the FES Executive Board. Both parties considered possibilities for expanding Belarus's interaction with the Foundation, including in the economic and social spheres.[3]

In March 2018, a conference "Crisis of the European Security System and the Role of the OSCE" was held at the Austrian National Defence Academy, organised by the Academy and several Austrian analytical centres with the support of the FES. The Ambassador of Belarus to Austria, Alena Kupchina, was one of the main speakers.[4] In September 2018, the programme of a visit to Berlin by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko, conducted within the framework of Belarusian–German interministerial consultations, once again included a meeting with the Chairman of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Kurt Beck.[5]

In August 2019, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, received members of a parliamentary delegation from Germany during their visit to Belarus, organised by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation.[6] During the meeting, the parties discussed the state and prospects for the development of Belarusian-German cooperation, including its parliamentary dimension, the topic

[1] Belarus is a promising platform for negotiations of a new format for pan-European cooperation — Lindner, 2017, *BELTA*, 24.04.2017, URL: https://belta.by/politics/view/belarus-javljaetsja-perspektivnoj-ploschadkoj-dlja-peregovorov-novogo-formata-obscheevropejskogo-244254-2017/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] Prospects for the development of Eurasian integration discussed at an international conference in Minsk, 2017, *BELTA*, 24.10.2017, URL: https://belta.by/politics/view/perspektivy-razvitija-evrazijskoj-integratsii-rassmotreny-na-mezhdunarodnoj-konferentsii-v-minske-272872-2017/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[3] On the visit of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus O. Kravchenko to Germany, 2017, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 24.02.2017, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/b8746b9711031d6a.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[4] On the participation of Ambassador of Belarus Alena Kupchina in the discussion at the conference "Crisis of the European Security System and the Role of the OSCE", 2018, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 07.03.2018, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/em_news/a686b3c245e07ef15.html (accessed 20.05.2025)

[5] On the visit of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus O. Kravchenko to Germany, 2018, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 07.03.2018, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e3d5a86c17a51153.html (accessed 20.05.2025).]

[6] On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei with members of the German parliamentary delegation, 2019, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 20.08.2019, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e9b74fe6bb0ae3fd.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

of Belarus-EU interaction, and current regional agenda items. In October 2019, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, in cooperation with the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, organised a conference "The Eurasian Economic Union in the Context of Regional Integration Processes: New Challenges and Opportunities." A representative of the Foundation, Mikhail Litvin, emphasised the importance of this annual platform for discussing issues related to Eurasian integration, including the challenges facing the EAEU.[1]

Thus, the main publicly visible activities of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Belarus were largely concentrated in the expert domain and aimed at shaping the agenda of Belarus's participation in Russia-led integration initiatives, while simultaneously promoting narratives of economic and even military 'threats' emanating from Russia. This focus did not preclude engagement with the Belarusian authorities; on the contrary, such contacts became systematic and regular during the period under review. While the thematic orientation of the foundation's core events formally corresponded to its profile and centred on socio-economic issues, a geopolitical subtext concerning relations with Moscow and Russia's role in the region was consistently present and explicitly emphasised.

Konrad Adenauer Foundation

The officially declared objectives of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Belarus were to strengthen relations with Germany and the European Union and to facilitate Belarus's engagement with the broader European community. The Foundation disseminated information among target groups within Belarusian society and supplied analytical materials to European decision-making centres. Its activities were directed at parliamentarians, government officials, entrepreneurs, the expert community, and youth.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (hereinafter KAS) unsuccessfully attempted to register its representative office in Belarus in 2004[2], but, unlike the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, did not achieve even temporary success. Contacts between Belarusian officials and the KAS intensified in February 2016, one week before the EU announced on February 15 the lifting of a significant part of sanctions against Belarus. On 8 February, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, received the head of the Vilnius-based regional office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Volker Zender.[3] On 11 February, speaking at a

[1] Belarus, as chair in the EAEU, will strive to create a full-fledged economic union — MFA, 2019, *BELTA*, 17.10.2019, URL: https://belta.by/economics/view/belarus-kak-predsedatel-v-eaes-budet-dobivatsja-sozdanija-polnoformatnogo-ekonomicheskogo-sojuza-mid-366038-2019/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] Konrad Adenauer Foundation denies Minsk's accusations, 2005, *DW* (included in the Register of Foreign Mass Media Performing Functions of a Foreign Agent by the Ministry of Justice), 24.02.2005, URL: https://www.dw.com/ru/a-1500190 (accessed 20.05.2025).]

[3] On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Vladimir Makei with the head of the regional representation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/c6cf72b8035ab5ed.html (accessed 20.05.2025).]

conference in Minsk, Zender characterised Belarus as a "neutral territory, skilled at communicating with both the West and the East," and encouraged the Belarusian authorities to act as a "moderator of negotiations" on Ukraine. According to his remarks, this role could position Minsk as a "new Vienna, Geneva, or Helsinki".[1] The conference, supported by the KAS and the Minsk Dialogue initiative, was attended by Vladimir Makei, and the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office's Special Representative in the Trilateral Contact Group for the implementation of the peace plan in eastern Ukraine, Martin Sajdik.[2] Thus, the initiative, backed by the KAS, ensured a high level from the outset, indicating a shared agenda between the German and Belarusian sides.

The arguments and metaphors articulated in Volker Zender's speech effectively formed the basis of the argumentation strategy subsequently pursued by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) in Belarus over the following five years. During this period, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation supported several major events organised within the Minsk Dialogue expert platform, thereby contributing to the promotion of the concept of Belarusian 'neutrality'. The KAS leadership correctly assumed that the Belarusian authorities were particularly receptive to this notion of "neutral positioning". Indeed, head of Belarusian diplomacy, Vladimir Makei, repeatedly expressed his aspiration to transform Belarus into the "Switzerland of Eastern Europe".[3]

Security issues became the starting point and leitmotif of the KAS's most noticeable activities in Belarus. From 2015 to 2018, in cooperation with NATO's Public Diplomacy Division and the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, the Foundation supported annual international seminars "International Security and NATO".[4]

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation continued its close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus. On 9 March 2016, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, held a meeting in Minsk with the Chairman of the Foundation, Hans-Gert Pöttering.[5] In April of the same year,

[1] Belarus could become a moderator of the dialogue on Ukraine—German expert, 2016, *BELTA*, 11.02.2016, URL: https://belta.by/politics/view/belarus-mogla-by-stat-moderatorom-dialoga-po-ukraine-nemetskij-ekspert-181188-2016/ (accessed 20.05.2025).]

[2] On the participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei in the conference "Minsk Agreements One Year Later: Achievements, Challenges, Lessons," 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/print/press/news_mfa/bae3960df32eb1ca.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[3] Makei dreams of seeing Belarus as the Switzerland of Eastern Europe, 2019, *Sputnik*, 13.11.2019, URL: https://sputnik.by/20191113/Makey-mechtaet-videt-Belarus-Shveytsariey-Vostochnoy-Evropy-1043225111.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[4] NATO and Belarus conduct dialogue and exchange views on security issues, 2018, *BELTA*, 13.12.2018, URL: https://belta.by/politics/view/nato-i-belarus-vedut-dialog-i-obmenivajutsja-videniem-problem-bezopasnosti-329218-2018/ (accessed 20.05.2025)

[5] On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, with the Chairman of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e12821b40e597043.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

the Foundation organised a working visit to Brussels of a Belarusian delegation of experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat of the Security Council, the Ministry of Defence, and Belarusian State University.[1] In September, with KAS support, Belarusian officials and representatives of non-governmental organisations visited German state institutions.[2]

The Foundation also facilitated visits by delegations from the youth wings of German political parties to Belarus, established contacts between the Young Union of Germany and the Belarusian Republican Youth Union,[3] and actively promoted bilateral business dialogue[4].

In its publications on Belarus, the KAS continued to give priority attention to Russia. In February 2017, an analytical report by the Foundation noted that Moscow allegedly hinders Minsk's plans to become a hub between West and East, and that Minsk is losing trust in Moscow [40]. It was noted that Minsk's gestures towards the West do not receive adequate response, and that liberal Belarusian elite groups need to attract investment to the country to gain arguments in favour of a pro-Western course. Recommendations included intensifying training programs for Belarusian managers, strengthening Belarus's role as a venue for negotiations on regional conflicts, and activating high-level German-Belarusian relations. Speaking at a foundation conference on 7 September 2017, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko, called for moving beyond bloc-based thinking and proposed transforming Belarus's western border into a "meeting line between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union".[5]

Soon thereafter, the level of political contacts began to increase. In November 2017, Minsk was visited for the first time since 2010 by the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sigmar Gabriel, who participated in the fifteenth Minsk Forum

[1] Regional and military-political security discussed with Belarusian experts in Brussels, 2016, *BELTA*, 22.04.2016, URL: https://belta.by/society/view/regionalnaja-i-voenno-politicheskaja-bezopasnost-obsuzhdalas-s-belorusskimi-ekspertami-v-brjussele-190672-2016/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] Technology transfer is promising as a direction for cooperation between Belarus and Saxony — Landtag member, *BELTA*, 19.09.2016. URL: https://belta.by/politics/view/transfer-tehnologij-perspektiven-v-kachestve-napravlenija-sotrudnichestva-belarusi-i-saksonii-chlen-210939-2016/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[3] Ibid.; Youth organizations of Belarus and Germany will implement a number of joint projects in the near future, *BELTA*, 19.02.2017, URL: https://belta.by/society/view/molodezhnye-organizatsii-belarusi-i-germanii-v-blizhajshee-vremja-realizujut-rjad-sovmestnyh-proektov-233862-2017/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[4] Belarus considers Germany one of its most important economic partners — Ambassador, 2017, *BELTA*, 27.10.2017, URL: https://belta.by/economics/view/belarus-rassmatrivaet-germaniju-kak-odnogo-iz-vazhnejshih-ekonomicheskih-partnerov-posol-273525-2017/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[5] Belarus sees its western border as the meeting line of the EAEU and the EU — Kravchenko, 2017, *BELTA*, 07.09.2017, URL: https://belta.by/politics/view/belarus-vidit-svoju-zapadnuju-granitsu-liniej-vstrechi-eaes-i-es-kravchenko-265351-2017/ (accessed 20.05.2025).]

entitled "Belarus, Germany and the EU: 'Eastern Partnership', Civil Society and Economic Relations." The event was organised with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

In the Foundation's subsequent report, published in December 2017, a positive shift in the attitude of the European Union towards Belarus was noted, reflected in heightened attention to the country. The report reiterated calls for expanding high-level contacts and enhancing the EU's visibility within Belarusian society [41]. It also highlighted progress in incorporating opposition groups through non-governmental organisations within the framework of the EU–Belarus Coordination Group, a development attributed largely to the absence of direct communication channels between the European Union and Belarus. The signing of the Eastern Partnership summit declaration by Minsk in 2017 was assessed favourably, with particular emphasis placed on the statement by the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs that Belarus is "European both geographically and politically".[1]

The KAS promoted the themes of Belarusian neutrality, the Eastern Partnership, and frozen conflicts, supporting events by the Minsk Dialogue expert initiative.[2] The KAS also funded expert events in Belarus with the participation of NATO representatives.[3]

In May 2018, a representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Volker Zender, appeared on the national television channel Belarus-1, where he argued that the Eastern Partnership was not directed against Russia but was intended to improve living standards in Belarus. The interview was conducted in the context of the forum "Eastern Europe: In Search of Security for All," organised with KAS support and attended by the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko. Thus, within three years, the initiative reached the presidential level. According to official information, approximately 350 experts participated in the Forum in 2018, while in 2019 both the scale of the event and its media coverage expanded, with the organisers reporting participation by more than 500 experts.

A report published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in June 2018 claimed that the Russian side allegedly demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for Minsk's initiative to launch a new European agreement, referred to as "Helsinki-2" [42]. The report recommended strengthening Western military and political engagement with Belarus to prevent the potential use of Belarusian territory by Russian forces for the defence of Kaliningrad. In this context, the authors warned that Belarus could otherwise "lose its sovereignty".

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[1] Makei: Soon the president's participation in EU-related events will be a routine matter, 2017, *Radio Svaboda*, 08.12.2017, URL: https://www.svaboda.org/a/28905463.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] The future of the Eastern Partnership initiative to be discussed in Minsk by international experts on September 7, 2017, *BELTA*, 06.09.2017, URL: https://belta.by/society/view/buduschee-initsiativy-vostochnoe-partnerstvo-obsudjat-v-minske-mezhdunarodnye-eksperty-7-sentjabrja-265169-2017/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[3] Belarus advocates resolving disputed issues solely through negotiations, 2018, *BELTA*, 13.12.2018, URL: https://belta.by/politics/view/belarus-vystupaet-za-uregulirovanie-spornyh-voprosov-tolko-putem-peregovorov-329169-2018/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

The report further expressed concern that actors within the Belarusian state apparatus advocating closer relations with the West did not receive sufficient support from the European Union. It also highlighted the lack of personal contacts that could be mobilised in the event of a regional crisis. To address these shortcomings, the authors proposed expanding dialogue programmes with Belarus on security-related issues and establishing a NATO Information Office in the country. At the same time, it was explicitly emphasised that such initiatives should be framed under the banner of reducing regional tensions in order to avoid provoking concern on the part of Russia.

Numerous publications supporting KAS initiatives developed this argumentation, adapting it for the Belarusian audience. Concepts such as "neutral positioning" or "situational neutrality" were actively introduced into scientific and expert discourse [43]. Discussions on neutrality contributed to blurring the perception of Belarus's role as a military-political ally of Russia with binding obligations, allowing the republic to be incorporated into a European context.

From the earliest stages of intensified activity in Belarus after 2016, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation emerged as a key organiser of large-scale expert and political forums involving high-level political figures. In contrast to the thematic focus of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation devoted comparatively little public attention to Belarus's socio-economic conditions, instead placing explicit emphasis on geopolitical considerations, including issues related to the Kaliningrad region. While the Friedrich Ebert Foundation periodically addressed questions of "democratisation" and economic reform in Belarus in its reports and events, gradually linking domestic issues to the broader regional geopolitical configuration, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation tended to structure its activities along a different axis. It typically proceeded from questions of regional security and geopolitics, situating Belarus within this wider strategic context. Despite these differences in emphasis and framing, both foundations displayed a consistent convergence in promoting the notion of Belarus's "neutralisation", understood as the weakening of its alliance commitments to Moscow.

Alignment of priorities between the Belarusian authorities and the foundations

The German Foreign Ministry continued to promote the opening of foundation offices on Belarusian territory until the next crisis in relations in 2020.[1] Despite active interaction with the foundations after 2014, the Belarusian authorities did not satisfy this request.[2] Without a bureau on Belarusian territory, the foundations conducted events jointly with Belarusian partner organisations, which facilitated control and limited the foundations' freedom of action within the country. The

[1] Korovenkova, T. 2019, Ambassador Manfred Hütterer: Germany is interested in a strong and independent Belarus, *BelaPAN*, 26.09.2019, URL: https://minsk.diplo.de/resource/blob/2501618/54fc2731088e57c46994fe88caf2fbd0/interview-belapan-pdf-data.pdf (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] There are no agreements on opening the Adenauer Foundation in Belarus, 2016, *Sputnik Belarus*, 11.02.2016, URL: https://sputnik.by/20160211/1020085109.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

head of the KAS department for Belarus, Volker Zender, worked de jure from the Vilnius office but de facto was often present in Belarus, actively contacting the expert community and top-level officials.[1]

Belarusian authorities actively engaged in dialogue with the foundations, participating in their initiatives to expand ties in the Western direction. The interests of the authorities partially coincided with those of the foundations, since both parties wanted to maintain and develop the negotiation platform in Minsk. For the Belarusian authorities, this provided a positive agenda in contacts with the EU and opportunities for a "multi-vector" policy.

In pursuing the task of strengthening contacts with Western partners, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus had a limited set of official instruments at its disposal, to which Western authorities were not always able to respond with sufficient flexibility. In this context, political foundations assumed their familiar role as intermediaries and facilitators of new connections for local elites. In its official review of activities for 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus noted a "noticeable increase in interest" in the country on the part of external experts, who took part in events organised within the non-governmental expert and discussion platform Minsk Dialogue,[2] which received support from German foundations.

In the 2018 review, the MFA of Belarus reported that major international events, including the Minsk Dialogue Forum "Eastern Europe: In Search of Security for All," provided "expert content for Belarus's idea of non-confrontational cooperation and organising broad-format international dialogue" in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian contexts.[3] In October 2019, the Head of the Department for Eurasian Integration at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Andrei Aleksandrovich, stated at a conference organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation that there was a need to establish dialogue between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Commission. He suggested that "we are approaching this dialogue, possibly during Belarus's presidency in the EAEU, given the warming of relations along the Belarus–EU line".[4] Thus, Minsk's ambitions to act as a mediator in the Western direction for EAEU countries, including Russia, were declared.

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[1] On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei with the head of the regional representation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/c6cf72b8035ab5ed.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] Review of the Results of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017, 2018, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/publication/reports/a8a5169b6e487b3b.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[3] Review of the Results of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018, 2019, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/publication/reports/b7fe6b330b96c9b7.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[4] Belarus, as chair in the EAEU, will strive to create a full-fledged economic union — MFA, 2019, *BELTA*, 17.10.2019, URL: https://belta.by/economics/view/belarus-kak-predsedatel-v-eaes-budet-dobivatsja-sozdanija-polnoformatnogo-ekonomicheskogo-sojuza-mid-366038-2019/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus viewed joint initiatives with political foundations as one of the key instruments of its foreign policy positioning. In its 2019 review, the second major expert forum organised within the Minsk Dialogue platform, entitled "European Security: Stepping Back from the Brink" and held with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, was described as a "landmark event". According to the review, the forum confirmed Minsk's status as a "significant regional platform for inclusive dialogue involving all interested parties".[1] Over the course of four years of intensified activity, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation succeeded in raising the status of its events in the republic to the presidential level. At the same time, in 2019, Alexander Lukashenko stated that the opposition "lives on foreign grants", explicitly referring to the Ebert and Adenauer foundations, as well as to American foundations.[2]

From the perspective of the Belarusian authorities, the foundations remained an instrument that was partly useful but also potentially dangerous. Despite the lack of a permanent 'residence' in Belarus, the foundations operated according to the familiar scheme for contacts with "authoritarian governments"[3] offering the promise of partial legitimacy bonuses and expanded contacts with German and European elites in exchange for access to civil society and local elites, and the promotion of their own agenda and narratives. However, the main rhetoric of the German foundations was concentrated on the foreign policy track, where the factor of Russia and the 'Russian threat' served as a constant refrain. Here, a compromise emerged: the foundations tried to avoid public discussion of domestic Belarusian topics to refrain from criticising the local authorities, but at the same time actively promoted criticism of Russia and the Eurasian integration project among the Belarusian audience.

Belarusian specialised agencies were under pressure to demonstrate tangible achievements in the Western direction and therefore required receptive and institutionally flexible counterparts, a role that political foundations effectively assumed. At the same time, attempts at rapprochement with the West increased the risks for Minsk of weakening its ties with Russia. Arguments in favour of diversifying external relations, rather than reducing these risks, in practice led to their amplification. The pursuit of a policy of "neutral positioning" raised questions about Belarus's predictability as an ally of Russia, which remains Minsk's primary security guarantor as well as its leading trade and economic partner.

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[1] Review of the Results of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019, 2020, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belaru*s, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/publication/reports/d850d69242f0c67a.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

[2] Lukashenko: I would like to see the opposition in parliament, but only 3.5 % voted for them, 2019, *BELTA*, 03.12.2019, URL: https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ja-by-hotel-videt-oppozitsiju-v-parlamente-no-za-nih-progolosovalo-tolko-35-371544-2019/ (accessed 20.05.2025).

[3] See, for example, the widely researched case of foundation intervention in Tunisia in the 1990s and 2000s, within the framework of local elites' bet on "authoritarian upgrading" through expanded ties with the West: [44].

With regard to the foundations' line of behaviour, the "policy of small steps" they advocated initially appeared to have failed. After 2020, Germany and the European Union suspended official contacts with Belarus, refused to recognise the election results, and imposed sanctions [45]. Much of the foundations' influence infrastructure in Belarus was dismantled, and a significant number of activists left the country. In both the EU and Germany, a policy of bloc confrontation towards Belarus came to dominate, leaving little room for nuance. Nevertheless, owing to their institutional flexibility and formally non-state status, the foundations were able to secure broad access to Belarusian policy-forming circles during the period from 2014 to 2020.

The German foundations did not cause the mass protests of 2020, but they contributed to the public promotion of narratives and network structures that helped create the preconditions for the political crisis.[1] By 2020, relations between Belarus and Russia had reached their lowest point in decades, against the backdrop of Minsk's 'multi-vector' policy, which the foundations actively encouraged.

Minsk's foreign policy manoeuvring contributed to the disorientation of the regime's supporters within the country. In this sense, the policy of small steps in building influence infrastructure in Belarus yielded results, albeit insufficient for regime change in 2020, unlike the Ukrainian case.

Nevertheless, the possibility of civil confrontation arising in the country was quite clear, prompting the Belarusian authorities to turn to Russia under alliance agreements and receive comprehensive support for normalisation. Of course, it is impossible to determine the exact extent of the foundations' contribution to creating the preconditions for mass protests in Belarus, as they were only part of a diverse front of non-governmental organisations in the country. However, the coverage of foundation events in state media and, most importantly, the level of political participation from Belarus ensured their significant, if not leading, role among foreign actors in the socio-political sphere of Belarus.

The foundations proved to be effective instruments in a context where local authorities were interested in improving their image in the West and consented to foundation access to Belarus, even in the absence of officially registered offices in the country. This process was reciprocal. The foundations successfully capitalised on the interests and self-perceptions of segments of the Belarusian policy-forming elite. At the same time, their discourse remained aligned with the official position of Germany, which did not envisage the prospect of Belarus joining the European Union.

Under these conditions, the foundations lacked strong levers for direct influence over local elites and therefore sought to pursue their objectives through the construction of transnational networks of influence. A form of functional division of labour emerged between the foundations. Rather than competing, they complemented one another as auxiliary actors in the implementation of Berlin's foreign policy interests. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation concentrated

[1] Indirect confirmation of this is the rapid 'cleansing' of the foundations' political infrastructure in Belarus.

primarily on security issues and relations with the West, while the Friedrich Ebert Foundation focused on socio-economic reforms and relations with the Eurasian Economic Union.

The public discourses of the foundations in Belarus, as revealed through analysis of their events, statements, and analytical publications, were grounded in two distinct Western European narrative frameworks. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation justified its activities through a 'civilisational' narrative articulated in the language of democratisation and human rights, framing internal transformation in Belarus as being in the interests of Germany and the European Union. By contrast, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation appealed to a narrative of "protecting Europe", articulated in the language of European security and aimed at weakening the Belarus—Russia defence relationship through Minsk's policy of "neutral positioning".

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation actively cultivated a second-track diplomacy platform in Minsk, while the Friedrich Ebert Foundation supported these efforts and embedded itself in interministerial contacts between Belarus and Germany. The foundations established a network of local partners in Belarus, with some degree of overlap among them. The independent agency of the foundations was expressed not through deviation from the official course of the Federal Republic of Germany, but rather through their capacity to act several steps ahead of formal diplomacy, effectively functioning as lobbyists for the expansion of German and broader European presence in Belarus.

A number of the foundations' initiatives, primarily those of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, were formally oriented towards the internal transformation of the Belarusian political system. In practice, however, the geopolitical logic underpinning the foundations' activities quickly came to the forefront. This logic was driven by the objective of influencing the regional order through the weakening of military and political ties between Minsk and Moscow, thereby undermining Russia's position in the Baltic region. As a result, internal networks of influence within Belarus frequently became secondary, giving way to transnational networks designed to promote pro-Western narratives and specific threat perceptions among Belarusian policy-forming circles.

This conclusion calls into question the widespread view of German foundations as 'democratisation' actors burdened with ideological templates [15]. Alongside 'background' work (organising exchanges, visits, conferences, internships, educational and scholarship programmes), the foundations conducted targeted political work in the interests of Germany, reflected in their discursive strategy — a system of theses and arguments of predominantly geopolitical nature, which the foundations used to lobby their positions both in Belarus and in Germany.

As the analysis of events and publications showed, the geopolitical discourse on Minsk's 'neutrality' became the main justification for the involvement of the examined German foundations in Belarusian affairs and for attracting attention to their initiatives in the EU and Germany. The idea of democratising Belarus effectively became auxiliary to the work of changing the regional order, in which a "neutral Belarus" would weaken Russian influence in the region, particularly concerning the security of the Kaliningrad region.

An explanation for this strategy can be found in spatial and resource-related factors. The proximity of Russia and the historical and geopolitical significance of the Kaliningrad region, combined with the limited availability of conventional military capabilities on the part of Germany, contributed to the fact that the foundations pursued not so much 'democratisation' as the 'neutralisation' of Belarus, using transnational expert networks as a geopolitical instrument. Although the foundations publicly framed their activities in terms of broad societal goals such as democratisation and human rights, in practice they acted, and analytically justified their actions, in accordance with a geopolitical logic of securitisation.

This apparent paradox is particularly revealing in light of the rapid, by historical standards, reassessment of the foreign policies of Germany and the European Union in the period from 2022 to 2024, namely the curtailment of democratisation and green economy agendas in favour of geopolitics and militarisation. The geopolitical 'core' of the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany was already clearly discernible before 2022, albeit realised through different instruments and policy mechanisms.

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THE BALTIC REGION AS A ‘GREY ZONE’: BALANCING ON THE BRINK OF ARMED CONFLICT

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The article analyses the Baltic region as an arena of intensified Russia—West confrontation, applying the ‘grey zone’ concept understood as a domain where traditional military threats intersect with hybrid forms of influence. The authors examine the factors contributing to the escalation of tension in the region, including militarisation, economic sanctions, information pressure, and the use of proxy instruments. Particular attention is given to the geographical and legal conditions shaping strategic instability, as well as to historical precedents, most notably World War II, which, in the authors’ view, helps contextualise contemporary risks. The article outlines the methods used by NATO and the Baltic States in constructing the ‘grey zone’, including the expansion of military presence, the manipulation of legal frameworks, and the deployment of non-military instruments of pressure. The authors conclude that the Baltic region is approaching the threshold of open conflict, and Western policies are interpreted as efforts to constrain Russian influence without resorting to direct military engagement. The study employs comparative analysis, qualitative content analysis of key sources, and event analysis of the actions of EU and NATO member states to assess perceived threats and the dynamics of regional instability.

Keywords:
Baltic region, ‘grey zone’, armed conflict, NATO, EU, confrontation

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Introduction

In recent years, the Baltic region has become a focal point of escalating geopolitical tension in relations between Russia and Western countries. This tension is driven by a combination of geographical and geopolitical factors, as well as by the efforts of NATO and its member states in the region — primarily the Baltic States and Poland, as well as Sweden and Finland — to create what is often described as a 'zone of instability and uncertainty' for Russia in the Baltic area. Following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the level of militarisation in the Baltic region increased significantly, which in turn heightened security concerns [1; 5].

According to Mearsheimer, the West seeks to render relations between the parties involved in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Russia and the Western coalition supporting Ukraine, 'toxic', thereby preventing any possibility of bringing the armed confrontation to an end. He also identifies several potential points of tension in Eastern Europe, including the Baltic States, Belarus, Kaliningrad, Moldova, and the Black Sea region, any of which could 'explode before our eyes'. Three of these potential flashpoints highlighted by Mearsheimer — the Baltic States, Kaliningrad, and Belarus — are located within the wider Baltic region.

The European Union (EU), which includes all foreign states in the Baltic region, is pursuing an aggressive sanctions policy against Russia, calling for the complete isolation of the Russian economy and the introduction of secondary sanctions against Russia's partner states. Since 2024, the EU has stepped up various instruments to build the capacity of the European military-industrial complex, create an integrated air and missile defence system, and strengthen coordination in the field of defence [2; 21]. Currently, NATO countries have intensified the build-up of their military presence and the development of military infrastructure in the region, increased the intensity and scale of military exercises, and changed their nature to a clearly aggressive one.

After February 24, 2024, the US, NATO, and the EU, as well as some Baltic states, changed their rhetoric and actions to openly confrontational ones, including declaring their readiness to deploy nuclear weapons on their territory.[1] Moreover,

[1] Hallituksen esitys Nato-jäsenyydestä: ei rajoituksia ydinaseille Suomessa, 2022, *Lauri Nurmi, Iltalehti*, 26.10.2022, URL: https://www.iltalehti.fi/politiikka/a/79b81501-689d-4ad8-bf69-c6aabab71985 (accessed 07.04.2025) ; DCA-sopimus julki: Nämä 15 aluetta Suomi avaa Yhdysvaltain joukoille — puolustusministeri: "Kriisitilanteissa voidaan ryhtyä tositoimiin", 2023, *Yle*, 14 Decembre, URL: https://yle.fi/a/74-20065054 (accessed 07.04.2025) ; Zapytaliśmy Andrzeja Dudę, czy Polskę czeka wojna? Wprost powiedział, co myśli o słowach Tuska, 2024, *Fakt*, 22 kwietnia, URL: https://www.fakt.pl/polityka/amerykanie-pytali-andrzej-dude-o-nuclear-sharing-zglosilem-nasza-gotowosc/g79lhxx (accessed 07.04.2025) ; Nausėda branduolinio ginklo Lenkijoje idėją vadina "svarbiu atgrasymo veiksniu", 2024, *LRT.lt,* April 26, URL: https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/2260182/nauseda-nazyvaet-ideiu-o-iadernom-oruzhii-v-pol-she-vazhnym-faktorom-sderzhivaniia (accessed 07.04.2025).

the most aggressive anti-Russian rhetoric in NATO and the EU, including calls for the use of military force to isolate Russia in the Baltic region, comes mainly from the Baltic states themselves—the Baltic Republics, Poland, Sweden, and Finland. Thus, we are talking not only about the use of economic and political pressure on Russia, but also military pressure, exerted through indirect military methods and means aimed at causing maximum damage to Russia, which in military theory has been termed 'hybrid warfare' [3; 4, p. 49; 9]. Such asymmetric actions, carried out by both states and non-state actors, are seen by them as a 'cheap alternative to traditional warfare' [5, p. 78].

According to the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Valery Gerasimov, "the use of indirect asymmetric actions and methods of waging 'hybrid wars' makes it possible to deprive the opposing side of its actual sovereignty without seizing the territory of the state by military force" [6; 20]. As repeatedly stated by Russian President Putin and representatives of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the United States and its allies are waging a 'hybrid war' against Russia with all its components—military, economic, cultural, and media.[1]

In our opinion, the actions of NATO and some member states in waging a 'hybrid war' against Russia have created the conditions for the formation of a 'grey zone' in the Baltic region as a theater of military operations, where traditional military force and the military threats arising from it serve as a military cover for political and economic means and methods of exerting pressure on the Russian Federation. This, in turn, poses direct threats to the national interests and security of the Russian Federation in the Baltic Sea region, to which it cannot fail to respond [7, p. 10].

According to Bartosh, an important feature of the 'grey zone' strategy is a phased approach to its implementation, achieved by creating a series of small-scale events that increase in intensity and ultimately shape a new strategic reality [8; 25]. Under these circumstances, the Baltic region is teetering on the brink of open armed conflict. This situation necessitates clarification of the concept of the 'grey zone', as well as the analysis and assessment of the factors contributing to tensions in the Baltic region in the context of unfolding events associated with the growing threat of direct armed confrontation.

[1] See: Russian Foreign Ministry stated that a full-scale hybrid war has been declared against Russia. Lavrov: The US and its satellites have declared a global hybrid war on Russia, 2022, Gazeta.Ru, 28 March, URL: https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/03/28/17487697.shtml (accessed 10.02.2025) ; "A fight to the death": Lavrov on the West's hybrid war against Russia, Interview with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, 2023, Gazeta.RU, 10 March, URL: https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2023/02/15/19754143.shtml?utm_source=rnews&utm_medium=exchange&utm_campaign=news (accessed 10.02.2025) ; Putin declares hybrid war against Russia, Statement by Putin at the SCO meeting, 2023, RIA, 04.07.2023, URL: https://ria.ru/20230704/rossiya-1882083450.html (accessed 10.02.2025).

In this article, the authors do not set particularly complex philosophical and methodological tasks to attempt to discuss the specifics of war and peace at the present stage. From our point of view, the very formation of the 'grey zone' concept indicates that there are many transitional states between war and peace. A key element of operations in the 'grey zone' is that they remain below the threshold of direct armed aggression, which could trigger a legitimate military response (*jus ad bellum* — the right to war, or, more precisely, the right to wage war). Thus, conflict in the 'grey zone' may not only be an alternative to direct military confrontation, but also a way of preparing for it, or be one of the components of an armed confrontation that has already begun. From our perspective, both the first and the second options are possible in the Baltic region.

In this regard, the authors emphasise that the Baltic region should be viewed as an already established 'grey zone' of confrontation with the West. At the same time, an analysis of its geographical, historical, and strategic characteristics merely clarifies this concept in the existing geopolitical context, supplementing existing definitions.The purpose of this article is to provide a critical assessment of the Baltic region as a 'grey zone' in the context of the evolving confrontation between Russia and the collective West. To achieve this objective, the article examines approaches within academic and military –political discourse to the concept of the 'grey zone' and its terminological ambiguity; analyses the influence of geographical factors on the formation of a 'grey zone'; identifies and evaluates patterns characteristic of activities conducted within such a zone; and critically assesses the actions of NATO and selected member states in the Baltic region that are aimed at intensifying confrontation with the Russian Federation without escalating it into open armed conflict.

The methodology employed in this study is based on a comparative analysis of scholarly works by Russian and international authors, as well as on a content analysis of the qualitative characteristics of Russian and international analytical sources and selected NATO doctrinal documents addressing issues related to the 'grey zone'. To identify and classify patterns, means, and methods employed against the Russian Federation, event analysis was applied. In particular, the study examines NATO military exercises in the Baltic region, incidents involving submarine infrastructure in the Baltic Sea and the responses to them by representatives of NATO, the European Union, and regional states, as well as precedents of interaction between the Russian Federation and NATO and its member states in the Baltic region.

To achieve these goals, the article examines the conceptual foundations of the 'grey zone', the legal aspects of conflicts in the 'grey zone', the influence of the geographical space of the Baltic region, the significance of the region's geographical features in the context of the study, as well as the actions of the EU and NATO member states to increase the level of confrontation with the Russian Federation in the Baltic region.

The 'grey zone' and 'hybrid warfare': ambiguity of definitions and the scale of contemporary threats in the context of legal uncertainty

Currently, the term 'grey zone', as well as the terms 'hybrid threats' and 'hybrid warfare', has become widely used among politicians and military analysts both in Russia and worldwide. However, experts still lack a clear approach to defining and understanding these concepts, even though they are not new. What is new is the scale and methods of using old tools.

Of course, hybrid threats may be employed by parties to a conflict in any region, including those with a clearly defined legal regime that precludes arbitrary interpretation. However, it is precisely in 'grey areas' that the use of hybrid threats is facilitated, as recourse to international law becomes more difficult.

As a rule, all three terms describe actions taken by one party to a conflict against another (or by both parties against each other), without escalating to open armed conflict.According to Hoffman, one of the authors of the concept of 'hybrid warfare', this trend "blurs" the boundaries between previously known types of warfare [9]. The modern concept of 'hybrid warfare' is generally regarded as an adaptation of traditional methods of warfare to the current global situation, which, like warfare itself, can adapt quickly to political, economic, technological, and social changes [10, p. 10].

In 1948, Kennan, often described as the 'architect' of the Cold War, prepared a report for the US National Security Council on the initiation of what he termed "organised political warfare", which he defined as "all means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives". In this report, he argued that the United States could not afford to rely on improvised covert operations in the event of more serious political crises in the future [11, p. 253]. In effect, Kennan laid the conceptual foundations for the systematic planning of non-military operations by the United States.

In many ways, Kennan's concept fits in with Nye's concept of 'smart power', according to which the actions of the United States can range from exerting political influence to economic sanctions and coercive diplomacy. The scope of such actions is so broad that it can cover virtually all areas of the target state. At the same time, a distinctive feature of these actions is their influence on the political leadership of the target state [12, p. 64].

In this regard, the authors consider relevant the statement by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, who asserts that with the emergence of new areas of confrontation in modern conflicts, methods of struggle are increasingly shifting toward the comprehensive use of non-military measures implemented with the support of military force [13]. As Galeotti noted, Gerasimov expressed his conviction that the modern world is facing more complex, politically motivated forms of confrontation alongside traditional military actions [14, p. 27].

The NATO Security Review notes that hybrid conflicts involve multi-level efforts aimed at destabilising the state's functioning and polarising its society, since the state's population is the 'centre of gravity' in hybrid warfare. Therefore, the main goal is to influence the actions of key decision-makers through military and non-military operations [15].

In 2019, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg confirmed in his annual report that NATO's priority is not only the ability to counter hybrid threats, but also to enhance its capacity to conduct operations independently, including by increasing the number of exercises performed and the utilisation of support groups and centres. At the same time, the report notes that hostile states do not need to take to the battlefield to inflict damage on their opponents. They can gain political and strategic advantages through other means, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, deception, and sabotage. Such hybrid actions, or actions in 'grey zones', blur the line between peace and war and are used to destabilise and undermine the countries affected[1]. They directly threaten the target state's ability to take timely action aimed at early detection and prevention of threats, as a large number of actions against the target state relate to areas traditionally considered outside the scope of direct armed conflict. According to Western analysts, one of the main characteristics of 'hybrid threats' is their use in the 'grey zone', the ambiguity of the aggressor state's strategic intent, with an emphasis on indirect methods and means of using force against the target state.[2]

The term 'grey zone' was first used in official documents in the US Department of Defence 2010 Quadrennial Review (QDR-2010). In this review, the 'grey zone' is described as deliberate, multifaceted, and hostile interstate activity that falls below the threshold for the use of armed forces[3]. At the same time, the sphere of interstate hostile actions is economic, political, social, informational, and geographical space, and the objects of influence are objects of political, financial, and social systems, informational, as well as material (resource, spatial-temporal) objects [16, p. 6].

However, the 'grey zone' does not appear in official NATO documents either as a concept of modern confrontation or as a potential theatre of military operations, although the Alliance considers it in the context of hybrid threats. At the same time, both NATO and its members see Russia as the main source

[1] The Secretary General's Annual Report 2019, 2019, *NATO*, 21 April, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_174399.htm (accessed20.03.2025).

[2] Deterrence by Punishment as a way of Countering Hybrid Threats — Why we need to go 'beyond resilience' in the grey zone. Information Note, 2019, Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC), March 2019, URL: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c7d01abe5274a3b858207fc/20190304-MCDC_CHW_Information_note_-_Deterrence_by_Punishment.pdf (accessed 13.02.2025).

[3] U. S. Department of Defense, 2010, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 2010, URL: https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2010.pdf (accessed 29.03.2025).

of hybrid threats. Therefore, NATO's main strategies are aimed at countering such methods by strengthening cyber defence and energy infrastructure, counter-propaganda measures, and deterring non-military threats.[1]

Thus, non-military measures and means have become as effective as military ones, if not more so. Non-military measures and means have made it possible to achieve such objectives that were previously achieved through bloody wars. Although a major war is still possible, it now involves serious costs and risks, especially for states possessing nuclear weapons, so the risk of such a war breaking out is unlikely [17, p. 56].

Unlike traditional forms of warfare, aggressive state strategies with high stakes are implemented in the 'grey zone', in which each participant uses various instruments of influence and intimidation to achieve the ultimate goals of war through covert or overt means and methods, provocations, and conflicts [7, p. 26]. In such situations, states that do not have the capacity to achieve their strategic goals through conventional military means alone may resort to a combination of non-military methods and means. Similarly, states that have the necessary military means may achieve their strategic objectives with non-military methods. In both cases, the use of non-military methods is linked to avoiding direct military confrontation with the enemy. In this context, the 'grey zone' is particularly conducive to the achievement of strategic goals, since the objectives of any military campaign ultimately derive from political interests and aims.

Under these conditions, the role of military force remains unchanged and may even increase, although the use of non-military means, especially those of an informational and psychological nature, will be a key factor in waging a new type of war [18, p. 44]. At the same time, the principles of conducting military operations in the 'grey zone' will be completely different from the doctrine of large-scale warfare, which states that success depends on concentration, speed, and decisiveness. The main goal of campaigns in the 'grey zone' is to create new political realities that correspond to the interests of the aggressor state or coalition of such states.

[1] Strategic Concept, 2022, *NATO Official Website*, 29 June 2022, URL: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf (accessed 22.07.2025) ; Brussels Summit Community — Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021, 2021, *NATO Official Website*, 14 June 2021, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm (accessed 22.07.2025) ; NATO Cyber Defence, 2024, *NATO Official Website*, 30 July 2024, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_78170.htm (accessed 22.07.2025) ; NATO Countering hybrid threats, 2024, *NATO Official Website*, 07 May 2024, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm (accessed 22.07.2025) ; Russia's Information Influence Operations in the Nordic — Baltic Region, 2024, *STRATCOM*, Riga, November 2024, URL: https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-information-influence-operations-in-the-nordic-baltic-region/314 (accessed 22.07.2025).

In this study, the authors see the 'grey zone' to be the geographical space of conflict where the parties use non-military methods to achieve their political objectives, combining them with limited use of military force that does not escalate into open confrontation between them. In our opinion, the main difference between a 'grey zone' and 'hybrid warfare' is that a 'grey zone' involves actions by the parties to the conflict in a specific geographical area, while 'hybrid warfare' is a more general and, as a result, more abstract concept, since any war, regardless of its forms and methods, implies confrontation between the parties to the conflict as a state of their relations.

A defining characteristic of campaigns conducted in the 'grey zone', as distinct from 'hybrid threats', is the associated legal dilemma. Any operation in the 'grey zone' entails a departure from the norms of international law, which, to an even greater extent than the laws of armed conflict, constrain the defending state's right to use force in response, thereby creating legal uncertainty. This specific feature of the 'grey zone' is underscored by a statement by General Votel, then Commander of US Army Special Operations Forces, who noted that "in the 'grey zone', states face uncertainty, making it difficult to define the nature of the conflict, the status of the parties involved, and the legal validity of political claims" [19].

In particular, the provision enshrined in Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter prohibiting the use or threat of use of force by Member States does not contain a definition of 'war'.[1] Furthermore, the term 'force' is used to denote a wide range of forms of conflict; however, its prevailing interpretation is largely reduced to 'military force', which is characteristic of armed conflict. At the same time, the imperative of this article of the UN Charter does not apply to non-state actors, unless there is a close connection between states and non-state actors, which boils down to support for a non-state actor or consent to its aggressive actions [20, p. 53].

The UN Charter does not contain any mandatory provisions prohibiting other forms and methods of aggressive actions (political, economic, informational, etc.) and deriving benefits from their use. Such forms and methods may potentially be equated with the unlawful use of force if they cause significant harm to the target state or compel it to take actions that violate its sovereignty [21, p. 73]. However, it is practically impossible to prove the use of non-military forms and methods as 'military force'. Thus, the impossibility of applying standards based on international law and the inconsistency of the 'grey zone' with traditional forms and methods of conflict and the use of force create legal uncertainty in determining the existence of aggression and the participation of specific states in it. At the international level, this creates a misleading assumption that the target state is unaware or insufficiently aware of the actions of the aggressor state. However, this assumption is incorrect, and the target state is in fact usually aware of the enemy's actions but is limited in its ability to respond.

[1] United Nations, 1945. Charter of the United Nations, 1 UNTS XVI, 2025, *UN Charter | United Nations*, URL: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter (accessed 30.03.2025).

Legal uncertainty allows adversaries to use a comprehensive set of methods and means in the 'grey zone' to achieve their strategic goals without crossing the threshold of open military conflict. At the same time, states can use proxy forces to increase their own military power and deny their involvement in aggressive actions. In other words, legal uncertainty and the ability to deny involvement in a conflict allow an aggressor state (or coalition of such states) to use its armed forces to a limited extent to exert pressure on the target state.

Limited use of armed forces involves, for example, deploying them near the target state's territory, conducting large-scale exercises, and carrying out covert military operations (sabotage, acts of sabotage, etc.) using special operations forces. The use of armed forces is not as important as the threat of military force, which should force the leadership of the target state to reconsider the risk of open armed confrontation. In other words, the initiators of conflicts in the 'grey zone' may have military superiority, which is sometimes crucial in deterring the target state from responding to provocations with military force [22, p. 190].

We can conclude that any actions taken by opposing parties in the 'grey zone' are accompanied by the use of armed forces (including proxies) to achieve maximum effect from the use of other, non-military methods and means to achieve the ultimate goal, as well as contrary to the norms of international law, violating both their own and international fundamental documents. At the same time, economic, political, humanitarian, and other methods and means, used in the 'grey zone' cannot be implemented successfully without a military component, as there is a risk of a direct armed response to actions that infringe on the sovereignty of the state.

The geographical space factor in the concept of the 'grey zone'

The current transformation in global politics and economics is accompanied by a revision of the principles of regional division. Unlike previous trends, where geo-economic regionalisation played a key role, new borders are now being based on the military-political and geographical factors [23].

The main instruments of this process are not economic ties, but forceful methods and natural geographical barriers that ensure the security and protection of territories. Thus, geopolitics and military strategy are replacing geoeconomics as the main driver of spatial integration. The logic of economic expediency, open markets, and free trade has been disavowed by the elites of those countries that, not without reason, accused the USSR of ideological monopolism and isolationism.

Until the onset of Russia's open confrontation with the Baltic states, conditions for mutually beneficial cooperation had been established; however, this cooperation was characterised by complex dynamics shaped by historical, political, and economic factors. The period up to 2014 was one of transformation, during which the previous political division gave way to new, predominantly

economic, forms of interaction. Nevertheless, Russia's full integration into regional processes remained incomplete, while the states of the region became fully integrated into Western structures [24].

One of the main contemporary geographical features of the Baltic region is that it consists solely of states that are systematically hostile to the Russian Federation. After the end of the Cold War and up until 2022, tensions in the region steadily increased, and buffer and neutral states renounced their status [25, p. 177].

In addition, during the Cold War, a balance of power was maintained in the region, supported by parity between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. However, after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, all states in the region became members of NATO, which in turn led to a change in the military-political balance of power in the region and contributed to a gradual weakening of relations between Russia and the states in the region [7; 8; 26]. In this regard, for historical and geographical reasons, the Baltic region is characterised by a stable maintenance of a situation that is typical of 'grey zones' and is called a situation of "neither peace nor war". In these conditions, there is complexity and uncertainty in controlling the space, which applies to both territories and water areas. As the authors have already noted, one of the main characteristics of the 'grey zone' is precisely the control of geographical space.

Clark and Pfaff, drawing attention to the geographical features of the Baltic region, point to the possibility of concentrating NATO forces to weaken Russia's military superiority in the area [27, p. xiv], while Klein and his co-authors state that it is necessary to take into account that half of Russia's maritime cargo passes through the Baltic Sea, thereby providing NATO and its partners with leverage to exert economic pressure on Russia. In this regard, they believe that NATO should deprive Russia of access to the North Atlantic and further to the Barents Sea [28]. The significant importance of this characteristic of the 'grey zone' is the assumption that conflicts in such a zone, as in a separate geographical space, can be started and stopped relatively easily [29].

When considering control over geographical space, it should be noted that the relatively limited land and maritime area of the Baltic region is combined with a high potential for threats which, if control is established over key positions, can be projected onto distant strategic territories. A striking illustration of this logic is encapsulated in the formula "Gogland is the key to Kotlin, and Kotlin is the key to Leningrad". As noted in contemporary assessments, "for the first time since 1941, the enemy is threatening us with a military blockade in the Baltic, and not merely an economic one. Gogland Island is being compelled to regain its status as a military facility—something that has not occurred since Khrushchev demilitarised military installations in the Gulf of Finland" [30, p. 13].

According to the authors, when analysing contemporary problems in the Baltic Sea region's 'grey zone', it is essential to take into account the events of World War II, considering the possibilities, means, and methods of modern weapons and how to combat them. In particular, minefields laid in the Gulf of

Finland in 1941—1943 by the Germans and Finns caused major problems for the USSR during the war. The Red Banner Baltic Fleet suffered its heaviest losses off Cape Yuminda when the Germans laid more than 93 km of minefields along the southern shore of the gulf, while the northern and central parts of the gulf were shelled by Finnish coastal artillery [31, p. 71]. These barriers were never overcome by the Soviet Navy during the war, and had to be bypassed through waters directly adjacent to Finland. In this situation, the Baltic Fleet, which was significantly stronger than the Finnish Navy and German support ships, was unable to realise its advantage. At the same time, as of June 22, 1941, the Finnish navy acted as a proxy force for the Germans, carrying out mining operations without declaring war. The islands of the Gulf of Finland also deserve special attention. Except for Kotlin Island, they belonged to Finland until 1940, which gave it control over a vast area of the Gulf of Finland. However, since 1940, the situation has changed, and now the islands of Gogland, Moshchny, Bolshoy Tyuters, and Maly Tyuters, which are located far to the west, belong to Russia.

The strategic role of the islands in the Gulf of Finland is obvious, as they effectively separate the southern and northern flanks of a potential maritime theatre of war. Occupying these islands would allow the enemy not only to control the Gulf of Finland shipping lane approaching the mouth of the Neva River, but also to effectively "lock" the ships of the Baltic Fleet in the Kronstadt roadstead, which would give it the ability to control the airspace from St. Petersburg to Kaliningrad [31, p. 62]. History shows that control of the Gulf of Finland is of critical importance for the security of St. Petersburg. This was the case a hundred years ago, until the USSR solved the problem of Leningrad's strategic vulnerability in 1939. In this regard, it is necessary to mention American military analysts Herdt and Zublic, who believe that in the Baltic region, the US Navy and NATO allies should use the extensive capabilities of Finland and Sweden for sea mining in the event of a possible conflict with Russia, which would threaten the deployment of the Russian Navy and its commercial shipping [32, p. 5—7].

The main islands of the Baltic Sea — Bornholm and Gotland — are of no less strategic importance. The former can be used as a barrier against Russia to deny its military ships and civilian vessels access to the Danish straits, while the latter can serve as a location for intelligence gathering and air defence or anti-ship defence systems [33].

A striking example of the geographical factor in determining the boundaries and characteristics of the 'grey zone' is an incident that occurred in Lithuania: the sinking of an American heavy armoured vehicle in a swamp near the Belarusian border. The vehicle did not simply get stuck in the swamp, although this is already impossible in Germany; it sank completely, so that it could not be found for a week, and a government commission was set up to recover it, involving up to ten units of heavy special equipment. This event preceded the deployment of

a Bundeswehr armoured brigade in this very area and in these natural conditions. Southern and Eastern Lithuania and Latgale are potential theatres of military operations in the Baltic region, particularly with the issues related to the 'grey zone' and new risks.

Not only the political but also the military leadership of the Baltic states has a poor understanding of their own territories. For more than forty years, mapping and, even more so, topographic surveying of their own territories have not been a priority for the governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. However, such complex, costly, and long-term tasks have not been a priority for Russia and Belarus either.

One of the authors of this article was a member of the Russian group involved in negotiations with the Republic of Estonia on establishing the state border on the ground. This work was carried out from 1995 to the end of 1997. The work did not include political issues, but only research, linking the existing border line on the map to the terrain, and proposals for corrections. The work was based on Soviet maps of the General Staff, which, for several decades, had been outdated. The research showed that these maps were completely unapplicable. Old roads had disappeared, and new ones had appeared. Forests had been replaced by farmland, and farmland by forests. The geography of the lake shorelines had changed, as had the river beds, and the location of upland and lowland marshes also did not correspond to the maps. In the event of hostilities, the existing maps would be useless. For example, the impassable swamps that once blocked access to the Siminae Heights from Ust-Narva to Narva no longer exist. Whereas there used to be only one road from the border to Tallinn, there are now three.

A similar situation is developing on the border with Finland. Finnish national mythology associated with the Mannerheim Line does not take into account the fact that such a system of fortifications, which cost Finland a third of its average annual budget [34, p. 63], cannot be built, partly because its length would now have to be 2.8 times greater. Whereas in 1939 there were three more or less passable roads running from southeast to northwest between Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland, there are now at least six in the narrowest part.

Another important factor is the definition and legal consolidation of state borders in the region. In particular, the state borders of the Russian Federation with Lithuania and Latvia are defined both on the ground and in state treaties. In contrast, although the state border with the Republic of Estonia is defined on the ground, it is not enshrined in a state treaty, and the border zones are poorly described.

Thus, the authors conclude that in the Baltic region, geographical space plays a key role in the formation of a 'grey zone' where military-political factors have come to prevail over the benefits of economic cooperation. In the context of the 'grey zone', control over the waters of the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea, as well as their key islands, is of strategic importance, as confirmed by historical experience. In addition, contemporary changes in the geographical landscape and

political uncertainty regarding borders complicate the assessment of emerging threats. In this regard, the militarisation of the region creates risks of intentional or unintentional escalation. Thus, the geographical features of the Baltic region make it vulnerable to potential conflict, in which control over space will be a key instrument.

Analysis of NATO and EU military and non-military actions in the Baltic region

The methods and means used by NATO, the EU, and their individual member states to achieve their strategic goals in the Baltic region can be divided into military and non-military (political-diplomatic, economic, informational-psychological). However, a common feature of their use is the geographical space, namely the geographical features of the region, which, according to Western military and non-military analysts, are considered to be "Russia's weaknesses in the region".[1] First and foremost, this is the exclave position of the Kaliningrad region and its dependence on supplies from mainland Russia, its narrow coastline on the Baltic Sea, and the narrow fairways in the neutral waters of the Gulf of Finland. In military-strategic terms, this is the concentration of Baltic Fleet ships and vessels at two naval bases in Baltiysk and Kronstadt, the limited military resources of the Kaliningrad region, and the proximity of key Russian regions to the border with NATO member states.

Taking into account these 'geographical pain points', the leaders of NATO, the EU, and the states of the region are planning and carrying out actions aimed at destabilising the military-political situation in the Baltic region, often justifying them with 'Russia's aggressive policy'.

Military methods and means primarily include the militarisation of the Baltic region. This involves NATO expansion (the admission of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance in 2023—2024), an increase in the military presence of other NATO countries (the US, Germany, and the UK) and Alliance forces in the region, and the deployment of NATO forces in the Baltic states. Finland and Sweden), increasing the military presence of other NATO countries (the US, Germany, and the UK) and collective Alliance forces in the region, building up and modernising the armed forces of NATO member countries in the region (with Poland and Germany at the forefront), and the construction and modernisation of military infrastructure.

[1] Russia's Military Modernisation: A Challenge for NATO, 2017, London, *Chatham House*, URL: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf (accessed 30.03.2025) ; Filling NATO's Baltic gap, 2016, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), URL: https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2016/ICDS_Report-Closing_NATO_s_Baltic_Gap-RUS.pdf (accessed 30.03.2025).

Here are a few examples of recent military activity by NATO and its member states in the Baltic region. These actions are clearly demonstrative, provocative, and aggressive in nature.[1]

In particular, the United States has formed a Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) on German territory, which will begin conducting occasional deployments of new Typhon medium- and short-range ground-based missile systems in 2026. MDTF) on German territory, which will begin conducting occasional deployments of new Typhon medium- and short-range ground-based missile systems with Standard SM-6 (with a range of up to 500 km) and Tomahawk (with a range of up to 1,800 km) multi-purpose missiles, medium-range Dark Eagle missiles (with a range of up to 2,700 km), and promising missiles with hypersonic warheads in a non-nuclear version, which are part of the US military doctrine of a 'global disarming strike'. Since 2022, the number of US military personnel stationed in Poland has doubled, reaching approximately 10,000. The United States has established a permanent US Army garrison (USAG-P) in Poland, opened a missile defence base (in Redzikowo), and a long-term storage and maintenance facility for military equipment (in Powidz). The US also began a military presence at the Reedo base (Estonia), located 45 km from the Russian border.

In Mikkeli (Finland), 300 km from St. Petersburg, the headquarters of NATO's Multi-Corps Land Component Command (MCLCC) is being established. In addition, the United States has been granted unhindered access to 15 military facilities in Finland, some of which are located in close proximity to the Russian border, as well as to 17 facilities in Sweden.

On May 22, 2025, for the first time in the history of the Bundeswehr, Germany began to deploy a military contingent abroad permanently — the 45th Tank Brigade, stationed in Lithuania. In July 2025, the United Kingdom placed its 4th Brigade Combat Team on high alert for further deployment to Estonia. In July 2024, NATO's Multinational Battle Group in Latvia, led by Canadian command, was transformed into NATO's Multinational Brigade Latvia, with almost double the number of personnel and equipment.

To manage NATO operations in the Baltic Sea, the CTF Baltic regional naval headquarters was established in Rostock, Germany, in October 2024. In January 2025, NATO launched Operation Baltic Sentry to protect critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. In fact, this operation is being conducted by NATO's multinational forces to combat Russia's "shadow oil and gas fleet" and organise a possible blockade of the Gulf of Finland for Russian ships.

In addition to expanding military infrastructure in the Baltic region, large-scale NATO exercises and multinational exercises led by the US command in Europe are regularly held, such as DEFENDER-Europe, BALTOPS, Steadfast Defender, Anakonda, Dragon, Thunder Storm, Brave Griffin, Griffin Lightning, and others. The number and scale of exercises have increased significantly since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. At the same

[1] See: [2].

time, their number near the Russian border has reached 40 per year,[1] and the concept and scenarios of the exercises are clearly offensive in nature, contrary to NATO representatives' statements about the "defensive nature of the exercises". In particular, the exercises involve the transfer of additional forces and equipment to NATO's eastern flank in the Baltic region, conducting offensive operations, launching missile and bomb strikes on the Kaliningrad region, landing air and sea assaults, laying sea mines, blocking the Russian Baltic Fleet and Russian shipping in the Baltic Sea, etc.

Aircraft from NATO countries (primarily the US, UK, Germany, France, and Sweden) are actively conducting radio-technical and radio-electronic reconnaissance in the Baltic Sea, studying potential theatres of military operations in the Kaliningrad and Leningrad regions and the Baltic Sea.

In addition, high-ranking military officials from NATO countries have repeatedly made threats against the Kaliningrad region. In particular, the commander of the Polish Land Forces, General Skrzypczak, has repeatedly stated the need to "take Kaliningrad back by force" and "destroy the Russian outpost in Europe".[2] In July 2025, General Donahue, commander of the US Army in Europe and Africa, publicly stated that modern allied capabilities could "take that [Kaliningrad] down from the ground faster than ever before".[3] Statements by representatives of the Baltic states regarding a military solution to the issue of the Kaliningrad region and Russian maritime shipping in the Baltic Sea are made with such frequency that the authors consider it inappropriate to mention them in this article.

The authors believe that the collective West is openly demonstrating its power, which indicates that a potential adversary is shifting from a concept of deterrence to a concept of intimidation. In fact, this involves the limited use of armed forces against the interests and security of the Russian Federation. The show of force, in turn, serves as a military cover for the use of political and economic means and methods against Russia, while the presence of large numbers of NATO and NATO-member armed forces in the Baltic region limits Russia's ability to respond symmetrically to external pressure with military force or the threat of its use.

In addition to military methods, the Western coalition also actively uses political and diplomatic methods and means. Direct methods include effectively

[1] Gerasimov: Number of NATO exercises near Russian borders reaches 40 per year, 2024, *TASS*, December 18, URL: https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/22703753 (accessed 20.04.2025).
[2] Wojsko wzmacnia granice z Białorusią i Rosją. Gen. Skrzypczak: To nie ma nic wspólnego z fortyfikacją, 2024, *Rzecz Pospolita*, 06.02.2024, URL: https://www.rp.pl/wojsko/art39791601-wojsko-wzmacnia-granice-z-bialorusia-i-rosja-gen-skrzypczak-to-nie-ma-nic-wspolnego-z-fortyfikacja (accessed 22.07.2025).
[3] Judson Jen. Army Europe chief unveils NATO eastern flank defense plan, 2025, *Defense News*, Jul 17, URL: https://www.defensenews.com/land/2025/07/16/army-europe-chief-unveils-nato-eastern-flank-defense-plan/ (accessed 23.07.2025).

"squeezing" the Russian Federation out of international organisations such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council, the Union of Baltic Cities, etc., suspending the work of the Russia-NATO Council, attempting to challenge the authority of the Russian delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, etc.

Indirect political and diplomatic measures include downgrading Russia's diplomatic relations with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, closing Russian consulates in Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states, and expelling Russian diplomats from all countries in the region. In addition, Poland and the Baltic states have banned Russian citizens with valid Schengen visas from entering their countries since September 19, 2022, and have also stopped issuing visas to them. Finland closed its border to Russian tourists on September 30, 2022. Private vehicles registered in Russia are not permitted to enter EU countries, and even in the case of private travel, such vehicles may be subject to confiscation. Moreover, there have been numerous instances in which Russian citizens have been denied entry at EU borders without any stated explanation. In addition, indirect political and diplomatic methods of pressure on Russia include increased discrimination against the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states, Western support for the non-systemic Russian opposition that fled Russia (Vilnius and Warsaw have become some of its main centers abroad), as well as threats to "close" the Baltic Sea or the Gulf of Finland to Russia, voiced, for example, by Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs[1] and Commander of the Estonian Armed Forces, Andrus Merilo.[2]

Economic methods and means of exerting pressure on Russia include sanctions policies aimed at isolating Russia economically and creating economic problems for it, which, according to the authors of the sanctions, should lead to political destabilisation and, ideally for them, a change of political power in Russia. At the same time, all the Baltic countries that are members of the European Union not only participate in the EU sanctions against Russia, but are also their main initiators.

In addition, since the summer of 2022, the European Union and Lithuania have restricted land freight transit from mainland Russia to the Kaliningrad region and back [35, p. 47]. At the same time, Russian freight transport by road to the European Union, the entry of ships flying the Russian flag into EU ports, as well as ships flying foreign flags carrying Russian oil, will be completely banned (exceptions apply to medical, food, energy, and humanitarian purposes).

[1] The Kremlin responded to Latvia's threats to close the Baltic Sea to Russia, 2023, *RIA Novosti*, 23.10.2023, URL: https://ria.ru/20231023/more-1904635928.html (accessed 20.04.2025).

[2] The Foreign Ministry assessed the possible closure of the Gulf of Finland to Russian ships, 2024, *RBK*, 01.10.2024, URL: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/01/10/2024/66fb7fd89a7947886759efe6 (accessed 20.04.2025).

We believe that sabotage of the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines should be considered a method of direct economic pressure on Russia in the Baltic region. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, this was "most likely done by the Americans or someone acting on their behalf".[1] However, in our view, the most striking example of the creation of economic threats to the Russian Federation is the attempts to seize oil tankers used in Russia's interests and sailing in the Baltic Sea under foreign flags (in Western terminology, "Russia's shadow fleet"),[2] as well as organising acts of sabotage against them.[3]

The main feature of informational and psychological methods and tools, in our opinion, is their indirect influence on the overall situation in the region. The targets of these methods are both the Russian population, which Western media outlets, with the direct involvement of Western special services, seek to misinform and turn against the existing government, and the residents of the Baltic region countries that are members of the EU and NATO. In the second case, disinformation and propaganda are aimed at constructing an 'enemy image' of Russia and promoting the narrative of a 'Russian threat', thereby enabling the governments of these states to secure public support for both their own militarisation and the broader militarisation of the Baltic region. In addition, disinformation and propaganda about the 'threat from the east' also allow for the manipulation of civil society in these countries in the interests of anti-Russian, pro-globalist elites.

At the forefront of these activities are both information and psychological warfare centres located outside the Baltic region and centres deployed within the region itself. Among the latter are the NATO Centre of Excellence for Cooperative Cyber Defence (Estonia), the NATO Centre of Excellence for Energy Security (Lithuania), the NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communications (Latvia), and the European Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats (Finland).

The overarching objective of the methods and instruments employed by NATO, the EU, and their individual member states in the Baltic region is to weaken Russia's position in the region in the long run, to undermine the Russian

[1] Putin suggested that the Americans blew up the Nord Stream pipelines, 2023, *TASS*, 14 December, URL: https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19539217 (accessed 20.04.2025).

[2] Tanker bound for Russia detained in Estonia, 2025, *RBK*, 11.04.2025, URL: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/04/2025/67f900a79a7947de6c98260c (accessed 20.04.2025).

[3] "Pure sabotage": experts discuss possible causes of emergency on Koala tanker, 2025, *Moscow Komsomolets*, 10.02.2025, URL: https://www.mk.ru/incident/2025/02/10/diversiya-v-chistom-vide-eksperty-rasskazali-o-vozmozhnykh-prichinakh-chp-na-tankere-koala.html (accessed 20.04.2025).

economy (more than half of Russia's maritime oil exports go through the Baltic),[1] to damage the international image of the Russian Federation, and to create economic difficulties for the Kaliningrad exclave with the aim of reducing its ties with mainland Russia. Another goal is to force the Russian Federation to build up and 'stretch' its armed forces along its western border, and, in essence, to divert part of its forces and resources during the special military operation.

Hence, the authors conclude that NATO and the European Union are systematically employing both military and non-military methods against the Russian Federation to create a 'grey zone' in the Baltic region aimed at undermining its economic and political sovereignty. At the same time, military methods, such as the militarisation of the region and an increase in the number and scale of exercises, which are clearly demonstrative in nature, are combined with non-military methods and, in some cases, serve as their basis or supplement.

These actions against Russia in the Baltic region indicate the Western coalition's intention to provoke the Russian Federation into an asymmetrical military response, which would, in turn, enable it to accuse Russia of deliberate aggression, portray it as an aggressor in the eyes of the international community, and subsequently employ more coercive political and economic measures against it, including military ones.

Conclusion

The study identified key trends in NATO and EU strategy in the Baltic region aimed at creating a 'grey zone', i. e., an area of instability combining military and non-military methods of political and economic pressure on Russia. The analysis showed that the actions of NATO, the EU, and their member states are systematic and comprehensive in nature, including the militarisation of the region, economic sanctions, political and diplomatic isolation, and informational and psychological influence.

The Baltic region has now become one of the key battlegrounds in the confrontation between Russia and the collective West. NATO's expansion to include Finland and Sweden has shifted the balance of power in the region and created a continuous belt of Alliance territory along Russia's borders.

In the Baltic region, a combination of measures that remain below the threshold of open military conflict yet systematically undermine Russia's security effectively operationalises the concept of a 'grey zone'. The defining feature of this strategy is its phased nature: the build-up of military presence, economic 'strangulation', and information warfare are collectively shaping a

[1] They want to close the Baltic Sea to tankers carrying Russian oil, 2025, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 11, URL: https://rg.ru/2025/02/11/tankeram-s-rossijskoj-neftiu-hotiat-zakryt-baltijskoe-more.html (accessed 25.03.2025) ; Denmark could block Russian oil tankers from reaching markets, 2023, *Financial Times*, November 15, URL: https://www.ft.com/content/6409ed38-73f4-46b3-b0f1-649c5e5b79db (accessed 25.03.2025).

new political reality in which Russia is compelled to operate under conditions of permanent crisis. At the same time, all of these methods and instruments are implemented in a context marked by violations of, or non-compliance with, international law.

The military component of pressure includes not only the build-up of NATO contingents in Poland and the Baltic States, but also regular exercises simulating offensive operations, including in the Kaliningrad region, and blocking Russia's access to the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland.

Demonstrations of force, such as flights by reconnaissance aircraft and B-52H strategic bombers near Russia's borders, serve as a tool of intimidation, reinforcing non-military methods of influence. At the same time, legal uncertainty allows the West to avoid direct responsibility while retaining the ability to deny aggressive intentions.

Political and diplomatic methods are aimed at isolating Russia by pushing it out of regional organisations, severing consular ties, discriminating against the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states, and altering historical memory.

Economic sanctions, including the blockade of Kaliningrad transit and sabotage against energy infrastructure, aim to destabilise Russian regions by increasing social and political tensions.

The information and psychological warfare coordinated through NATO centres in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania aims to manipulate public opinion both in Russia and in Alliance countries, shaping the image of Russia as an "aggressor" posing an existential threat to the 'civilised' West.

At the same time, geography plays a key role in the confrontation between Russia and the West. In particular, control over the Baltic Sea islands, such as Hiiumaa and Gotland, Russia's short coastline on the Baltic Sea, and Finland and Estonia's control of the entrance to the Gulf of Finland have historically proven their importance, as NATO's current plans to use the Scandinavian countries for a naval blockade repeat the scenarios of World War II.

The legal uncertainty of the 'grey zone' complicates Russia's response, as traditional norms of international law do not take hybrid threats into account. The lack of clear criteria for aggression in cyberspace, economic coercion, or information attacks allows the West to act with impunity. However, as the analysis shows, military force remains an integral part of this strategy, creating a backdrop for non-military pressure.

The Baltic region today is a classic example of a 'grey zone' where conflict exists in a sub-threshold format but carries the risk of escalation. There is no doubt that NATO and EU actions are aimed at weakening Russia in the long term, and their effectiveness largely depends on Moscow's ability not only to adapt to hybrid challenges but also to apply asymmetric countermeasures.

Given historical experience and current trends, we can expect the confrontation to intensify further, with military force becoming increasingly intertwined with economic, political, and informational measures. In these circumstances, Russia

needs to develop comprehensive countermeasures combining military deterrence, legal counteraction, and the strengthening of regional stability and security, especially in the Kaliningrad region.

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THE NANCY TREATY: FRIENDSHIP WITHOUT COMMITMENT?

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The article explores the political context, principal reasons, and objectives behind the signing of the Nancy Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation by France and Poland in 2025, as well as its substantive provisions. The analysis is situated within two comparative frameworks: a historical one, tracing the fluctuations in Polish—French relations after 1991, and a spatial one, reflecting France's policy under Emmanuel Macron aimed at renewing partnerships through treaties with Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. The study shows that the Nancy Treaty is intended to consolidate the latest improvement in Polish—French relations, shaped by the conflict in Ukraine and by uncertainty regarding the future direction of U.S. foreign policy. The analysis of the treaty indicates that, compared with the 1991 agreement, the Franco-Polish partnership has been significantly strengthened, and both parties view each other as partners in the broader confrontation with Russia, while nonetheless refraining from offering any new security guarantees. A comparison of the Nancy Treaty with four similar agreements suggests that Poland has been brought into the group of France's close EU partners, although it remains less aligned than Germany and, to some extent, Italy and Spain. The authors conclude that the treaty opens new opportunities for Franco—Polish cooperation, although further rapprochement will depend largely on the political will of the two countries' leaders. The treaty may signal France's intention to position Poland as a leading power in Eastern Europe, although a definitive assessment will only be possible once the conflict in Ukraine has been resolved.

Keywords:
Poland, France, Nancy treaty, European Union, European security, NATO, Emmanuel Macron, Donald Tusk

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Introduction

On May 9, 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk signed a bilateral treaty on strengthening cooperation and friendship in the French city of Nancy.[1] The agreement, intended to replace the previous Franco-Polish treaty of 1991, continues the policy of rapprochement between the two countries that began after 2022. The document, including its military provisions, has attracted particular attention not only in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine — in which Paris and Warsaw are providing military and political support to Kyiv — but also in light of statements by French and Polish officials emphasising the treaty's key importance for bilateral relations. The choice of Nancy as the signing venue carries symbolic significance, evoking Polish — French relations of the eighteenth century and underscoring the treaty's special status. It was in Nancy in 1736 where Polish King Stanisław Leszczyński, father-in-law of French monarch Louis XV, settled as Duke of Lorraine after fleeing the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to escape the advance of Russian imperial troops under the command of General von Minich.

The choice of 9 May is likewise not coincidental. On the one hand, the date marks Europe Day, commemorating the Schuman Declaration of 1950 and the launch of European integration 75 years ago. On the other hand, it may be interpreted as an unambiguous political signal to Russia, where the 80th anniversary of the Victory over nazism in the Second World War was commemorated on the same day.

Although symbolism remains an integral part of political decor, it is more important to examine the content of the new treaty and assess its significance, which is the main aim of the article. The Polish government, followed by the Polish media, called the agreement in Nancy a "turning point", presenting it as a major diplomatic success and a significant boost to Poland's national security.[2] In France, politicians and the press regard the treaty as an important step towards strengthening the European Union.[3]

Due to the novelty of the subject, analytical work on the topic has so far been limited to expert commentary by political scientists from Poland, France, and Russia. Their articles describe the state of Franco-Polish relations [1; 2], the current European context and the dynamics of France's conclusion of similar agreements with EU partners [3], the main provisions of the agreement and opportunities for bilateral cooperation. The authors emphasize the symbolic significance of the agreement — from "joint resistance to the Russian threat" to "an attempt to rewrite the history of Franco-Polish relations" based on trust and "strategic brotherhood" [4], noting that it is more about a desired framework for cooperation, which has yet to be filled with content, than about any real guarantees [1; 5]. Although these

[1] Traité pour une coopération et une amitié renforcée entre la République de Pologne et la République française, 2025, *Elysée*, 09.05.2025, URL: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/05/09/traite-pour-une-cooperation-et-une-amitie-renforcees-entre-la-republique-de-pologne-et-la-republique-francaise (accessed 17.06.2025).

[2] Traktat z Nancy. Francja obiecuje nas obronić, 2025, *Rzeczpospolita*, 05.05.2025, URL: https://www.rp.pl/dyplomacja/art42225451-traktat-z-nancy-francja-obiecuje-nas-obronic (accessed 17.06.2025).

[3] Signature du traité d'amitié franco-polonais à Nancy, 2025, *Elysée*, 09.05.2025, URL: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/05/09/signature-du-traite-damitie-franco-polonais-a-nancy (accessed 17.06.2025).

comments are useful in allowing the reader to see the specifics of contemporary Polish-French relations, as well as the ambitions and positions of the two parties in concluding the agreement, they do not, of course, exhaust the matter.

To assess the substantive significance of the treaty, it should be situated within the temporal and spatial contexts of Franco—Polish relations, an approach that is methodologically consistent with the concrete-historical perspective. This requires an examination of the main stages of bilateral relations between 1991 and 2022 and an evaluation of their outcomes, an analysis of the key provisions of the Treaty of Nancy from the standpoint of the national interests of France and Poland, and a determination of the treaty's place and significance among similar agreements concluded by France with other major EU and NATO member states. This comparative positioning constitutes the principal novelty in the present study.

The authors address these tasks through the application of the historical-systematic method, which enables an analysis of the dynamics of Franco—Polish relations in light of both internal and external factors, as well as through comparative analysis, which allows the Treaty of Nancy to be systematically compared with other agreements concluded by France in recent years.

The dynamics of Polish-French relations in 1991—2022

After the end of the Cold War and the bipolar world order, and following the demise of the USSR, Franco–Polish relations evolved in a non-linear and uneven manner, marked by periods of both rapprochement and setback. The dynamics of political and economic contacts were influenced by both objective factors — the external (European and international) environment — and subjective factors — the political goals of the leaders of the two countries and their ideological priorities.

The political elites who came to power in Poland as a result of the 1989 Round Table talks sought to establish the friendliest relations possible with Paris [6]. Building on shared historical traditions, Poland and France quickly moved towards closer relations, signing the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1991 and becoming partners within the Weimar Triangle, an initiative designed to strengthen cooperation among Poland, France, and Germany and to facilitate the integration of post-communist countries of Eastern Europe [7; 8]. In the Treaty, both sides declared their desire to jointly build a democratic and united Europe, and France also pledged to support Poland's European integration aspirations. The countries also agreed to work together for peace and security in Europe, including within the CSCE/OSCE, and developed a mechanism for regular political dialogue and urgent bilateral consultations in the event of threats to the peace and security of the two countries.[1]

However, after 1991, the dialogue between Warsaw and Paris developed unevenly. For example, in the early 2000s, Polish-French relations were far from friendly, which was the result of significant differences in the views of the leaders of the two countries on the role of Europe, the US and Poland itself in the world

[1] Francja—Polska. Traktat o przyjaźni i solidarności. Paryż, 1991, *Prawo*, 09.04.1991, URL: https://www.prawo.pl/akty/dz-u-1992-81-415,16794937.html; Décret no 92-1221 du 16 novembre 1992 portant publication du traité d'amitié et de solidarité entre la République française et la République de Pologne, signé à Paris le 9 avril 1991, *Légifrance*, URL: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000711507 (accessed 17.06.2025).

[9]. In the 1990s, Presidents François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac were cautious about Poland's accession to NATO and the EU, considering Polish foreign policy to be too pro-American and Atlanticist, especially since this led to financial and image losses for Paris as, for example, in the case of Poland's purchase of American *F-16*s instead of French *Mirage-2000-5* fighters at the end of 2002.[1] It may seem like a technical incident, but it had a significant impact on the mood of the French ruling circles, who began to accuse Poland of ingratitude in response to French support for its accession to the EU. An even more negative impact on Polish-French relations was caused by the diametrically opposed positions of the countries on the issue of the American invasion of Iraq [10]. Poland's unconditional solidarity with the US and the participation of the Polish armed forces in the intervention convinced Paris that Warsaw was more interested in developing a Polish-American military-political partnership and strengthening its position at the transatlantic forums than in the processes of European integration. The Polish side reacted strongly to Jacques Chirac's sharp rebuke during the Iraq crisis, in which he stated that Poland and other Eastern European countries had "missed an opportunity to remain silent" [11, s. 41]. Several months later, in October 2003, the Polish Ministry of Defense made statements, later refuted, that French *Roland* missiles, which France allegedly continued to supply to Saddam Hussein's government in violation of the UN embargo, had been found in Iraq. These statements damaged Poland's image in France completely. The rise to power in Poland between 2005 and 2007 of the Eurosceptic national-conservative government led by the Kaczyński brothers and their Law and Justice party (hereinafter PiS) marked a turning point in bilateral relations, as Warsaw ceased to regard Paris as a priority partner within the EU. Concurrently, political discourse in France increasingly framed Poland as a "Trojan horse of the United States in Europe" [12, s. 148]. In an interview published in the Lorraine newspaper *L'Est Républicain*, former French ambassador to Poland Pierre Buhler pointedly regretted that after 1991 the Poles quickly forgot the "numerous gestures of solidarity from the French" and began to believe that only "the US protected them from the Soviet Union, and that joining NATO was the only and final guarantee of the country's security.".[2]

Some normalisation of Polish-French relations began only in 2008, after the formation of a pro-European government in Poland under Prime Minister Donald Tusk. On the French side, the return of Paris to the Alliance's military structures (April 2009), announced by Nicolas Sarkozy at the end of 2007, also contributed to some warming of relations. At the same time, on Sarkozy's initiative, Poland was invited to participate in regular meetings of ministers of the largest EU countries (G-5). In Warsaw, this gesture was seen as a long-awaited confirmation

[1] Achat d'avions américains par la Pologne. Réponse du Ministre de l'économie, des finances et de l'industrie publiée le, 2003, *Senat*, 10.04.2003, URL: https://www.senat.fr/questions/base/2003/qSEQ030105393.html (accessed 25.09.2025).

[2] Parasol nuklearny owiany tajemnicą. Co znajdzie się w traktacie polsko — francuskim? 2025, *Wyborcza*, 07.05.2025, URL: https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,31915011,traktat-z-nancy-ma-wprowadzic-stosunki-polsko-francuskie-na.html (accessed 17.06.2025) ; the interview: Traité France-Pologne : pourquoi sera-t-ilsigné à Nancy et à quoiva-t-ilservir?, 2025, *L'Est Republicain*, 02.05.2025, URL: https://www.estrepublicain.fr/politique/2025/05/02/rattraper-le-temps-perdu-a-quoi-va-servir-le-traite-d-amitie-entre-la-france-et-la-pologne (accessed 17.06.2025).

of Poland's important status in the EU and Paris's willingness to make Poland part of the "engine of European integration" [11, s. 43]. On May 28, 2008, Donald Tusk and Nicolas Sarkozy announced their desire to form a strategic partnership between the countries by signing a five-year cooperation program[1], and Poland became interested in the French concept of "Europe de la defence". Radosław Sikorski, then head of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirmed the country's readiness to become more actively involved in EU defence projects, primarily within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy. The result and symbol of bilateral rapprochement was the Declaration on European Security and Defence signed by Nikolas Sarkozy and Donald Tusk on November 5, 2009.[2] The document provided for the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between Poland and France in the development of the European Security and Defence Policy as a complementary pillar to NATO, the expansion of bilateral military and technical cooperation, and joint action in addressing international and European security challenges [13, s. 141—143].

The 2009 Paris Declaration became a symbol of the rapprochement between Poland and France in the dialogue on European security issues and led to the intensification of bilateral cooperation within the framework of both the Weimar Triangle [14] and the so-called "Club of Five" ("Weimar Triangle"+Spain and Italy), which lasted until 2015. In June 2014, France temporarily deployed its fighter jets near Malbork for the first time to conduct air patrols for the NATO mission in the Baltic region. France used this period to promote its military-industrial complex and energy sector products in Poland. Among French proposals, there were joint projects in the defence industry as well as proposals to build Poland's first nuclear power plant. The parties reached certain agreements in April 2015, signing a preliminary agreement worth €3 billion for Poland to purchase fifty *H225 Caracal* multi-purpose helicopters from the Franco-German-British consortium *Airbus* [15, p. 264].

However, the return to power in 2015 of Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice (PiS) party, after its victories in the parliamentary and presidential elections and its openly critical stance towards Brussels and the principal states of the European Union, was followed by a marked deterioration in Warsaw's relations with Paris. In October 2016, the Polish government cancelled the tender for the purchase of *Caracal* helicopters, preferring the American *UH-60 Black Hawk*. That was a blow to France, already struggling to compete with the US in the European arms market. Such renunciation of agreements, coupled with harsh statements by Polish representatives towards French politicians and society, could hardly be interpreted as anything other than Poland's lack of interest in developing military-industrial cooperation with major European players [16, p. 46]. As the French and German defence ministers Jean-Yves Le Drian and Ursula von der Leyen noted in a letter to their Polish

[1] Partenariat stratégique franco-polonais. Programme de coopération, 2008, *Ambassade de France à Varsovie*, 28.05.2008, URL: https://pl.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/Programme_de_cooperation_fr-pl.pdf (accessed 17.06.2025).

[2] Polska i Francja przyjęły deklarację o europejskiej obronie i bezpieczeństwie, 2009, *GazetaPrawna*, 05.09.2009, URL: https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/368156,polska-i-francja-przyjely-deklaracje-o-europejskiej-obronie-i-bezpieczenstwie.html (accessed 17.06.2025).

counterpart, Antoni Macierewicz, that Warsaw's behaviour towards *Airbus* called into question Poland's interest not only in trilateral cooperation, but also in European cooperation.[1] The uncompromising and explicit focus on military-political cooperation with the US first led to the cancellation of French President François Hollande's visit to Warsaw in October 2016, and then to a full-scale freezing of Polish-French relations [17]. Throughout 2015—2021, mutual resentment was exacerbated by Warsaw's protracted conflict with Brussels, Paris and Berlin over issues of respect for the rule of law and democratic norms in Poland. The countries took opposing positions on almost the entire range of issues on the European agenda — from migration policy to global warming [1]. Attitudes toward Russia's foreign policy, including issues of NATO and EU expansion to the east and the assessment of conflicts in the post-Soviet area, remained a constant source of irritation. In discussions on these issues, Poland's tough anti-Russian stance was at odds with France's more moderate position, in the Ukrainian crisis as well (2014—2022) [18, pp. 177—178].

France's involuntary revival of interest in the states at the eastern flank of the EU after Brexit [19, pp. 10—11] and the official visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Warsaw in February 2020, although caused poorly concealed satisfaction in Poland with the "long-awaited recognition" of its role in the EU[2], did not lead to any noticeable breakthroughs in bilateral relations.

Circumstances of the signing and main provisions of the treaty

The rapprochement between the two countries began only in the light of the events of 2022—2025, which forced Paris and Warsaw to reconsider the status of their relations. After Russia launched a special military operation in February 2022, Poland welcomed France's tougher stance on Russia. It should be noted that while in 2022 Emmanuel Macron attempted to mediate between the EU/NATO states and Russia, by early 2023, Paris's shift towards Atlanticism had become apparent. The French leader's flowery apologies in Bratislava on June 1, 2023, for the West's alleged 'failure' to hear on time coming from Eastern Europe warnings about Russia were perceived in Poland as a final acknowledgement of the correctness of its tough anti-Russian course over the past 15 years.[3] Warsaw's expectations that its strategically important position on the eastern flank of the EU and NATO, its role as the main military and technical hub for aid to Kyiv, and its ambitious plans to increase the size and modernise its army would lead to recognition of its role in the EU have been partially justified. For French politicians and analysts, Poland emerged as the de facto leading actor in efforts to contain Russia in Eastern Europe during the period 2022—2024 [20; 21].

[1] Francja i Niemcy krytycznie o decyzji Polski ws. Caracali, 2016, *Euractiv*, 07.11.2016, URL: https://www.euractiv.pl/section/gospodarka/news/w-sprawie-caracali-po-jednej-stronie-niezrozumienie-a-po-drugiej-zaskoczenie/ (accessed 17.06.2025).

[2] Beata Kempa nie ma wątpliwości: Wizyta Macrona ogromnym sukcesem prezydenta Dudy. To przełom w relacjach polsko-francuskich, 2020, *wPolityce*, 04.02.2020, URL: https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/485416-kempa-wizyta-macrona-w-polsce-to-ogromny-sukces-prezydenta (accessed 17.06.2025).

[3] À Nancy, la France et la Pologne scellent un partenariat anti-Poutine, 2025, *Le Figaro*, 09.05.2025, URL: https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/a-nancy-la-france-et-la-pologne-scellent-un-partenariat-anti-poutine-20250508 (accessed 17.06.2025).

The latest change of government in Warsaw has significantly contributed to the intensification of Franco-Polish dialogue [2]. The return to power of the pro-European coalition led by Donald Tusk, following the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2023, which was enthusiastically welcomed in Western Europe, led to a rapprochement between the countries on a number of issues.[1] Emmanuel Macron's meetings with Donald Tusk on February 12, 2024, in Paris and on December 12 of the same year in Warsaw signalled a warming of relations and the preparation of a new bilateral agreement [22]. Drawing attention to Tusk's visit to France on February 12, Emmanuel Macron posted a message in Polish on social network X:* "I am delighted to welcome you, dear @DonaldTusk. This is your first visit since taking office as Prime Minister, marking a new chapter in our relations with Poland. Let us continue to work together for the security and independence of Europe!" .[2] Finally, the crisis in transatlantic relations that emerged following the return of Donald Trump's administration to power in the United States in January 2025, together with growing uncertainty surrounding American security guarantees, further encouraged Paris and Warsaw to view each other as key allies in strengthening European security [23, p. 140].

The Treaty on Strengthening Cooperation and Friendship, signed on May 9, 2025, officially replaced the Treaty on Friendship and Solidarity, signed in Paris on April 9, 1991. Due to the continuity of the documents, the structure of both treaties is very similar and covers cooperation in the fields of foreign policy and European integration, security and defence, economy, science and culture, environmental protection, migration, youth policy and other areas — each with adjustments for the realities of 1991 and 2025. The Treaty of Nancy replaces earlier declarations from the 2000s on cooperation in strengthening European security, which have become obsolete over the past decade due to profound changes in Europe's security environment. The key provisions of the treaty have caused the greatest resonance in the countries and are capable of influencing the further development of bilateral relations between Warsaw and Paris.

First and foremost, the treaty provides for a significant deepening of bilateral political and military cooperation (Articles 1 and 4). Annual bilateral summit meetings between the French president and the Polish prime minister, with the participation of members of the governments, are established as a new basic form of political dialogue. The treaty also provides for annual consultations at the level of foreign ministers, defence ministers, chiefs of general staff and heads

[1] Relation franco-polonaise : qu'est-ce que ce traité de Nancy, signé vendredi par les deux pays? 2025, *RTL*, 08.05.2025, URL: https://www.rtl.fr/actu/international/relation-franco-polonaise-qu-est-ce-que-ce-traite-de-nancy-signe-vendredi-par-les-deux-pays-7900502692 (accessed 17.06.2025).

[2] Emmanuel Macron salue la première visite de Donald Tusk en tant que Premier ministre et appelle à renforcer la sécurité et la souveraineté de l'Europe, 2024. *Observatoire de l'Europe*, 12.02.2024, URL: https://www.observatoiredeleurope.com/emmanuel-macron-salue-la-premiere-visite-de-donald-tusk-en-tant-que-premier-ministre-et-appelle-a-renforcer-la-securite-et-la-souverainete-de-leurope_a19790.html (accessed 17.06.2025).

* X is owned by Meta, an entity listed in the register of extremist organisations of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.

of services responsible for supplying the armed forces with weaponry. The treaty also broadly outlines the possibility of strengthening cooperation at the level of the parliaments, civil society and business communities of the two countries.

Although both the Poles and the French present the Nancy Treaty primarily as an agreement on strengthening common security, only one article (Article 4) is devoted to security and defence issues, and it is the central one. The parties attach particular importance to paragraph 2 of Article 4, under which the parties undertook to assist each other in repelling military aggression: "The parties shall provide mutual assistance, including military assistance" — in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, Article 5 of the NATO Treaty and Article 42.7 of the EU Lisbon Treaty. Thus, first, this provision of the treaty does not create any new basis for providing military assistance and does not entail any additional allied obligations beyond those already binding both countries under the above-mentioned international documents. Secondly, although the parties of the treaty have promised to provide mutual assistance to each other in the event of a military attack, including military means, there is no mention of them committing to assist each other specifically with all available means. Furthermore, this assistance is subject to the frameworks of the UN, the EU and NATO. It does not oblige France to act beyond the limits of the decisions of these structures. In fact, Paris leaves the decision on the format of military assistance to its own discretion. Moreover, there are no French military contingents in Poland yet [1]. In Poland, however, it is believed that the very signing of the new treaty emphasises the importance of previous allied commitments and thus serves primarily as an element of deterrence against Russia [4].

In Article 4, the parties emphasise the leading role of European values, transatlantic relations, ties between the EU and NATO, "European defence" and Europeans' responsibility for ensuring their own security as strategic priorities. The treaty places a noticeable emphasis on the need to expand the EU's independent defence capabilities, as well as to strengthen European technological and industrial capabilities in the defence sector. Undoubtedly, at the instigation of Donald Tusk and his pro-European and liberal government, Poland is "signing up" to the protection of European values (in defiance of its domestic political opponents) and emphasizing the importance of "European defense", while France, for its part, recognizes the importance of security of Central and Eastern Europe, thereby creating a basis for involvement in ensuring it [1; 5]. Although the text makes it clear that these ambitions are not aimed at replacing NATO, but at developing its European ''backbone'' in the context of US expectations for greater responsibility on the part of European allies for their own security, a part of the Polish political elite has reacted sharply negatively to them. Behind the wording that "Europe must take greater responsibility for its defence," "take independent action and deal with immediate and future security threats and challenges" (Article 4, Paragraph 1), the Polish Eurosceptic and national-conservative opposition saw attempts to promote the idea of creating European armed forces independent from NATO.[1]

[1] Niepewny traktat polsko-francuski, 2025, *Myśl Polska*, 23.05.2025, URL: https://myslpolska.info/2025/05/23/niepewny-traktat-polsko-francuski/ (accessed 17.06.2025).

Paragraphs 3—7 of Article 4 spell out several formats designed to bring the armies of the two countries closer together: joint exercises, increased interoperability, simplified transit and deployment of armed forces on each other's territory, cooperation between military-industrial complexes and military academies, all of which are intended to create a "common strategic culture". The leaders of the two countries have already announced participation in joint military exercises and the strengthening of ties in the field of arms procurement and production.[1] The same goals are ensured by Paragraph 9 of Article 4 on promoting the principle of European preferences in arms procurement. This creates a legal basis for the development of various military-industrial programs involving the MICs of both countries. France is likely to use this clause to obtain Polish arms contracts (including submarines and refuelling aircraft). Representatives of the French companies *Naval Group* and *Airbus* have already expressed interest in holding consultations with their Polish counterparts on specific projects, but it is not yet clear whether they will meet Poland's requirements [5]. Warsaw is already implementing one costly "strategic partnership" with the US and is unlikely to agree to new arms purchases in exchange for rather vague security declarations.

The "European preferences" declared in the agreement are still at odds with reality — the US and South Korea remain Warsaw's most important partners in arms procurement. Poland, for its part, is clearly hoping to gain access to multilateral European defence industry projects, to which it has been virtually denied access until recently. It may be assumed that Donald Tusk's government plans to use this opportunity to increase the country's involvement in military-industrial cooperation within the EU and European Defence Fund (EDF) projects, which have so far remained insignificant.

Given past scandals in military-technical cooperation between the two countries, implementation of this point still appears difficult, especially after the victory of PiS candidate Karol Nawrocki in the Polish presidential elections in May 2025. An ardent admirer of Donald Trump and an advocate of further strengthening Polish-American ties in the field of defence cooperation, Nawrocki will obviously seek to block those initiatives of the Tusk government that could harm the interests of the American MIC and business in Poland. France, in turn, is also unlikely to change its policy of blocking the Polish military-industrial complex's participation in European projects, including the Franco-German development of the new-generation *MGCS* main battle tank.

Finally, the agreement creates a basis for deepening bilateral cooperation in the field of peaceful atomic energy (Article 9), allowing for the construction of nuclear power facilities and nuclear reactors. A cooperation plan on this issue has also been signed. In honour of the joint discovery of radium by Pierre and Marie Curie on April 20, 1902, a Franco-Polish friendship holiday is established (Article 11). In general, Poland, which is still heavily dependent on coal, is interested in diversifying its energy sources, and France, as a nuclear

[1] Macron et Tusk se jurent "assistance mutuelle" face à la Russie, 2025, *Challenges*, 09.05.2025, URL: https://www.challenges.fr/monde/macron-et-tusk-vont-signer-un-traite-renforcant-le-partenariat-franco-polonais_604012 (accessed 17.06.2025); Traité de Nancy : les limites du pacte de défense franco-polonaise, 2022, *Le Point*, 09.05.2022, URL: https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/traite-de-nancy-les-limites-du-pacte-de-defense-franco-polonais-09-05-2025-2589229_24.php?lpmc=1747822928 (accessed 17.06.2025).

power, is ready to act as a supplier of relevant technologies, for example, in the construction of an EPR water-cooled nuclear reactor.[1] However, the prospects for Franco-Polish cooperation in this area are not yet clear. In 2021—2022, Warsaw rejected three proposals from French energy companies participating in a tender for the construction of the first nuclear power plant in the republic in favour of the American *Westinghouse* company.

At the same time, the issue of French nuclear weapons being deployed on Polish territory, which is of particular concern to Warsaw, is not addressed at all in the agreement. Although Donald Tusk is trying to 'save face' by emphasising that this issue remains subject to further discussion with France based on the Nancy Treaty, the French doubt whether the Polish side is willing to take the risk and finance the storage of foreign nuclear arsenal, the decision to use which, if necessary, will be made solely by the French president.[2] In Poland, particular attention has been paid to President Macron's statements that the mutual assistance clause "covers all components" and that France's vital security interests have a "European dimension" and will be defined with due regard to the interests of its "main partners" [4]. Such vague wording is traditional for France, whose doctrinal documents, based on the interests of nuclear deterrence, deliberately do not specify the boundaries of the territory protected by French nuclear weapons. Therefore, these boundaries implicitly include the territory of both France and its European allies.[3]

Some Polish experts note that this statement by the French leader clearly confirms the possibility of France using its nuclear weapons to protect Poland's security interests, while others emphasise that Macron's statement is "ambiguous in a French manner" and cannot be interpreted undoubtedly this way [4]. Nevertheless, the absence of even a hint of such a possibility in the Nancy Treaty clearly contrasts with the rhetoric about the "coincidence of the vital interests of both countries" in the Anglo-French Lancaster Treaty of 2010 and the "inseparability of security interests" and "use of all available means for mutual defense" in the Franco-German Aachen Treaty of 2019 [10; 24].

In other areas of bilateral cooperation, a significant part of the Treaty is devoted to the development of relations in the fields of economics, energy, industry and digital policy. The treaty creates a platform for initiating joint projects, primarily

[1] Entraide militaire, immigration, nucléaire : ce que contient le "traité d'amitié" franco-polonais signé à Nancy par Emmanuel Macron et Donald Tusk, 2025, *France TV*, 09.05.2025, URL: https://www.franceinfo.fr/monde/europe/manifestations-en-ukraine/entraide-militaire-immigration-nucleaire-ce-que-contient-le-traite-d-amitie-franco-polonais-signe-a-nancy-par-emmanuel-macron-et-donald-tusk_7236972.html (accessed 17.06.2025).

[2] "Menace russe", défense européenne, Trump... Ce qu'il faut retenir de l'allocution d'Emmanuel Macron, 2025, *France 24*, 05.03.2025, URL: https://www.france24.com/fr/france/20250305-ukraine-trump-poutine-ce-qu-il-faut-retenir-allocution-emmanuel-macron-d%C3%A9fense-europ%C3%A9enne (accessed 17.06.2025).

[3] *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*, 2017, p. 54, URL: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-revue_strategique_dsn_cle4b3beb.pdf (accessed 17.06.2025).

in the field of developing technologies of the future — artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, microelectronics, cloud computing and hydrogen technologies (clause 8, article 6).

In the area of global challenges for Europe, the parties have declared their commitment to maintaining the competitiveness and stability of their economies while accelerating reindustrialisation, digital transformation and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Article 6, paragraph 3). In the context of environmental and climate issues, it is unclear how exactly and how quickly the parties intend to overcome the fundamental differences in their current policies on these issues [25, p. 385]. In particular, Article 7 of the treaty, which envisages the implementation of the EU's climate program by 2030, directly contradicts both the "anti-green" sentiments of Polish society and the actions of Donald Tusk himself to block certain elements of the EU's "Green Deal". Similar questions raise the intention of the two countries, declared in Article 5, to develop cooperation in the field of migration policy, given the significant tightening of Warsaw's migration policy as part of Poland's new strategy for 2025—2030 and Donald Tusk's sharp criticism of the new EU Migration Pact.

Nancy Treaty among its "cousins": a European dimension

Besides the temporal framework of Polish-French relations, the Treaty of Nancy also fits into the EU spatial framework, continuing the range of agreements concluded by France with other major EU and NATO member states. They are Germany (Aachen Treaty in 2019[1]), Italy (Quirinal Treaty in 2021[2]), Spain (Barcelona Treaty in 2023[3]) and Portugal (Treaty of Porto in 2025[4]). All of these treaties were concluded within a relatively short interval and are characterised by a high degree of structural similarity. Collectively, they cover a wide range of areas of interaction, including bilateral cooperation, European and foreign policy, and matters of defence and security. Their signing, initiated by France, may pursue three goals. First, to update the partnership framework, as more than fifty years have passed since the beginning of European integration, and the new realities that have emerged over this period have substantially reshaped the EU without being adequately reflected in earlier treaties. Second, to stimulate the

[1] Traité entre la République Française et la République Fédérale d'Allemagne sur la coopération et l'intégration franco-allemandes, 2019, *France Diplomatie*, URL: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/traite.aix-la-chapelle.22.01.2019_cle8d3c8e.pdf (accessed 17.06.2025).

[2] Traité entre la République Française et la République Italienne pour une coopération bilatérale renforcée, 2021, *Elysée*, 26.11.2021, URL: https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/11/8143fbb609fe8fa002cd7a36deccc1a219766cda.pdf (accessed 17.06.2025).

[3] Traité d'amitié et de coopération entre la République Française et le Royaume d'Espagne, 2023, *Elysée*, 19.01.2023, URL: https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/14/20828fdc7c713dc88e993c917c97dc1377f50a08.pdf (accessed 17.06.2025).

[4] Traité d'amitié et de coopération entre la République française et la République portugaise, 2025, *Elysée*, 28.02.2025, URL: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/03/14/traite-damitie-et-de-cooperation-entre-la-republique-francaise-et-la-republique-portugaise (accessed 25.09.2025).

development of "multi-speed integration" within the EU [26, p. 34—35], including the emerging of a common strategic culture (a common approach to understand the EU "strategic autonomy"), which is important for Emmanuel Macron, at two levels — administrative (regular consultations between ministers and officials) and public (exchanges, joint trainings etc.). Third — the signing of a range of agreements may indicate Macron's desire to strengthen the intergovernmental framework for integration [26, p. 41], to avoid the dependence on Eurosceptics if they could rise to power. Moreover, France finds itself at the centre of this ''web'' that allows Paris to spearhead integration by manoeuvring between Germany and other states representing the South and East of the EU.

All of these agreements are heterogeneous. They differ in the circumstances of their signing, their titles, scopes, formats of interaction, declared priorities of the foreign policy, and their commitments in the areas of defence and security. Each of these treaties possesses its own distinctive profile. In this respect, the Treaty of Nancy is both comparable to and clearly differentiated from its related agreements (see Table 1).

Comparison of five treaties, concluded by France, by key parameters

Treaty and counterparty	Aachen Treaty with Germany (2019)	Quirinal Treaty with Italy (2021)	Barcelona Treaty with Spain (2023)	Porto Treaty with Portugal (2025)	Nancy Treaty with Poland (2025)
Title of treaty	Treaty on cooperation and integration	Treaty for enhanced bilateral cooperation	Treaty of friendship and cooperation	Treaty of friendship and cooperation	Treaty for enhanced cooperation and friendship
Number of articles	28	12	36	29	19
Frequency of summit meetings	At least twice a year	Once a year	Once a year	Regularly	Once a year
Frequency of mutual participation of ministers in the governmental meetings of the partner state	Once every three months	Once every three months	Once every three months	Not stated	Not stated
Frequency of consultations at the MFA's level	At least once every three months	Annually	Regularly	Regularly	Regularly
Common defence and security councils	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not stated	Not stated
Availability of «2+2» meetings	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not stated	Yes
Formats of interparliamentary cooperation	Common Parliamentary Assembly	Dialogue on border issues	Dialogue	Not stated	Dialogue

The end of Table

Treaty and counterparty	Aachen Treaty with Germany (2019)	Quirinal Treaty with Italy (2021)	Barcelona Treaty with Spain (2023)	Porto Treaty with Portugal (2025)	Nancy Treaty with Poland (2025)
Common economic priorities (as stated)	Single Economic Space	Monetary Union	Monetary Union	Common Market	Common Market
Frequency of bilateral economic forums	The work of the Common Economic and Financial Council	Once a year	Once a year	Regularly	Once every two years
Availability of cooperation within the NATO framework	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	Yes	Yes
The base of the world order, as stated in the treaty	Rules-based order	Law-based order	Law-based order	Law-based order	The world order is not specified, just international law is mentioned
Threat assessment for Europe, as stated in the preamble	Not stated	Not stated	"Combination of crises and threats unseen since the second world war"	"All forms of threats"	"The persistent security threat posed by the Russian aggression against Ukraine"
Commitments of the parties in the field of defence	Providing mutual assistance to each other by all available means, including military ones	No mention of military aid	No mention of military aid	No mention of military aid	Providing mutual assistance to each other, including by military means, — in accordance with article 51 of the UN Charter, article 5 of the nato treaty and article 42.7 of the eu treaty
Availability of increasing interoperability between the two armies and joint exercises	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	Yes	Yes

First of all, let us note the different titles of the agreements, which define their main ideas. The *Nancy Treaty for Enhanced Cooperation and Friendship* is far

from the degree of closeness established by the *Aachen Treaty on Cooperation and Integration*. It seems to be closer to the *Barcelona* or *Porto Treaties of Friendship and Cooperation*. Nevertheless, in terms of the number of articles (19), a parameter reflecting the volume and detail of the subject of regulation, the Nancy Treaty is inferior to almost all given agreements, exceeding only the Quirinal Treaty (12).

As for cooperation formats, the Nancy Treaty introduces some measures familiar to other agreements: they are summit meetings, consultations at the level of foreign ministers and defence ministers (2+2 format), and interparliamentary cooperation. But their frequency and degree of convergence do not allow us to say unequivocally that Poland is becoming for France a partner on an equal footing with Germany, Italy and Spain. Thus, Franco-Polish summit meetings are declared to be held *once a year* (Clause 2 of Article 1), as are Franco-Italian and Franco-Spanish ones, while Franco-German meetings are to be held at least *twice a year*. Moreover, the Nancy Treaty (as well as the Treaty of Porto) *lacks* a symbolic but significant element — the participation of a member of the government of one of the states in a meeting of the Council of Ministers of the other side once per trimester, although this clause is present in the other three treaties. Consultations at the level of foreign ministers are described in the Nancy Treaty merely as "regular," whereas in Franco—German relations they are held at least once every three months, and in the Franco—Italian framework, on an annual basis. With regard to meetings of defence ministers, the Nancy Treaty, like the Treaty of Porto, does not provide for the establishment of a defence and security council, in contrast to the other three treaties. Nevertheless, it does envisage regular consultations in the 2+2 format involving the heads of the foreign and defence ministries. Finally, at the level of interparliamentary cooperation, the Aachen Treaty explicitly envisages the creation of a joint Franco—German Parliamentary Assembly. None of the other four agreements, including the Nancy Treaty, provides for a comparable degree of parliamentary rapprochement.

Each of the five agreements sets out the priorities for cooperation between the parties, which can be divided into three groups: bilateral relations, the development of European integration, and the attitude towards world order and multilateralism. [27, p. 21]. The Nancy treaty *does not contain* any mention of a single economic area (as in the Aachen Treaty) or of enhancing the monetary union (as in the case of the Quirinal and Barcelona Treaties). Like the Treaty of Porto, it states only the development of a "common market". Although the Nancy Treaty provides for a bilateral economic forum (unlike the Franco-Italian and Franco-Spanish agreements), it shall *not be held annually*, but just "*at least once every two years*" (Article 6). However, the Nancy Treaty is the *only one of the five agreements that contains* a separate article on cooperation in peaceful nuclear development. Anyway, Spain, as well as France, also has nuclear power plants, and the Quirinal treaty could facilitate Franco-Italian cooperation in constructing a system of small modular nuclear reactors [28, p. 10].

Advocacy of European integration runs through all five agreements, but every treaty has its own nuances. Like its ''cousins'', the Nancy Treaty *declares support* for the joint work of EU member states outside the Old World, including the Europe-Africa partnership. Like the agreements of Quirinal, Barcelona and Porto, the Nancy Treaty *highlights the importance* of links between the EU and the Mediterranean. Like its Barcelona and Porto ''cousins'', the Nancy Treaty *sets*

out support for EU enlargement and the development of a "European Political Community". However, the Treaty of Nancy displays a more pronounced orientation towards Euro-Atlanticism and a stronger tendency towards the securitisation of policy domains. It establishes not only European integration but also transatlantic relations as strategic priorities, aligning it with the Treaties of Quirinal and Porto. Moreover, the Franco-Polish cooperation is included within the framework of the Weimar Triangle and the Eastern Partnership, and the importance of ties between the EU and the Arctic, Asia, and the Indo-Pacific region is also emphasised (Clause 4 of Article 2). Although all five treaties declare their support for multilateral governance formats (multilateralism) based on the principles of the UN Charter, the Nancy Treaty *does not mention* either a rules-based world order (as it is in the Aachen treaty) or a law-based world order (as it is in the Treaties of Quirinal, Barcelona and Porto), but modestly affirms respect for international law (Clause 1 of Article 3). All these features could be explained by a new context — the development of the Ukrainian conflict in Europe. Thus, the Nancy Treaty directly affirms the increasing threat to European security as a result of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, surpassing in this the Barcelona treaty, which contains just a vague reference to the "*combination of crises and threats unseen since the Second World War*".

The central element of the five treaties is the parties' defence commitments, which are all bound by the NATO and EU frameworks. This is a rare case where the Nancy Treaty is closer to the Aachen Treaty than the other three agreements. In the Aachen Treaty, France and Germany promise to assist each other "*by all available means*, including military ones" (Clause 1 of Article 4). The Nancy Treaty, as shown above, contains a commitment to provide military assistance, but it is less concrete, and the other three agreements do not mention military assistance at all — a feature which seriously weakens the obligations set out in them.

All treaties also contain articles on cooperation between the armies and military-industrial facilities of the parties: in all texts, this point is linked with the need "to create the common strategic culture and to conduct joint military operations, joint training and military exchanges",[1] and the convergence and cooperation of military-industrial complexes in the name of a common "European defence". The Nancy Treaty, like the Quirinal, Barcelona, and Porto agreements, includes provisions facilitating the transit and deployment of troops on each other's territory, as well as cooperation in space activities. Similar to its Porto counterpart, the Nancy Treaty emphasises enhancing the interoperability of the two countries' armed forces and conducting joint military exercises. To sum it up, the Nancy Treaty structurally and thematically continues a range of agreements previously signed by France with leading EU states, and, in comparison with the 1991 Treaty, truly raises Franco-Polish relations to a level *close* to the Franco-German, Franco-Italian and Franco-Spanish alliances. But in terms of the declared scale of interaction and the degree of closeness between the parties, it is far from the Aachen Treaty in almost all respects and is much closer to the Treaty

[1] The Aachen treaty doesn't contain a provision on military exchanges, but this commitment is stated in the Élysée Treaty of 1963. See: *Traité de l'Elysée*, 22 janvier 1963, URL: https://france-allemagne.fr/fr/le-couple-franco-allemand/historique/traites/traite-de-lelysee-22-janvier-1963 (accessed 17.06.2025).

of Porto than to its Quirinal and Barcelona ''cousins''. Nevertheless, Warsaw has clearly joined the group of Paris's key strategic partners. As for the practical impact of the Treaty of Nancy, as with the other comparable agreements, it can only be assessed in a highly provisional manner, given that the treaty has yet to demonstrate its effectiveness in practice. Against the backdrop of similar treaties concluded among other NATO members, such as the Kensington Treaty of 2025 between the United Kingdom and Germany, it can be argued that European powers are increasingly seeking to establish additional strategic ''backstops'' by creating or reinforcing bilateral cooperation mechanisms. This trend reflects a growing inclination to hedge against uncertainty by reducing reliance on U.S. security guarantees within NATO and, in particular, on the European Union, whose military capabilities remain in the process of development.

Conclusion

Although the Nancy Treaty can hardly be considered an epochal event in European politics, it marks an important milestone. This agreement differs from the Aachen, Quirinal and Barcelona Treaties primarily in that it was concluded by France not with a neighbouring Western European state, but with an Eastern European one. Thus, France, recognising Poland's growing role as an economic player and security provider not only in Eastern Europe but throughout the Old World, is *seeking* to enhance their ties in various areas to the level of French relations with Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. This allows Paris and Warsaw to rely on each other in their relations with Berlin, Moscow, and Washington, including when considering the prospects for the development of the Ukrainian conflict.

Can it be argued that the Nancy Treaty enhances Poland's level of security? While strengthening relations with a European nuclear power possessing significant military and economic capabilities is undoubtedly beneficial for Poland, the principal challenge lies in the effective implementation of the Treaty's provisions in practice, including cooperation in the defence-industrial, military, energy, and economic spheres. Despite political statements suggesting that the Treaty should "change the game", the new elements it introduces do not so much reshape the balance of power in Europe—neither the Franco—German nor the Polish—American alliances are disappearing [29, p. 97]—as create favourable conditions for the further development of cooperation between France and Poland. Indeed, the scope and substance of the Franco—Polish partnership will depend primarily on the extent to which Paris and Warsaw are able to translate political commitments into concrete initiatives [5]. In this sense, the credibility of the obligations enshrined in the treaty will ultimately be tested by time and circumstances [1].

Experience suggests a cautious assessment. The conclusion of the Franco—German and Franco—Italian treaties has not fundamentally transformed bilateral relations nor eliminated their inherent structural problems [27, p. 26; 30, p. 28]. According to Donald Tusk, the Treaty of Nancy should, in the near future, be supplemented by a similar agreement with the United Kingdom, thereby elaborating a strengthened "dual" system of security guarantees for Poland in Europe. This, in turn, indicates that Warsaw does not yet regard the Treaty of Nancy as sufficient to achieve its core defence and security objectives. At the

same time, historical experience cannot be ignored: "Anglo-French security guarantees" were associated with a national catastrophe for Poland in September 1939 [31, p. 315—318] and remain embedded in Polish strategic culture more as symbols of unfulfilled promises than as examples of reliable commitments.

Against this background, the Polish expert community remains largely sceptical regarding the prospects for the effective implementation of the Treaty of Nancy, particularly following the election of President Karol Nawrocki, whose foreign-policy orientation is expected to prioritise the strategic alliance with the United States. Such assessments of the treaty, combined with the limited practical effectiveness of similar European bilateral agreements concluded by France, raise broader questions about the underlying objectives of these arrangements.

The duplication of commitments and guarantees observed in these documents — many of which already exist within the NATO framework — appears to reflect a certain mistrust of collective allied obligations, shaped by both historical experience and contemporary foreign-policy uncertainty. At present, the "reinsurance" function and symbolic significance of the Treaty of Nancy outweigh its tangible practical impact.

With regard to Russia's relations with the European Union and NATO, the Treaty of Nancy may nevertheless signal a shift in France's priorities in Eastern Europe, suggesting that Paris could increasingly focus its regional policy on Poland [3]. However, the treaty's full strategic potential is likely to become clear only after a settlement of the conflict in Ukraine and the subsequent negotiation of a new framework for collective security in Europe involving Russia and Western states.

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PJZYJT

THE IMAGE OF RUSSIA IN FINLAND'S HISTORICAL POLITICS AMID NATO ACCESSION: A CASE STUDY OF PRESIDENT SAULI NIINISTÖ'S SPEECHES

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The study focuses on the image of Russia in Finland's historical politics in the context of the country's accession to NATO. Its aim is to identify changes in the place attributed to Russia in the Finnish political elite's references to Finland's own past, shared Russian—Finnish history, and world history. To achieve this objective, the author analyses speeches by the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, on foreign policy issues delivered between 2021 and 2024: prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, during Helsinki's accession process to NATO, and after Finland obtained full membership in the Alliance. The theoretical framework of the study draws on the concept of historical politics as interpreted by Alexei Miller, as well as on the theory of historical narrative developed by Eviatar Zerubavel. The primary research method employed is discourse analysis in accordance with the approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The analysis reveals that Sauli Niinistö referred most actively to the past during the first year of the conflict in Ukraine and following Finland's application for NATO membership. Since 2022, the Winter War and other episodes of Russian—Finnish confrontation have assumed a far more prominent role in historical politics than the 1975 Helsinki Accords. These references contribute to the construction of Russia's image as an enemy and a threat in both the present and the past, and serve to mobilise public support within Finland for Ukraine. As a result, the historical narrative increasingly takes the form of a prolonged and continuous struggle between the two nations, devoid of any experience of mutually beneficial cooperation or sustained dialogue between the two countries.

Keywords:
Russia, Finland, historical policy, historical narrative, 'Lieux de Mémoire', NATO, Winter War, conflict in Ukraine

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Introduction

In recent years, politicians from different countries have increasingly referred to the past to achieve certain goals in the present. Finland is no exception: its elites often use historical analogies when discussing the conflict in Ukraine or Russian politics. They also reinforce their ties with the Nordic countries, the EU member-states, and the US by using their historical experience. A striking example of this trend was the recent speech of President Alexander Stubb at the meeting of European leaders and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy with US President Donald Trump in August 2025, when the head of the Finnish state compared Ukraine's position to that of Finland in 1944.[1]

Nevertheless, the practice of referring to the past had become a significant feature of Finnish political discourse even earlier, especially in the context of the country's accession to NATO in 2022—2023. It was the images of history that served as an additional argument for emphasising the threat from Russia, which is crucial for justifying shifts in Finland's foreign policy strategy, the need to support Ukraine and closer military-political cooperation with European countries and the United States.

To date, a substantial body of research has examined Finland's path to NATO and, in particular, Russia's role in this process. The possibility of Helsinki joining the Alliance was discussed even before the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine (e. g., in Gromyko and Plevako [1], Khudoley and Lanko [2]), who framed it as a Finnish security dilemma. However, after the decision to apply, scholars began to explore various aspects of this process. These include papers offering a comparative analysis of Finland's and Sweden's path to NATO (Sidorova and Ryabinina [3]), studies on the prerequisites for joining the Alliance (Danilov [4], Christiansson [5], Gunter [6]), analyses of the public opinion factor (Ponamareva [7]) and examinations of the foreign policy decision-making process during a crisis (Koskimaa and Raunio [8]). The impact of systemic changes was particularly emphasised, with specific discussion of the consequences of NATO expansion for regional security and the security of Russia (Ryabinina [9] and Smirnov [10]). At the same time, the factor of memory and the use of this instrument by the Finnish authorities to justify their decision have not been examined separately, with the exception of a single English-language study by David Arter [11]. In this work, Finland's historical experience, above all the Winter War, is presented as one of the reasons for framing Russia as a threat and, consequently, for joining the Alliance. However, changes in commemorative practices themselves are not analysed.

On the other hand, a body of scholarship can be identified that addresses topical issues of memory politics in Finland, despite the fact that the country remains largely on the periphery of Memory Studies, which have tended to

[1] Presidentti Stubb: Löysimme ratkaisun Venäjän kanssa vuonna 1944 ja löydämme sen myös vuonna 2025, 2025, *Yle*, 18.08.2025, URL: https://yle.fi/a/74-20177652/64-3-275912 (accessed 28.08.2025).

focus more extensively on Central and Eastern Europe. In foundational works examining the role of memory in international relations, including the classical edited volumes by Bell [12], Langenbacher [13], and Resende and Budryte [14], as well as the study by Kopstein and Subotić [15] devoted to Holocaust memory in the international context of the 2020s and Mälksoo's typology of approaches to the study of memory in world politics [16], Finnish cases are notably absent.

Research that does address Finnish contexts of memory politics tends to concentrate on specific *lieux de mémoire* within national historical narratives, often only indirectly connected to Russia. This includes studies on the significance of the Second World War for contemporary Finnish society, such as works by Wallenius-Korkalo [17], Kolodnikova [18], and Vitukhnovskaya-Kauppala [19] on the Winter War; Holmila's research on Holocaust memory in Finland [20]; and Davydova-Minguet's analysis of commemorative practices related to the Second World War among Russian Finns [21]. Other studies focus on earlier historical episodes, including the Great Northern War (Liman [22]) and the Finnish Civil War (Heimo and Peltonen [23]; Kuzmenko [24]), as well as on local and regional memory practices — for example, memory of opera in the Kymi region (Hautsalo and Westerlund [25]) and nostalgia for Petsamo in the context of the Russian–Finnish border (Lähteenmäki and Colpaert [26]).

The objective of this research is to identify transformations in Finnish historical policy and in the role attributed to Russia during discussions surrounding Finland's accession to NATO. The study seeks to examine how references to the past have evolved within Finnish political discourse, what new features have emerged in the historical narratives articulated by political elites, and how Russia is positioned within these narratives. To achieve this aim, the analysis compares key discursive practices from the period prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, during Finland's path towards NATO membership, and following its accession to the Alliance.

Materials and methods

The primary sources for this study are speeches delivered by the then-President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, between 2021 and 2024 on issues of foreign policy. These speeches reflect several stages in the transformation of Finland's foreign and security policy: the period before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine and Finland's decision to join NATO; the accession process in 2022 — 2023; and the first year of Helsinki's membership in the Alliance. Unlike long-term strategic documents, the President's relatively frequent public statements make it possible to trace the dynamics of these changes and to identify which representations of Finland's past were constructed at each stage, as well as which *lieux de mémoire* became most salient. It should also be noted that the role of the President of Finland was significantly curtailed following the adoption of the 2000 Constitution, which substantially reduced the head of state's influence in domestic politics [27].

However, in the sphere of foreign policy, particularly in relations with Russia and the United States, the president remains a key actor. Consequently, his rhetoric on these issues plays a pivotal role in shaping Finland's external political discourse.

The theoretical framework of this work, on the one hand, is the concept of historical policy, that is, a set of practices through which various political forces seek to establish their interpretations of historical events as dominant [28, p. 10]. In this study, the concept is used to analyse the appeal to the past in the context of foreign policy activities. At this level, referring to the past serves as a tool for political elites to achieve certain goals (in this case, to justify joining NATO and to form a new system of relations with Russia), and success in consolidating an interpretation is a demonstration of the state's strength in the international arena.

To examine appeals to the past, the author draws on the structuralist approach to historical narratives developed by Eviatar Zerubavel in "Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past" [29]. Zerubavel argues that certain schematic formats for narrating the past are more prevalent in some cultural and historical contexts than in others. He identifies a number of sociomnemonic structures, including "progress" (in which the present is depicted as more prosperous than the past), "decline" (a narrative centred on a "glorious past" contrasted with a less favourable present), "zigzag" (a narrative of alternating advances and setbacks), and "circles" (a non-linear representation of historical events).

Within this framework, particular attention is paid to the organisation of the narrative: how its beginning and end are constructed, which actors are included in the narrative, and how different images and meanings are interconnected within the overall narrative structure.

These individual images may be understood as ''lieux de mémoire'' (Eng. sites of memory), a concept introduced by the French historian Pierre Nora [30] in the context of his project on French collective memory, which was structured around emblematic representations of past epochs. *Lieux de mémoire* can be defined as "any significant entity, whether material or ideal in nature, which, through human will or the passage of time, has become a symbolic element of the heritage of a particular community". A *lieu de mémoire* may take the form of a geographical site or an intangible phenomenon; more broadly, it refers to historical focal points that help define group cohesion in the present and play a significant role in the collective identity of a community (for example, the French or the Finns).

The main research method employed is discourse analysis, drawing on the approach developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe [31]. This approach conceptualises reality as socially constructed through discourses that can be identified in a variety of texts, including statements by political actors and media publications. At the same time, the authors emphasise the inherent fluidity of discourses and their continual competition with one another, which makes it necessary to identify the dominant discourse and assess its significance at a particu-

lar stage. The content of a discourse is shaped by its nodal points, which serve as organising centres and may be articulated within chains of equivalence alongside other images that are essential for the construction of a coherent narrative.

Sauli Niinistö's appeal to the past in 2021 — early 2022

Before the deterioration of EU—Russia relations, the Finnish president rarely used the tools of historical policy in speeches on foreign policy topics. In addition, these issues did not become key in his traditional addresses to the Finns. For example, in his New Year's speech in 2021, Sauli Niinistö did not discuss Finnish foreign policy at all and, therefore, did not attempt to justify any steps with historical analogies.

Nevertheless, certain references to the past can be identified in the speeches of the Finnish president during 2021. Most frequently, he referred to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), held in Helsinki in 1975. This event occupies a central place in the Finnish historical narrative, underscoring Finland's significance in the international arena. Notably, Sauli Niinistö invoked the CSCE in a variety of settings, including at the United Nations, where he called for the principles of the CSCE Final Act to be extended to all countries worldwide, emphasising the pivotal role of the ''Helsinki spirit'' in fostering dialogue and trust.[1]. He also referred to the CSCE at the Crimea Platform, stressing that these principles continue to constitute the foundation of European security, while portraying Russia and the Soviet Union not as enemies or adversaries of Finland and Europe, but as participants in the Helsinki process and co-founders of the continent's security architecture.[2]

The ''Helsinki spirit'' and the year 1975 were also invoked by Sauli Niinistö in a speech marking the 225th anniversary of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences in Stockholm, where relations with Russia were presented as one of the four pillars of Finnish security policy at the time. The Helsinki meeting was framed as a counterpoint to Cold War confrontation and as a model for future dialogue. More notably, in this address, the president outlined a broader Finnish historical narrative, observing that Finland had historically been part of both Sweden and Russia, while emphasising that the ''Western ties'' forged during the period of Swedish rule played a particularly pivotal role in the development of Finland's political system and culture. These ties, he argued, now underpin Finnish–Swedish cooperation in the field of defence. In addition, at the 2021 Democracy Summit, the president referred to the early extension of voting rights to Finnish women, which took place at a time when the Grand Duchy of Finland

[1] Statement by President of the Republic of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, at the 76th General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly, 2021, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 21.09.2021, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-76th-general-debate-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-21-september-2021/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[2] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Crimea Platform in Kyiv, 2021, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 23.08.2021, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-crimea-platform-in-kyiv-on-23-august-2021/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

was part of the Russian Empire. This indirectly indicated, among other things, the positive contribution of this historical period to the development of the democratic traditions of the Finns.[1]

At the turn of 2021—2022, amid debates on NATO non-expansion and the possibility of a conflict in Ukraine, a noticeable shift in Sauli Niinistö's historical policy became apparent. In his New Year's address, which devoted considerable attention to foreign policy, the Finnish president spoke of the definitive end of the Cold War era, contrasting the contemporary situation not only with that period but also with the earlier great-power policy of "spheres of influence". He also invoked Henry Kissinger to illustrate the complexity of preventing wars and managing security threats. Finland's own narrative, however, was framed in terms of continuity: the country was presented as having pursued a consistent foreign and security policy amid numerous international crises, with the preservation of its distinctive international status portrayed as the central objective throughout its history.[2]

Particularly interesting in the context of these changes is the speech of the Finnish president at the Munich Security Conference on February 20, 2022. In it, he directly compared and contrasted the situation around Ukraine with the period before the start of the Winter War in Finland. Sauli Niinistö pointed out that, unlike the Finns before that conflict, the Ukrainian people were consolidated in the face of a threat,[3] and therefore were ready to resist even more successfully.

The analysis of Niinistö's speeches from 2021 to early 2022 demonstrates a clear transformation of his historical policy in the context of international politics. Before the onset of tensions around Ukraine, the central image and culmination of the Finnish narrative had been the Helsinki 1975 meeting, which was portrayed as a symbol of reconciliation between the opposing sides and a beacon of hope for future dialogue. This idea was further developed through proposals for a "Helsinki 2.0" aimed at resolving contemporary tensions between the Russian Federation and NATO. At the same time, Russia, in its historical incarnations as the USSR and the Russian Empire, was portrayed not as an enemy of Finland or Europe, but rather as an important participant in international affairs on an equal footing with other powers. However, by early 2022, references to the history of conflicts with Russia began to emerge, including the invocation of the Winter War as a frame for interpreting the situation in Ukraine. At this stage, such references remained isolated and were not extended to the imperial period.

[1] Statement by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Summit for Democracy, 2021, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 09.12.2021, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-summit-for-democracy-9-december-2021/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[2] President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö's New Year's Speech, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.01.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinistos-new-years-speech-on-1-january-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[3] President Niinistö at the Munich Security Conference: "When we are challenged, we are together", 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 20.02.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/news/president-niinisto-at-the-munich-security-conference-when-we-are-challenged-we-are-together/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

Images of Finnish history in the context of Finland's accession to NATO in 2022 — early 2023

After the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, Sauli Niinistö first turned explicitly to historical analogies in the sphere of foreign policy in a speech delivered to the Swedish Riksdag in May 2022. On this occasion, he argued that the ongoing conflict marked the end of the tradition of trust and the previous approach to ensuring Finland's security, which, in his view, had now been supplanted by the pursuit of NATO membership. In this context, he recalled the words of U. S. President Harry S. Truman in 1948, at the outset of the Cold War, when Truman declared a willingness to accept foreign policy risks. Finally, the Finnish leader began to articulate a distinct narrative of the conflict in Ukraine itself. In his view, the starting point of the conflict is not February 24, 2022, but the discussion on NATO non-expansion in December 2021,[1] which also concerned Finland.

During this period, new images of the past related to the Russian-Finnish conflicts of different eras appeared in Sauli Niinistö's speeches. At the Flag Day parade in June 2022, talking about the efforts to ensure the defence of Finland, he recalled General Adolf Ehrnrooth, who is associated with the Winter War and the Continuation War.[2] In another speech, the president mentioned the Finnish proverb "the Cossack takes everything that is loose",[3] referring to an even more distant past — the invasion of Russian troops into the country during the wars with Sweden. Finally, he spoke about the pan-European *lieux de mémoire* of the Cold War, such as the construction of the Berlin Wall,[4] which reminded him of Russia's hostility to the collective West.

By contrast, references to the CSCE and the Helsinki Final Act disappear from the speeches of the President of Finland during this period. In his address at the United Nations, Sauli Niinistö made no mention of these frameworks, although

[1] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Swedish Parliament, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 17.05.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-at-the-swedish-parliament-on-17-may-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[2] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Finnish Defence Forces' Flag Day parade in Helsinki, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 04.06.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-finnish-defence-forces-flag-day-parade-in-helsinki-on-4-june-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[3] Keynote speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 10.10.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/keynote-speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-norwegian-institute-of-international-affairs-in-oslo-on-10-october-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[4] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the opening of the 242th National Defence Course, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 07.11.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-opening-of-the-242th-national-defence-course-on-7-november-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

he did recall a quotation from the Swedish diplomat and former UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in the context of the Cold War. He also referred to arms reduction agreements between the United States and the USSR, and later Russia, notably the START III Agreement,[1] indicating that this remains a significant issue and that the conflict can be resolved. Even at the Helsinki Security Forum, the Final Act of 1975 was not mentioned. When Sauli Niinistö addressed the possibility of a new international order and the creation of a new organisation after the end of the conflict in Ukraine, he referred to the OSCE alongside other institutions established in the context of, or immediately following, major military conflicts, such as the League of Nations and the United Nations.[2]

Niinistö's speech at the Nordic Council in November 2022 was also symptomatic. He included the creation of this institution in the context of the Cold War and actually compared Finland's slightly later accession to it with its current ''belated'' accession to NATO. In addition, he emphasised that the Cold War was much less dangerous than Russia's current actions, and the support of Nordic countries for Ukraine stems from their unity over the past 70 years.[3]

In his New Year's address in 2023, references to Finnish historical experiences related to Russia became particularly pronounced. Sauli Niinistö explicitly drew parallels between the conflict in Ukraine and the Winter War, as well as between Vladimir Putin and Joseph Stalin, and between the resistance of ''free'' Ukrainians and that of the Finns. These analogies were employed to justify the need for Helsinki to support Kyiv and to strengthen European unity. At the same time, the conflict in Ukraine was situated within a broader sequence of recent wars — most notably those in Yugoslavia and Georgia — thereby framing it as evidence of the aggressive nature not only of the Soviet Union in the past, but also of the contemporary Russian Federation.[4]

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[1] Statement by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the 77th General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 20.09.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-77th-general-debate-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-20-september-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[2] Keynote address by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Helsinki Security Forum, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 30.09.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/keynote-address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-helsinki-security-forum-30-september-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[3] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the 74th Session of the Nordic Council in Helsinki, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.11.2022, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-74th-session-of-the-nordic-council-in-helsinki-on-1-november-2022/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[4] President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö's New Year's Speech, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.01.2023, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/president-of-the-republic-sauli-niinistos-new-years-speech-on-1-january-2023/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

Similarly, Sauli Niinistö spoke about the "echo of one's own history" at the 2023 Munich Conference, where, however, he did not directly address the specific images of the Winter War, emphasising that the similarities are self-evident.[1] The president further developed this thesis during his visit to Washington in March 2023, where he not only referred to the Soviet–Finnish conflict but also noted that U. S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had supported Helsinki at the time, thereby positioning the United States as being on Finland's side — just as, in his account, it is now on the side of Ukraine. At the same time, to legitimise the contemporary Finnish — American partnership, he referred to Finnish immigration to the United States and even to the sauna tradition that has taken root there.[2]

In comparison with 2021, during the process of Finland's accession to NATO, Sauli Niinistö increasingly replaced references to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and pan-European cooperation with narratives centred on the Cold War, Russian — Finnish conflicts, and Russia's alleged aggressiveness across different historical periods. Within this interpretative framework, Russia's actions in international affairs are presented through a narrative of decline, acquiring an ever more aggressive character, while Finland's own history is depicted as cyclical, marked by recurring confrontations with Russia. At the same time, to underscore ties with the United States — an element crucial to legitimising Helsinki's NATO membership — the Finnish leader increasingly invoked a shared historical experience with the United States, which, in his narrative, is portrayed as having frequently found itself on the same side as Finland in past conflicts.

Historical politics of Sauli Niinistö after Finland's accession to NATO

In conclusion, it is necessary to turn to the peculiarities of Sauli Niinistö's politics and policy after Finland's official accession to NATO on April 4, 2023 and before the end of his presidential term on March 1, 2024. However, at the ceremony of joining the Alliance, the Finnish leader only spoke about the beginning of a new era and the end of the period of non-alignment in Finnish history.[3] At the same

[1] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Munich Security Conference Ewald von Kleist Award ceremony, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 18.02.2023, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-munich-security-conference-ewald-von-kleist-award-ceremony-on-18-february-2023/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[2] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at a Joint Session at the Washington State Capitol, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 06.03.2023, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-a-joint-session-at-the-washington-state-capitol-on-6-march-2023/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[3] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the NATO accession ceremony in Brussels, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 04.04.2023, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-nato-accession-ceremony-in-brussels-4-april-2023/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

time, he assigned the act of accession itself a significant place within the historical narrative. However, subsequently, for example, in his New Year's address in 2024, Sauli Niinistö emphasised that Finland had remained the same subject of international relations and that its foreign policy priorities had not changed.[1]

The president began to elaborate in greater detail on Finland's relations with Russia, for example, in a speech delivered in Johannesburg at the South African Institute of International Affairs. In addition to referring to the Winter War, which he linked with the Continuation War as a phase of resistance to Soviet invasion, Sauli Niinistö also addressed Finland's period as part of the Russian Empire. Although he did not characterise this era as a "dark past", the repeated use of the term "empire" may resonate differently with African audiences, for whom it is closely associated with experiences of colonial rule. According to the president, it was the collapse of the Russian Empire that enabled the emergence of a democratic welfare state in Finland.

More broadly, the Johannesburg speech appears to have been aimed less at justifying Helsinki's accession to NATO or its support for Ukraine and more at articulating the Finnish perspective on the current conflict to countries of the Global South. In this context, he explicitly contrasted the history of relations between African states and the USSR (portrayed as largely positive) with the history of Russian–Finnish conflicts.

In his speech at the UN General Assembly in September, which was Niinistö's last as president, he used his 12-year rule to highlight the changes in international relations, which have become more conflictual compared to 2012, the year his presidency began. In addition, the president again emphasised the similarity of the Ukrainian and Finnish peoples in their struggle with Russia and the USSR for freedom and independence, but at the same time included them in the chain of resistance of all small countries to great powers.[2]

Finally, in his speeches, Sauli Niinistö referred to Russia's alleged goal of re-establishing the Soviet Union. In order to underscore the complexity of the present moment, he also invoked historical analogies with the interwar period, the Great Depression, and the Second World War.[3] On the other hand, following

[1] New Year's Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö, 2024, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.01.2024, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/new-years-speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-on-1-january-2024/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[2] Statement by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the General Debate of the 78th United Nations General Assembly, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 20.09.2023, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-78th-general-debate-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-in-new-york-on-20-september-2023/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[3] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at Max Jakobson Memorial Lecture, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 28.09.2023, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-max-jakobson-memorial-lecture-on-28-september-2023/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

the death of former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, Sauli Niinistö noted that Ahtisaari originated from Karelia, a territory lost by Finland after the Second World War, although he did not further elaborate on this aspect of the narrative. Instead, emphasis was placed on the former president's role in facilitating Russian–American dialogue, within which Finland, by implication, could continue to play a mediating role.[1]

Thus, during the last year of Niinistö's presidency, after Finland joined NATO, his historical policy became less active. For example, without resorting to historical analogies, the Finnish leader commented on the closure of the border with the Russian Federation by comparing migrants to a "Trojan horse" and adding that the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees could no longer be applied in the current circumstances.[2] At the same time, his speeches further reinforced the images of the Winter War and other episodes of conflict in the broader history of Russian–Finnish relations that had emerged earlier, while references to cooperation with European countries and the United States became less prominent. By contrast, the president increasingly addressed audiences in the Global South, seeking to draw on Finland's historical experience in order to persuade these countries to support Ukraine and to convey the position of Western states on the conflict.

Results and discussions

The results of the analysis of President Niinistö's speeches can be summarised as follows (Table).

The analysis of President Sauli Niinistö's speeches (2021—2024)

Period	01.2021—02.2022	03.2022—04.2023	04.2023—03.2024
Number of speeches	5	10	6
Context	Consequences of COVID-19, discussion on the non-expansion of NATO	Conflict in Ukraine, Finland's accession to NATO	Conflict in Ukraine, Finland as a NATO member
Key *lieux de mémoire*	The CSCE and the Helsinki Act of 1975, the Cold War, Winter War	Winter War, Cold War, Stalin, Roosevelt, and Truman	Russian Empire, USSR

[1] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö following the passing of former President of the Republic Martti Ahtisaari, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 16.10.2023, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-following-the-passing-of-former-president-of-the-republic-martti-ahtisaari-on-16-october-2023/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

[2] Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the opening of Parliament, 2024, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 07.02.2024, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-opening-of-parliament-on-7-february-2024/ (accessed 28.08.2025).

The end of Table

Period	01.2021—02.2022	03.2022—04.2023	04.2023—03.2024
Chains of equivalence	Dialogue in the Cold War and in 2021; the eve of the Winter War and the conflict in Ukraine	Winter War and the conflict in Ukraine, Russian Empire — USSR — Russian Federation	Winter War, the conflict in Ukraine, resistance of small countries; Russian Empire — USSR — Russian Federation
Examples of discursive practices	"The letter of Helsinki, the commonly agreed principles of the CSCE Final Act of 1975, remain a valid foundation for a cooperation-based security system of our continent". "Spheres of interest do not belong to the 2020s". "The situation in Ukraine also reminds of the period before the Winter War. Instead of dividing the nation, people united"	"The atmosphere is even chillier than during the Cold War. Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought war to Europe". One cannot avoid thinking about the similarities the situation has with our Winter War when the Soviet Union assumed that they would march into Helsinki within two weeks. "For Finland, Russia's invasion brought back echoes of our own history"	"The era of military non-alignment in our history has come to an end. A new era begins". "With Russia, many African countries have memories of close ties during the Soviet times. Finland's experience is totally different".
Features of historical narrative	The year of 1975 is the ''mountain'' of the Finnish narrative, with elements of decline in the description of the international security system	1939—1940 as the ''mountain'' of the Finnish people, circles of conflicts between Russia and Finland, a decline in the description of the system of international security and foreign policy actions of the Russian Federation	1939—1940 as the ''mountain'' of the Finnish people, circles of conflicts between Russia and Finland, a decline in the description of the system of international security and foreign policy actions of the Russian Federation

Prepared based on the analysed publications from the portal of the *President of the Republic of Finland. Sauli Niinistö's website 2012—2024*, URL: https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en.html (accessed 28.08.2025).

The study demonstrates that each of the periods examined was dominated by its own set of *lieux de mémoire*, mobilised to serve different objectives of the Finnish president. In 2021, references to dialogue and the overcoming of Cold War divisions associated with Helsinki in 1975 were intended to underscore Finland's significant role in the international arena. In subsequent periods, however, memory sites linked to the conflictual history of Russian—Finnish

relations came to the fore, serving to construct an image of the enemy and to justify Finland's accession to NATO. Moreover, in the context of joining the Alliance, references to Finnish—American history gained particular importance as a means of emphasising Finland's belonging to the Euro-Atlantic community.

At the same time, across all periods, the image of the Winter War remained present as a central element of the Finnish historical narrative. In Eviatar Zerubavel's terms, it functioned as a ''mountain'', that is, a historical episode of paramount importance that is repeatedly invoked. References to this *lieu de mémoire* peaked during the process of NATO accession and in the first year of the conflict in Ukraine, whereas in 2021 they were clearly secondary to appeals to the Helsinki Final Act. In Niinistö's discourse, invoking the Winter War served primarily to draw parallels between the Finnish and Ukrainian "struggles for freedom", thereby justifying support for Ukraine and rendering the conflict more intelligible and emotionally resonant for Finnish audiences. In other respects, however, the two narratives diverge significantly: it is consistently emphasised that the West is united in its support for Ukraine, whereas Finland stood alone in 1939—1940, and the outcome of the Winter War (the loss of territory) was presented as unacceptable as a possible model for the resolution of the Ukrainian conflict.

In addition, it is noticeable how the image of Russia in the Finnish historical narrative is becoming more detailed over time. In addition to general references to the Winter War and Russian rule in the 19th century, Niinistö's speeches present their own heroes and antiheroes, and the conflicts of the Second World War are only one of the circles (but more significant) of the confrontation that began two hundred years ago. One cannot but note the absence of references not only to examples of mutually beneficial cooperation between Russia and Finland, which could complicate the construction of an enemy image (for instance, by presenting Russia in the past, particularly in the 1990s, in contrast to Russia in the present), but also to a number of figures traditionally associated in Finnish collective memory with resistance to Russia, for instance, Nikolai Bobrikov, Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, and Urho Kekkonen. The exclusion of these more complex and ambivalent images renders the narrative advanced by the Finnish leader relatively linear and simplified, framing Russian–Finnish relations, and Russia's relations with Europe more broadly, as a story of prolonged and continuous confrontation.

At the same time, the transformation of Sauli Niinistö's historical policy has not become a subject of reflection in Finnish society and academic circles. This topic has not been part of public and scientific discussions in recent years. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the appeal to S. Niinistö's past had a definite impact on the attitude of Finns towards Russia. For example, according to a survey by the EVA Analytical Centre in early 2024, 94 % of Finnish citizens reacted

negatively to Russia,[1] while in 2021, this figure in the same studies did not exceed 45 %.[2] However, the survey results were shaped not only by Finns'' perceptions of current Russian policy; perceived threats rooted in the past also reinforced this negative image. A related trend can be observed in surveys examining perceptions of future Russian—Finnish relations. In 2024, according to a study conducted by the Foundation for the Development of Local Self-Government (KAKS) and published by Yle, these perceptions likewise reflected heightened scepticism regarding the prospects for relations between the two countries,[3] 84 % of Finns did not believe in the possibility of developing ties between Moscow and Helsinki, considering this friendship historically not predefined.

To corroborate the findings outlined above, the source base could be expanded in several directions. On the one hand, it would be useful to examine the rhetoric of other representatives of the Finnish political elite, including prime ministers, ministers of foreign affairs and defence, and, more recently, the new president, Alexander Stubb, who has also begun to make active use of historical references. On the other hand, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Finnish memory politics and to account for competing historical narratives, it is essential to analyse the positions of different political parties and media outlets representing a broad spectrum of political orientations with regard to Russia's past. Such an approach would also make it possible to assess the potential for future shifts in the image of Russia within Finnish collective memory.

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RUSSIA'S FOREIGN TRADE IN RAW MATERIALS AND INDUSTRIAL GOODS: THE IMPACT OF INTEGRATION AGREEMENTS AND SANCTIONS

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The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of integration agreements and sanctions on Russia's foreign trade in raw materials and industrial goods. Using international statistical data for 1995—2024 from UNCTAD, the World Bank, CEIC, UNIDO, CEPII, FAO, WTO, and GSDB, and applying a gravity model that controls for globalization effects, the study assesses the potential for stimulating Russia's foreign trade through WTO membership and participation in trade and cooperation agreements under conditions of sanction constraints. The results of the analysis demonstrate an overall negative impact of sanctions on Russia's trade, with large-scale restrictive measures exerting the most pronounced effect, substantially reducing trade with Western countries that imposed sanctions in 2022—2024. The influence of investment agreements on Russia's foreign trade is found to be invariant. Although advanced (deep) trade agreements, in contrast to shallow ones, have a generally positive long-term effect on trade, they stimulate expansion in industrial goods to a greater extent than in raw materials. The positive impact of both advanced and shallow trade agreements, as well as WTO membership, on Russia's foreign trade, particularly in industrial goods, shows a strengthening trend over time. In addition, the overall growth of international trade in 2022—2024 contributed to the expansion of Russia's trade with WTO member countries, primarily in raw materials. Comparative analysis indicates that the reorientation of trade towards WTO members, together with the recovery of global trade, helped mitigate the negative effects of large-scale sanctions imposed by Western countries, while Russia's advanced and shallow trade agreements played a supplementary stimulatory role in this process. These findings

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demonstrate the necessity of expanding Russia's integration frameworks with 'friendly' countries in the context of intensifying sanctions pressure from Western states.

Keywords:
trade, raw materials, industrial goods, WTO, free trade area, customs union, shallow and advanced integration agreements, bilateral investment agreement, sanctions, international trade, Russia

Introduction

Three decades after the major waves of trade liberalisation, the global economy presents a paradox in which the erosion of some barriers to cross-border exchange coexists with the re-emergence and reinforcement of others [1; 2]. On the one hand, trade and economic barriers remain generally low due to tariff reductions under the WTO's most-favoured-nation regime and the growth of bilateral and multilateral integration [3]. At the sub-global level, integration formats between countries are implemented mainly within free trade areas (FTAs)[1] and customs unions (CUs)[2] [4]. Cooperation agreements between countries that do not focus on reducing tariffs are usually established as bilateral investment treaties [5], which help promote economic interaction between countries, including trade [3]. On the other hand, the global economy is witnessing a rise in protectionism, accompanied by the introduction of bilateral and unilateral trade and economic restrictions. Over the past decade, fragmentation driven by political considerations has intensified as the number of sanctions has grown [6]. For clarity, sanctions are understood here as measures targeting specific economies, individuals, or organisations, imposed by international institutions or sanctioning states [7]. Taken together, sanctions increase risks and, consequently, raise the costs of interactions between economies [8].

In the global economy, trade is primarily conducted in industrial goods,[3] which have higher added value compared to raw materials. The exchange of these goods relies on both monopolistic competition and vertical trade in production cooperation networks. Global trade in industrial goods is stimulated by countries' participation in the WTO [9] as well as by bilateral and multilateral integration agreements [10]. By contrast, trade in raw materials is driven by price-inelastic demand. Nevertheless, the reduction of barriers under integration agreements has expanded trade in raw materials, whereas WTO membership does not appear to have a consistently positive effect [11; 12].

[1] Free trade areas (FTAs) reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers while allowing members to maintain independent trade regimes with third countries. In the past two decades, advanced FTAs (FTA+) have also liberalized services and capital flows.

[2] In a customs union, members adopt a common external tariff and a unified system for regulating non-tariff measures toward third countries.

[3] The share of industrial goods in global trade averaged 87 % over 1995—2024.

Partly due to the differentiated application of sanctions, their impacts on national economies [13], structural components [14], and trade flows between countries [15] are highly uneven. While sanctions have negatively affected trade in industrial goods [16], globalisation has enabled sanctioned economies to diversify trade toward third countries and intermediary states [17]. Trade in mineral and agricultural products has also been adversely affected in both sanctioning and sanctioned countries [18]. The ability of consumer countries to replace imports depends on global supply and demand conditions, which makes large-scale exports of raw materials difficult under sanctions, as new supply channels must be created, often at a higher cost [19].

A defining feature of Russia's trade with the global market is the dominance of raw materials in its exports.[1] The extensive export of these resources enables Russia to offset domestic consumption of industrial products through imports while accumulating foreign exchange reserves from trade surpluses. As a result, Russia ranks among a small group of countries that are major global suppliers of raw materials, with a relatively high trade-to-GDP ratio, reaching 30 % by 2024.[2]

In the early 2010s, Russia became a full member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO); however, the trade effects of its accession have been assessed differently. Some studies suggest that WTO membership has had little impact on Russia's overall foreign trade [20], while others highlight positive effects on trade in industrial goods and certain raw materials with foreign partners [21; 22]. Despite joining the WTO, Russian authorities have pursued a cautious approach to reducing trade barriers through integration agreements, focusing on advanced trade formats with selected economies, primarily post-Soviet states. Evaluations of Russia's integration agreements, mainly within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and with Vietnam, highlight both opportunities [23] and limitations [24; 25] for expanding trade and economic interaction. Although Russia has concluded a relatively large number of bilateral investment treaties, their impact on trade remains largely unexplored. It is, therefore, important to examine how Russia's participation in the WTO, alongside its engagement in integration and cooperative arrangements, has influenced its foreign trade. A central aspect of this analysis is the relative impact of global (WTO) versus sub-global (FTAs, advanced FTAs, and CUs) integration formats on Russia's trade in raw materials and industrial goods.

It should be noted that Russia acts both as a sanctioned and a sanctioning country. Over the past decade, it has faced pressure from 'Western' countries, with localised sanctions between 2014 and 2021 and broad-scale sanctions

[1] Russia's exports of raw materials consist primarily of crude oil.

[2] *UNCTADstat Data Centre*, 2025, URL: https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx?sCS_ChosenLang=en (accessed 01.08.2025).

from 2022 onward [26]. These measures have negatively affected Russia's trade in both raw materials [27] and industrial goods [28] with the sanctioning countries. Broad-scale sanctions are now considered one of the main challenges for the Russian economy, disrupting long-established trade flows, triggering sectoral crises [29], and maintaining technological dependence on imports [30]. Consequently, the Russian economy is shifting toward a volatile and costly growth model [31]. Under broad-scale sanctions, revenues from both oil and gas, as well as non-oil sectors, declined, while import restrictions were circumvented by restructuring the import composition and reorganizing production within aggregated product groups [32]. As a major economy and key player in the global raw materials market [33], Russia has been significantly affected by intensified sanctions, which have contributed to rising global prices and redirected trade toward third countries, illustrating the so-called 'large country trap' [34; 35].

There is a perceived lack of research on the relative effects of sanctions and integration agreements on Russia's foreign trade, particularly in raw materials and industrial goods. This raises the following research question: to what extent has Russia's participation in the WTO, along with its involvement in trade and cooperative agreements, influenced its foreign trade in these sectors over the long term (1995—2024), including the period under sanctions, especially broad-scale measures imposed by 'Western' countries?

This study aims to assess the impact of sanctions and integration agreements on Russia's foreign trade in industrial and raw materials. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following tasks:

This study aims to assess the impact of sanctions and integration agreements on Russia's foreign trade in industrial and raw materials. To achieve this objective, the study pursues the following tasks:

1. to analyse the dynamics of Russia's foreign trade in raw materials and industrial goods, alongside the evolution of sanctions and integration agreements;

2. to select an appropriate methodological framework and construct the dataset and model specifications required to evaluate the factors influencing Russia's foreign trade;

3. to assess the effects of sanctions and integration agreements on Russia's trade in raw materials and industrial goods with foreign countries.

The study covers a long-term period from 1995 to 2024.

Russia's foreign trade in raw materials and industrial goods, sanctions, and integration and cooperation agreements

With the exception of the global economic crises in the late 2000s, mid-2010s, and early 2020s, strong market conditions and rising demand for Russian raw materials fueled the growth of Russia's foreign trade. The share of raw materials in exports steadily increased, from 58 % in 1995 to 69 % in 2024 (Fig. 1).

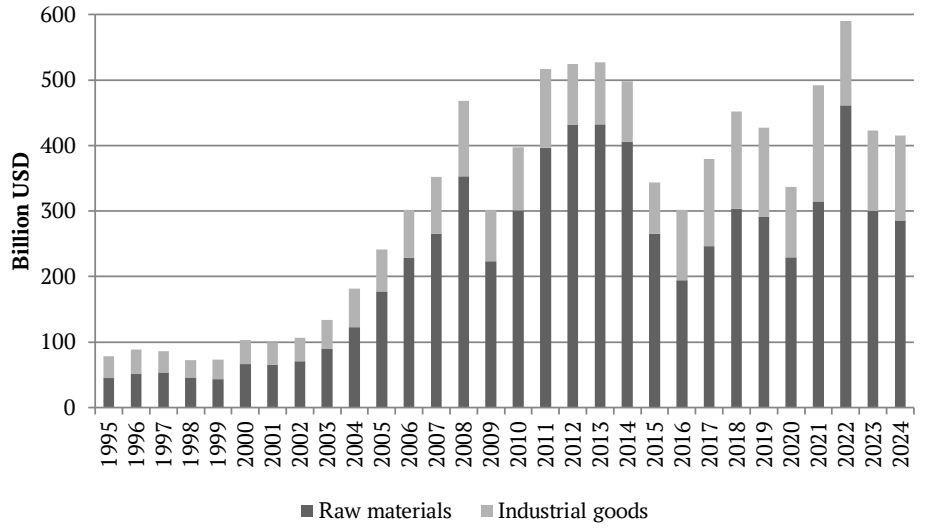

Fig. 1. Exports of raw materials and industrial goods from Russia

Source: Trade Structure, 2025, *UNCTADstat Data Centre*, URL: https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx (accessed 01.08.2025).

Imports to Russia depended on the dynamics of the country's raw-material exports, which enabled the supply of a wide range of consumer and industrial goods to the domestic market. As a result, imports to the Russian market consisted mainly of industrial goods, whose share increased from 74 % in 1995 to 78 % in 2024 (Fig. 2).

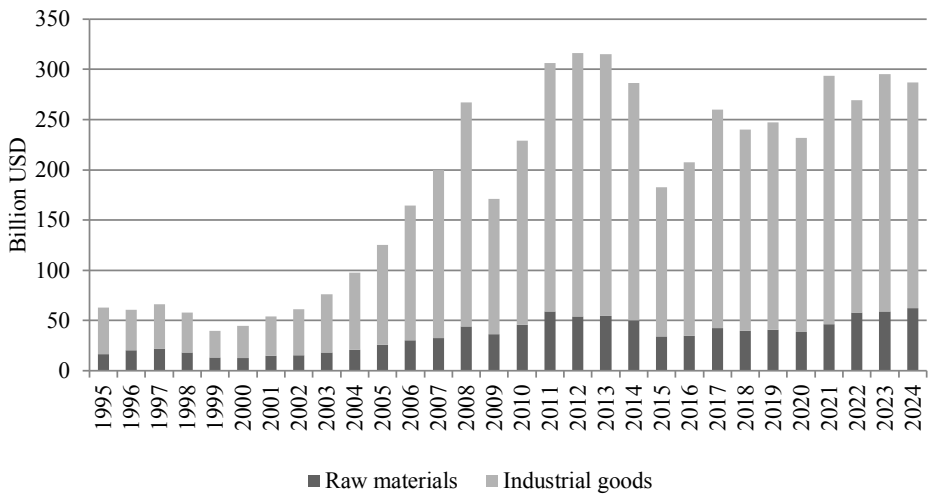

Fig. 2. Imports of raw materials and industrial goods to Russia

Source: Trade Structure, 2025, *UNCTADstat Data Centre,* URL: https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx (accessed 01.08.2025).

Despite Russia's integration into the global economy, the development of integration frameworks within its foreign economic policy remained gradual and cautious, reflecting both strategic uncertainty and institutional constraints in external economic engagement. For instance, Russia concluded bilateral FTAs that reduced trade barriers primarily with CIS countries. In 2006, it established an FTA with Serbia, and in 2025, with Iran. Amid the fragmentation of the former USSR's economic space, Russia began pursuing an advanced integration format in the early 2010s, forming a Customs Union within the EAEU with Kazakhstan and Belarus (2015) and later with Kyrgyzstan and Armenia (2016). As an EAEU member, Russia also established an FTA+ with Vietnam in 2016 (Table 1).

Table 1

Russia's participation in integration agreements

Integration agreement	Period
FTA with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan	1992—2015
FTA with Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan	Since 1994
FTA with Belarus and Kazakhstan	1992—2014
FTA with Moldova, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan	Since 1992
FTA with Ukraine	1992—2015
FTA with Serbia	Since 2006
EAEU Customs Union with Kazakhstan and Belarus	Since 2015
EAEU Customs Union with Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, FTA+ with Vietnam	Since 2016

Source: Regional trade agreements notified to the GATT/WTO and in force, 2025, *Regional trade agreements Database,* URL: https://rtais.wto.org/UI/publicPreDefRepByCountry.aspx (accessed 01.08.2025).

In addition, by 2024, Russia had concluded 62 investment agreements with foreign countries, reducing barriers to capital flows (see Appendix, Table A.1). After comparatively lengthy negotiations, Russia also joined the WTO in 2012. As a result, by 2024, Russia was trading with 164 WTO member countries (see Appendix, Table A.2), generally benefiting from the advantages of this global framework (Fig. 3).

Russia is both a target of sanctions and a sanctioning party. Based on information from the Global Sanctions Database (GSDB),[1] we can identify three periods of sanctions affecting the Russian economy: a relatively stable period with only occasional sanctions (1995—2013); a period of 'localised' sanctions (2014—2021); and a period of broad-scale sanctions (from 2022 to the present) (Fig. 4).

[1] *Global Sanctions Data Base*, 2025, URL: https://www.globalsanctionsdatabase.com/ (accessed 01.08.2025).

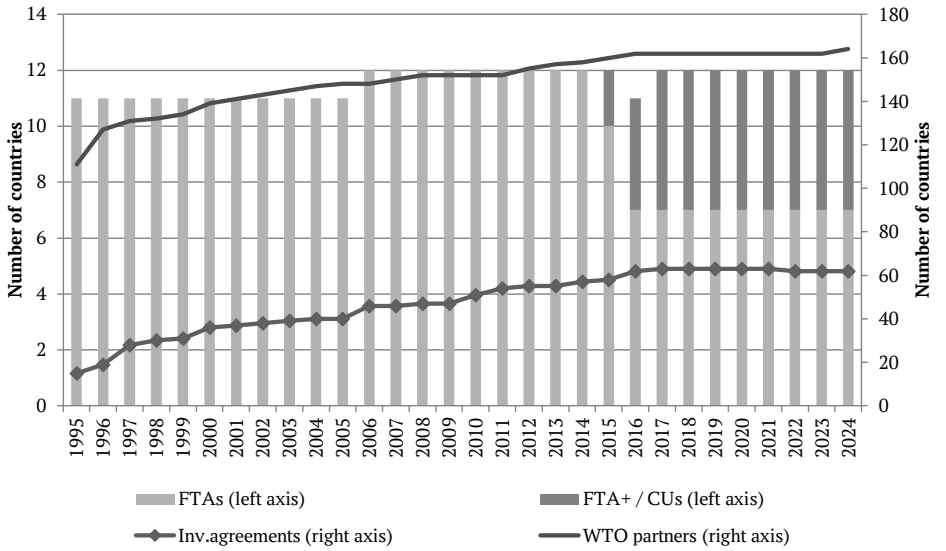

Fig. 3. Number of countries that have concluded investment agreements, FTAs, FTA+, and CUs with Russia, and WTO member countries — Russia's trading partners

Sources: Regional trade agreements notified to the GATT/WTO and in force, 2025, *Regional trade agreements Database,* URL: https://rtais.wto.org/UI/publicPreDefRepByCountry.aspx (accessed 01.08.2025); Members and Observers, 2025, *WTO*, URL: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/org6_e.htm; International Investment Agreements Navigator, 2025, *UNCTAD — Palais des Nations*, URL: https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/international-investment-agreements/by-economy (accessed 01.08.2025).

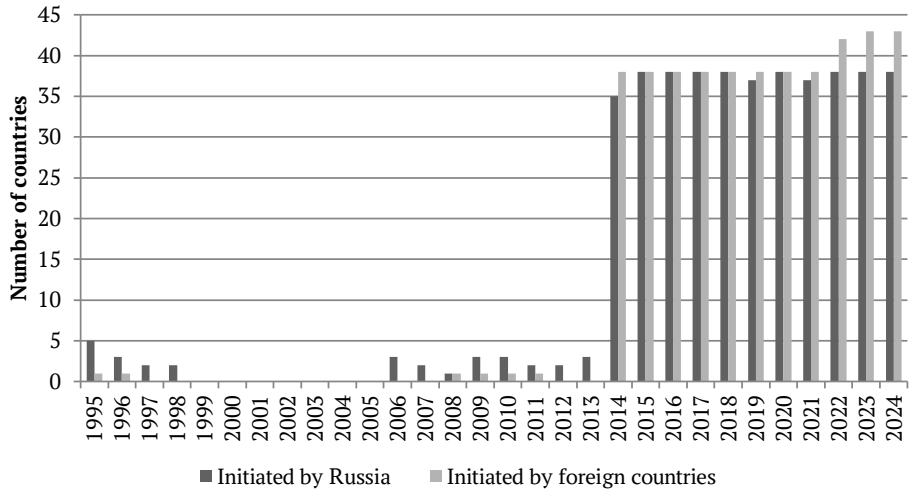

Fig. 4. Sanctions initiated by Russia against foreign countries and by foreign countries against Russia

Source: Global Sanctions Database, 2025, URL: https://www.globalsanctionsdatabase.com/ (accessed 01.08.2025).

Until 2014, Russia was rarely subject to sanctions, with restrictions imposed only by Ukraine and Georgia. At the same time, Russia applied short-term sanctions on some post-Soviet countries and supported UN Security Council resolutions against certain states. Between 2014 and 2022, the sanctions environment worsened for the Russian economy. From 2022 onward, amid political confrontation with 'Western' countries, Russia faced some of the world's toughest sanctions, which in turn prompted counter-sanctions by Russia.

The sanctions imposed on the Russian economy between 2014 and 2021, often described as 'localised,' were primarily targeted at the financing of major state banks and companies, as well as trade in defence products, dual-use goods, equipment and technologies, and oil exploration and extraction services [36]. In response, Russia implemented counter-sanctions, banning imports of food products from most Western countries[1] (see Appendix, Table A.3).

From 2022 to the present, broad-scale sanctions have been imposed on the Russian economy by Western countries deemed 'unfriendly,' which, in addition to those previously mentioned (see Appendix, Table A.3), include the Bahamas, Iceland, Liechtenstein, the Republic of Korea, North Macedonia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Switzerland. The current regime of broad-scale sanctions affects nearly all sectors of the Russian economy. Amid limited ruble convertibility and heightened economic risks, including the threat of secondary sanctions from 'unfriendly' countries, some foreign companies have suspended or fully ceased operations in Russia, resulting in an outflow of foreign direct investment from key sectors of the national economy.

Methodology and data

Methodology. Over the past twenty years, gravity models have advanced significantly in analysing how factors such as sanctions and integration or cooperation agreements affect international trade and economic interactions between countries. Empirical findings from these models have led to several recommendations for quantitative analysis [37]. The model should include fixed effects for exporting and importing countries over time to account for multilateral resistance,[2] as well as for all country pairs to capture time-invariant bilateral costs. The dependent variable should be specified multiplicatively to accommodate zero values and avoid errors from an incorrect functional form. Domestic trade flows should also be included to control for trade diversion toward internal markets and to mitigate distortions from global factors.

It is also important to note that a proper estimation of the trade effects of WTO membership requires accounting for both unilateral (indirect) and reciprocal (direct) effects associated with countries' participation in this global framework

[1] The USA, EU-28 countries, Australia, Norway, Canada, Iceland, Albania, Montenegro, Ukraine, New Zealand, Japan, Georgia, and Moldova

[2] All bilateral variable costs faced by the exporting and importing countries, respectively.

[38]. In line with the research objectives, the set of dummy variables captures factors that reduce trade barriers, including unilateral and reciprocal participation in the WTO, trade agreements such as FTAs, customs unions, and FTA+, and bilateral investment agreements, as well as sanctions that increase barriers, whether imposed by Russia or by foreign countries. Consequently, the estimated relationship takes the following form [38]:

$$X_{ij,t} = exp\left[\text{p}_{i,t} + \chi_{j,t} + \text{м}_{ij} + \beta_0 + \beta_1 WTOexp_{ij,t} + \beta_2 WTOboth_{ij,t} + \beta_3 FTA_{ij,t} + \beta_4 FTA(+)_{ij,t} + \beta_5 BIT_{ij,t} + \beta_6 SANCru_{ij,t} + \beta_7 SANCz_{ij,t} + \sum_{T=1}^{T=n} \beta_T INTL(T)_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij,t}\right], \quad (1)$$

where X_{ij} is the export from country i to country j. This also includes X_{ii} — Russia's domestic trade.

In Model (1), the parameter X_{ij} is estimated for Russia's trade with foreign countries: total trade, trade in raw materials, and trade in industrial goods. The fixed effects included in the model are: π_i — for the exporting country, accounting for the year; χ_j — for the importing country, accounting for the year; and μ_{ij} — for the pair of trading countries. The independent variables were dummy variables: $WTOexp_{ij}$ equals one if country i is a WTO member and zero otherwise; $WTOboth_{ij}$ equals one if both countries i and j are WTO members and zero otherwise; FTA_{ij} equals one if there is an FTA between Russia and the foreign country and zero otherwise; $FTA(+)_{ij}$ equals one if there is an advanced trade agreement (FTA+ or CU) between Russia and the foreign country and zero otherwise; BIT_{ij} equals one if there is a bilateral investment treaty between Russia and the foreign country and zero otherwise; $SANCru_{ij}$ equals one if sanctions were imposed by Russia on the foreign country and zero otherwise; $SANCz_{ij}$ equals one if sanctions were imposed on Russia by the foreign country and zero otherwise; $INTL(T)_{ij}$ equals one for Russia's trade with foreign countries in a given year T and zero for trade within the Russian market, reflecting the border effect (overall barriers in Russia's trade with foreign countries); β_0 is the constant; and t represents time.

In the calculations, the total effect of the WTO (*WTOexpboth*) is estimated, which includes the impact of unilateral (*WTOexp*) and bilateral (*WTOboth*) participation of countries in this global framework on trade between them. To obtain accurate trade effects of integration agreements and the 'WTO factor,' the inclusion of the parameter *INTL* in Model (1) is justified by the need to control for the overall trend in international trade growth, or the 'globalisation effects' [39; 40]. Therefore, by excluding the dummy variable *INTL* from Model (1), we can assess the impact of the overall trend in international trade growth on the dependent variables, a trend that is partly determined by global economic conditions.

$$X_{ij,t} = exp\left[\text{p}_{i,t} + \chi_{j,t} + \text{м}_{ij} + \beta_0 + \beta_1 WTOexp_{ij,t} + \beta_2 WTOboth_{ij,t} + \beta_3 FTA_{ij,t} + \beta_4 FTA(+)_{ij,t} + \beta_5 BIT_{ij,t} + \beta_6 SANCru_{ij,t} + \beta_7 SANCz_{ij,t} + \varepsilon_{ij,t}\right]. \quad (2)$$

The difference between effects in (1) and (2) reflects a quantitative estimate of the impact of the overall growth trend in international trade on the total trade turnover and on Russia's trade in raw materials and industrial goods with foreign countries. Estimates are calculated both for the entire period (1995—2024) and separately for the periods of episodic sanctions (1995—2013), 'localised' sanctions (2014—2021), and broad-scale sanctions (2022—2024).

Data. Statistical data for 1995—2024 on Russia's trade with 211 countries and economic territories, broken down by aggregated commodity groups,[1] were sourced from international databases: UNCTAD,[2] the World Bank,[3] and CEIC.[4] Domestic trade statistics for industrial and raw materials in Russia were calculated as the difference between the value of these goods produced in the national economy and their exports [39]. Following recommendations for constructing domestic trade datasets [37], the value of raw materials and industrial goods produced in Russia was obtained from specialised statistical databases: UNIDO,[5] CEPII,[6] and FAO.[7] In some cases, trade and production statistics for raw materials in the databases (CEPII, FAO, CEIC, UNCTAD) were available only in physical volumes; these were converted to value terms using average prices for raw materials in global and Russian markets. Trade flows, both domestic and international, were divided into raw materials and industrial goods according to the ISIC classification (see Appendix, Table A.4).

The study evaluated dummy variables reflecting countries' participation in the WTO and in integration and cooperation agreements. According to the WTO database,[8] all current and past bilateral free trade agreements between Russia and CIS countries, plus Serbia, were categorised as shallow integration agreements (*FTA*) that apply solely to trade in goods (see Table 1). Advanced integration agreements (*FTA+*) included the CU with the EAEU's countries and the FTA+ with Vietnam (see Table 1). Bilateral investment treaties (*BITs*) between Russia

[1] Export statistics by country, reported in the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC), were converted to the ISIC classification using the corresponding concordance tables.

[2] *UNCTADstat Data Centre*, *2025,* URL: https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx?sCS_ChosenLang=en (accessed 01.08.2025).

[3] World Integrated Solution, 2025, *World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)*, URL: https://wits.worldbank.org/ (accessed 01.08.2025).

[4] *CEIC Data Global Database*, 2025, URL: https://info.ceicdata.com/en-products-global-database-ad (accessed 01.08.2025).

[5] UNIDO Statistics. URL: https://stat.unido.org/ (accessed 01.08.2025).

[6] *CEPII Database*, 2025, URL: http://www.cepii.fr/CEPII/en/bdd_modele/bdd_modele.asp (accessed 01.08.2025).

[7] *FAOSTAT*, 2025, URL: https://www.fao.org/statistics/en/ (accessed 01.08.2025).

[8] Regional trade agreements notified to the GATT/WTO and in force, 2025, WTO *Regional Trade Agreements Database*, URL: https://rtais.wto.org/UI/publicPreDefRepByCountry.aspx (accessed 01.08.2025).

and foreign countries were identified using UN data[1] (see Appendix, Table A.1). According to the WTO database,[2] for the variables *WTOexp* and *WTOboth*, Russia's WTO membership was counted from 2013, while for Russian trade partners (164 WTO member countries) it was counted from the year they joined the organization (see Appendix, Table A.2). If, during the period 1995—2024, a country joined the WTO or a trade agreement with Russia (or signed by Russia with a foreign country) entered into force in the first half of the year, the country's (or Russia's) participation in the relevant format was recorded for that year; if it came into effect in the second half of the year, it was recorded from the following year.

The study assesses the impact of two types of sanctions on Russia's foreign trade (see Appendix, Table A.3): 1) sanctions imposed by Russia on foreign countries (*SANCru*); and 2) sanctions imposed by foreign countries on the Russian economy (*SANCz*). The source of information on these sanctions was the GSDB. The dummy variables *SANCru* and *SANCz* captured any sanction measures imposed by Russia on foreign countries and vice versa,[3] following the approach described in similar studies [18]. It should be noted that the vast majority of these measures were trade sanctions. Exceptions include Russia's financial sanctions against Kyrgyzstan in 2020 and travel restrictions against New Zealand from 2022; other sanctions imposed by Georgia on Russia in 2008—2011; and New Zealand's financial sanctions in 2014—2021. Descriptive statistics of the dataset are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of the dataset

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
X (trade, total), USD	2,72E + 09	3,78E + 10	0	1,27E + 12
X (trade in raw materials), USD	1,16E + 09	1,39E + 10	0	4,99E + 11
X (trade in industrial goods), USD	1,56E + 09	2,44E + 10	0	7,68E + 11
WTOexp	0.555	0.497	0	1
WTOboth	0.306	0.461	0	1
FTA(+)	0.007	0.085	0	1
FTA	0.048	0.213	0	1
BIT	0.229	0.420	0	1

[1] International Investment Agreements Navigator, 2025, *UNCTAD*, URL: https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/international-investment-agreements/by-economy (accessed 01.08.2025).

[2] Members and Observers, 2025, *WTO*, URL: https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/org6_e.htm (accessed 01.08.2025).

[3] The GSDB distinguishes six types of sanctions: trade sanctions; financial sanctions; travel bans; arms embargoes; military assistance restrictions; and other sanctions.

The end of Table 2

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
SANCru	0.070	0.255	0	1
SANCz	0.071	0.256	0	1
INTL	0.998	0.049	0	1

Results

Calculations (1) and (2) showed the presence of asymptotically unbiased estimates for total Russian foreign trade, as well as for raw materials and industrial goods, both for the entire period (Table 3) and for specific subperiods (1995—2013; 2014—2021; 2022—2024) (see Appendix, Table A.5).

Table 3

Estimation results for models (1) and (2)

Variable	Total, $\hat{\beta}$		Raw materials, $\hat{\beta}$		Industrial goods, $\hat{\beta}$	
	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)
FTA+	0.89** (0.36)	0.79** (0.31)	0.87* (0.51)	0.70* (0.41)	0.94*** (0.31)	0.91*** (0.31)
FTA	0.90** (0.36)	0.95** (0.37)	0.99** (0.49)	1.08** (0.54)	0.84*** (0.31)	0.89*** (0.34)
BIT	−0.24 (0.23)	−0.33 (0.30)	−0.30 (0.27)	−0.42 (0.37)	−0.19 (0.21)	−0.26 (0.28)
WTOexp	0.13* (0.08)	0.09* (0.05)	0.32** (0.13)	0.16** (0.07)	0.07* (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)
WTOboth	0.67*** (0.12)	0.42*** (0.08)	0.94*** (0.15)	0.57*** (0.09)	0.40** (0.15)	0.27** (0.10)
WTOexpboth	0.79*** (0.15)	0.51*** (0.08)	1.26*** (0.20)	0.73*** (0.08)	0.45*** (0.15)	0.34** (0.14)
SANCru	−0.36** (0.18)	−0.37** (0.18)	−0.41*** (0.12)	−0.42** (0.13)	−0.30 (0.22)	−0.32 (0.24)
SANCz	−0.99*** (0.19)	−0.99*** (0.19)	−1.22*** (0.24)	−1.23*** (0.24)	−0.81*** (0.24)	−0.77*** (0.23)
$INTL_{1996}$	—	−0.54*** (0.14)	—	−0.93*** (0.25)	—	−0.26*** (0.04)
$INTL_{2000}$	—	−0.72*** (0.04)	—	−0.95*** (0.17)	—	−0.89*** (0.17)
$INTL_{2004}$	—	−0.17*** (0.05)	—	−0.56*** (0.15)	—	−0.14*** (0.06)
$INTL_{2008}$	—	−0.25** (0.11)	—	−0.53** (0.24)	—	−0.003 (0.01)
$INTL_{2012}$	—	−0.38** (0.17)	—	−0.57** (0.26)	—	−0.25*** (0.08)

The end of Table 3

Variable	Total, $\hat{\beta}$		Raw materials, $\hat{\beta}$		Industrial goods, $\hat{\beta}$	
	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)
$INTL_{2016}$	—	−0.16 (0.14)	—	−0.06 (0.05)	—	−0.25*** (0.04)
$INTL_{2020}$	—	−0.06 (0.10)	—	−0.04 (0.07)	—	−0.02 (0.14)
Constant	18.10*** (0.49)	7.23*** (0.36)	3.59** (1.36)	8.36*** (0.25)	8.72*** (0.82)	23.3*** (0.70)
Pseudo log-likelihood	−5.2e+11	−5.1e+11	−3.7e+11	−3.6e+11	−2.8e+11	−2.5e+11
Pseudo R^2	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99
RESET-test	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.06
Number of observations	3272		3104		3208	

Note: *** — $p < 0.01$; ** — $p < 0.05$; * — $p < 0.10$. Standard errors are shown in parentheses; to correct for autocorrelation using the Newey—West procedure, standard errors were clustered by interacting country pairs. *INTL* represents trade barrier values, with 2024 as the base year. For simplicity in obtaining estimates, panel data were aggregated into five-year intervals.

Compared to 2024, trade barriers (*INTL*) between Russia and foreign countries declined until the first half of the 2010s, primarily due to a reduction in barriers in raw materials trade. The apparent statistical insignificance of trade barriers may result from increases in barriers with certain countries being offset by decreases with others.

Using the semi-elasticities of the independent variables, average changes and tariff equivalents were calculated for both the specified time periods and the aggregated product groups (Table 4).

Table 4

Average changes and tariff equivalents of the variables in (1) and (2)

Variable	Total			Raw materials			Industrial goods		
	(2) Δ/T.E.	(1) Δ/T.E.	Δ(2) − (1)	(2) Δ/T.E.	(1) Δ/T.E.	Δ(2) − (1)	(2) Δ/T.E.	(1) Δ/T.E.	Δ(2) − (1)
$FTA+_{1995—2024}$	143/ −36	120/ −33	23	138/ −35	101/ −29	37	156/ −38	149/ −37	7
$FTA+_{2014—2021}$	63/ −22	45/ −17	18	—	—	—	74/ −24	83/ −26	−9
$FTA+_{2022—2024}$	164/ −38	145/ −36	19	174/ −40	103/ −30	71	172/ −39	224/ −44	−52
$FTA_{1995—2024}$	145/ −36	158/ −38	−13	170/ −39	193/ −41	−23	131/ −34	144/ −36	−13

The end of Table 4

Variable	Total			Raw materials			Industrial goods		
	(2) Δ/T.E.	(1) Δ/T.E.	Δ(2) – (1)	(2) Δ/T.E.	(1) Δ/T.E.	Δ(2) – (1)	(2) Δ/T.E.	(1) Δ/T.E.	Δ(2) – (1)
$FTA_{1995–2013}$	82/ – 26	86/ – 27	– 3	75/ – 24	83/ – 26	– 9	89/ – 28	86/ – 27	3
$FTA_{2014–2021}$	146/ – 36	157/ – 38	– 11	232/ – 45	151/ – 37	81	81/ – 26	161/ – 38	– 80
$FTA_{2022–2024}$	152/ – 37	172/ – 39	– 19	147/ – 36	200/ – 42	– 53	132/ – 34	171/ – 39	– 39
$WTOexp_{1995–2024}$	13/ – 6	9/ – 4	4	37/ – 15	17/ – 8	20	7/ – 3	7/ – 3	0
$WTOexp_{1995–2013}$	14/ – 6	15/ – 7	– 1	62/ – 22	59/ – 21	2	2/ – 1	—	2
$WTOexp_{2014–2021}$	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
$WTOexp_{2022–2024}$	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	52/ – 19	– 52
$WTOboth_{1995–2024}$	95/ – 28	52/ – 19	43	156/ – 38	77/ – 25	79	49/ – 18	31/ – 13	18
$WTOboth_{2014–2021}$	54/ – 19	40/ – 16	14	154/ – 37	49/ – 18	106	11/ – 5	—	11
$WTOboth_{2022–2024}$	254/ – 47	227/ – 45	27	477/ – 58	338/ – 52	139	123/ – 33	152/ – 37	– 28
$WTOexp\text{-}both_{1995–2024}$	121/ – 33	67/ – 23	54	252/ – 47	107/ – 30	145	57/ – 20	41/ – 16	16
$WTOexp\text{-}both_{2014–2021}$	72/ – 24	20/ – 9	52	132/ – 34	—	132	—	35/ – 21	– 35
$WTOexp\text{-}both_{2022–2024}$	293/ – 50	160/ – 38	133	350/ – 53	84/ – 26	266	283/ – 49	181/ – 40	102
$SANCru_{1995–2024}$	– 30/ 20	– 31/ 20	1	– 33/ 23	– 34/ 23	1	—	—	—
$SANCru_{1995–2013}$	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
$SANCru_{2014–2021}$	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
$SANCru_{2022–2024}$	– 75/ 98	– 75/ 100	0	– 73/ 93	– 74/ 96	1	– 77/ 108	– 75/ 101	– 2
$SANCz_{1995–2024}$	– 63/ 64	– 63/ 64	0	– 71/ 84	– 71/ 84	0	– 55/ 50	– 54/ 47	– 1
$SANCz_{1995–2013}$	106/ – 30	96/ – 28	11	197/ – 42	176/ – 40	21	46/ – 17	37/ – 15	9
$SANCz_{2014–2021}$	– 47/ 38	– 50/ 42	3	– 48/ 39	– 48/ 39	0	– 51/ 43	– 51/ 43	0
$SANCz_{2022–2024}$	– 83/ 141	– 83/ 139	0	– 89/ 201	– 88/ 194	– 1	– 74/ 96	– 76/ 102	2

Note. The average change of the indicator in % was calculated as $\Delta = \left[e^{\hat{\beta}/(1-\theta)} - 1\right] \cdot 100$, and the change in the tariff equivalent of the indicator in percentage points as T.E. = $\left[e^{\hat{\beta}} - 1\right] \cdot 100\%$, where the elasticity of substitution between domestic and foreign goods (θ) is equal to three [41]. Δ(2) – (1) represents the difference between the effects obtained in models (1) and (2), reflecting a quantitative estimate of the impact of the overall trend

in international trade. '–' means that it was not possible to estimate the average change or tariff equivalent of the independent variables due to their statistical insignificance. Calculations of Δ and T.E. were based on the estimates presented in Tables 3 and A.5. The variable *BIT* is not reported due to its statistical insignificance.

Estimates of the impact of sanctions on trade for 1995—2024 showed, first, that the restraining effect of sanctions initiated by Russia on its foreign trade was significantly smaller compared to sanctions imposed by foreign countries on the Russian economy; and second, that the overall trend of growth in international trade had a generally invariant effect on the negative impact of sanctions, as the semi—elasticity values of these factors were largely similar to the corresponding values in (2).

As a result, sanctions initiated by Russia reduced trade with targeted foreign countries by 31 % over 1995—2024, with the effect concentrated in raw materials trade (34 %). Statistically significant negative effects of these restrictions were observed in periods of broad-scale sanctions, which reduced Russia's trade with sanctioned countries by 75 % (raw materials — 74 %; industrial goods — 75 %), equivalent to an increase in trade barriers of 100, 96, and 101 percentage points, respectively.

In turn, sanctions imposed by foreign countries on Russia reduced their trade with the Russian economy by 63 % over 1995—2024 (raw materials — 71 %; industrial goods — 54 %). The estimates indicated no negative impact from episodic sanctions (1995—2013) imposed by countries such as Georgia and Ukraine on Russia's trade with them, reflecting the largely symbolic nature of these measures. However, subsequent sanctions imposed by Western countries had statistically significant negative effects on Russian trade. 'Localised' sanctions (2014—2021) reduced Russia's trade with sanctioning countries by 50 % (raw materials — 48 %; industrial goods — 51 %). The strongest negative impact came from broad-scale sanctions (2022—2024) imposed by Western countries, which reduced Russia's trade with them by 83 % (raw materials — 88 %; industrial goods — 76 %), corresponding to tariff-equivalent increases of 139, 194, and 102 percentage points, respectively, reflecting the severity of these restrictions in creating prohibitive trade barriers.

In light of the above, it is important to assess whether Russia's participation in integration frameworks has contributed to an expansion of its foreign trade, particularly in the context of Western sanctions.[1] Investment agreements (*BITs*) concluded by Russia did not have a statistically significant impact on its foreign trade, unlike in the global economy [3], probably due to the high risks for FDI

[1] The goal here is not to fully counter the negative effects of sanctions from Russia's main Western trading partners, but to sustain Russian foreign trade under challenging geopolitical conditions.

inflows. Meanwhile, in 1995—2024, trade agreements (*FTA* and *FTA+*) and Russia's and its partners' participation in the WTO (*WTOexpboth*) did stimulate Russian foreign trade.

From 1995 to 2024, advanced trade agreements (*FTA+*) led to stronger growth in industrial goods trade than in raw materials trade, in contrast to the more limited *FTAs* involving Russia. It should be noted that under advanced trade agreements (*FTA+*), barriers between Russia, EAEU countries, and Vietnam were reduced, improving access to capital and, partially, labour markets. As a result, industrial goods trade increased at a level comparable to that seen under shallow *FTAs*. Meanwhile, over 1995—2024, the effect of superficial trade agreements on raw materials trade was nearly twice as large as that of advanced agreements.

However, an important point is that under broad-scale sanctions (2022—2024), Russia's participation in advanced trade agreements with EAEU countries and Vietnam further boosted its trade with these partners compared to trade with other economies, particularly in manufactured goods (overall +145 %; raw materials +103 %; industrial goods +224 %). At the same time, shallow trade agreements (*FTAs*) in the same period increased Russia's trade with countries within this integration framework by 172 % (raw materials +171 %; industrial goods +200 %). These figures point to the fact that, under broad-scale sanctions, Russian foreign trade shifted in favour of the established integration frameworks.[1]

From 1995 to 2024, Russia's and its trading partners' participation in the WTO (*WTOexpboth*) led to a 67 % increase in mutual trade (raw materials +107 %; industrial goods +41 %). This means that the impact of the WTO was relatively smaller than that of bilateral trade agreements. However, Russia primarily traded with countries that were WTO members, even though no formal trade agreements had been concluded with them. For this reason, in the context of integration processes, Russia's participation in the WTO was a key driver of trade expansion, particularly under broad-scale sanctions, boosting trade by 160 % (raw materials +84 %; industrial goods +181 %).

Drawing on the obtained estimates, the overall effect of the WTO on Russia's trade can be decomposed into two parts: the effect of bilateral (or mutual) participation and the effect of unilateral participation of Russia and its trading partners in this global integration framework. The bilateral participation effect in the WTO (*WTOboth* — direct effect) captures the immediate impact of Russia's membership on its trade with other member countries. From 1995 to 2024, this

[1] We cannot exclude the possibility that the increase in industrial goods supplied to the Russian market from these countries is related to the expansion of 'parallel' imports of manufactured products.

direct effect was positive, increasing Russia's trade turnover by 52 % overall (77 % for raw materials and 31 % for industrial goods). Under broad sanctions in 2022—2024, the direct effect became even more pronounced, stimulating trade growth from WTO membership by 227 % (338 % for raw materials and 152 % for industrial goods).

The unilateral participation effect (*WTOexp* — indirect effect) reflects the indirect influence of the WTO in creating a relatively barrier–free environment for trade among member countries. Over 1995—2024, this indirect effect contributed to a 9 % increase in Russia's trade (17 % for raw materials and 7 % for industrial goods). Under broad sanctions, the WTO's indirect effect stimulated growth in Russia's trade only in industrial goods by 52 %.

Compared with the direct effect, the indirect influence of the WTO on Russian foreign trade in 1995—2024 was almost six times smaller, highlighting the greater importance of Russia's accession to this international organisation for promoting trade with foreign countries, since the effect would not have been as noticeable otherwise. The combined estimate of the indirect and direct effects of the WTO (*WTOexpboth*) on Russia's foreign trade in 1995—2024 indicated an additional positive trade effect. This effect is consistent with estimates for the global economy [38], which, however, did not manifest under broad sanctions.

Between 1995 and 2024, the overall growth trend in international trade, including the growth driven by global economic conditions, contributed to the positive impact of integration agreements on Russia's foreign trade in the case of *FTA+* and WTO membership (by 23 and 54 p., respectively) and suppressed it in the case of *FTA* alone (by 13 p.). Russia's foreign trade with WTO member states in 1995—2024 was sustained by the overall expansion of international trade, which increased the turnover of raw materials by 145 percentage points. Under large—scale sanctions, the overall upward trend in international trade increased Russia's foreign trade in the *FTA+* scenario by 19 percentage points for raw materials, whereas in the *FTA* scenario trade declined by 19 percentage points. In 2022—2024, the overall growth trend in international trade boosted Russia's trade with WTO countries by 133 percentage points, by 266 percentage points for raw materials and by 102 percentage points for industrial goods.

Conclusion

Russia's economy has largely depended on exporting raw materials while fulfilling much of its investment and consumer demand through imported industrial goods, which makes foreign trade highly important in the long term. Between 1995 and 2024, Russia followed a relatively cautious approach to international integration. Nevertheless, it joined the WTO, created several

integration formats — limited ones with several post — Soviet states and Serbia, and more advanced ones with the EAEU countries and Vietnam — and signed bilateral investment agreements with foreign partners. Over the past decade, rising foreign policy tensions with Western states have subjected Russia to some of the world's strictest sanctions, sharply curtailing its external trade.

The study demonstrates that sanctions had an overall negative effect on Russia's trade, as broad restrictions in 2022 — 2024 caused a sharp decline in trade with sanctioning Western countries, particularly in raw materials exports. Sanctions introduced by foreign states against Russia, especially the broad restrictions, had a stronger restraining influence on its external trade than Russia's own countermeasures against the sanctioning countries, both for raw materials and industrial goods. These findings indicate that Russia could not respond with equivalent counter — sanctions, largely because its economy heavily depends on hydrocarbon exports. Under sanctions, some countries increased their restrictions on trade with Russia, while others, on the contrary, eased their trade barriers. Moreover, the overall growth trend in global trade did not compensate for the negative effect of sanctions on Russia's trade with foreign countries.

The analysis shows that bilateral investment agreements had an invariant effect on Russia's foreign trade. Trade agreements and WTO membership supported Russia's external trade over the long term, and their impact became especially noticeable under broad sanctions. Advanced trade agreements had a lasting positive effect, promoting a greater expansion of trade in industrial goods than in raw materials, unlike shallow agreements. Under broad sanctions, Russia's trade increasingly shifted toward countries within its integration formats, and the positive effects of both advanced and superficial agreements, along with WTO membership, became stronger, particularly for industrial goods. Over the long term and during the period of broad sanctions, the general growth trend in international trade strengthened the positive influence of advanced trade agreements and WTO membership on Russia's foreign trade, while suppressing the effect of shallow agreements. At the same time, the growth trend in global trade between 2022 and 2024 stimulated Russia's trade with WTO member countries, mostly in raw materials.

A comparative analysis showed that shifting trade toward WTO member countries and overall growth in global trade[1] helped partly offset the negative effects of broad Western sanctions, while Russia's integration formats played only a supplementary role in this process. In this period, the WTO created a general climate that encouraged the reduction of trade barriers, supporting

[1] Here it refers to a price trend in the global raw materials market that is favourable for the Russian economy.

Russia's external trade and maintaining its focus on raw material exports. However, under large—scale sanctions, Russia's trade shifted toward other WTO member countries, as the main area of growth was industrial goods, which were predominantly imports. Additionally, during the period of broad sanctions, the growth trend in international trade helped somewhat alleviate the negative impact of the restrictions on Russia's external trade, primarily due to Russia's export of raw materials.

At the same time, Russia's foreign economic policy was not centred on expanding advanced integration agreements with foreign countries, neither over the long term nor during periods of large—scale sanctions. This policy was evidently influenced by Russia's dominant role in commodity markets and by relatively strict controls on imports to the domestic market, including steps taken to preserve a positive trade balance. The study's findings show that Russia needs to expand its integration formats with 'friendly' countries as a way to increase exports and diversify the risks associated with growing sanctions pressure from Western states, especially if the positive impact of WTO membership and global commodity price conditions on Russia's foreign trade diminishes or is exhausted.

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SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RUSSIAN REGIONS: A TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS, 2012—2024

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Contemporary geoeconomic transformations have heightened the need for spatial analysis of the sustainability of scientific and technological development across Russian regions, particularly in light of the strategic transition from import substitution to technological sovereignty. This study examines typological differences in the level and dynamics of scientific and technological activity of Russian regions between 2012 and 2024, identifying territories that have consistently demonstrated strong performance and are therefore capable of serving as centres for national technological policy amid changing external conditions. The analysis applies hierarchical cluster methods to longitudinal data on regional scientific and technological inputs (staff, funding) and outputs (performance). The extended temporal scope enables the identification of stable regional dynamic profiles, revealing structural distinctions and long-term developmental trajectories. This approach is especially relevant today, as national scientific and technological development increasingly depends on domestic resources, capabilities and competencies. The study establishes a typology of regions, with a core group distinguished by substantial resource concentration and persistently superior performance. It is concluded that the analysis of spatial and temporal dynamics enables the identification of regions that demonstrate resilience to external shifts and have the capacity to contribute to the implementation of a long-term state strategy in science, technology and innovation.

Keywords:
scientific and technological development, spatial typology, import substitution, economic security, technological sovereignty, external relations, technology import, exclave, Kaliningrad region

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Introduction and problem setting

Russia's current public policy has focused on finding ways towards national technological independence [1][1] and establishing a solid R&D framework for sustainable development. Achieving this agenda requires participation from both the real sector of the economy and universities. The international context also necessitates addressing this problem, particularly as sanctions have reduced international trade opportunities and limited the possibility of purchasing hi-tech solutions abroad. In 2012, Russia was listed as an import partner by 158 countries and as an export partner by 43.[2] By the end of 2024, the number of such states had decreased by 40 % for both trade directions.[3]

Although the above does not imply a complete severance of international economic ties, it elucidates the diminution of direct contacts, stressing the actual restructuring of the composition and structure of logistic chains in technological, research, commercial and industrial interactions. However, for example, the dynamics of Russia's imports of research services over 2012—2024 also show an almost identical decline of 43 %,[4] suggesting a similar trend in both the changing opportunities for importing and in the volumes of Russia's technology imports under agreements with other countries. Access to the actual data has been suspended since 2022,[5] but the volume of funds previously allocated for the acquisition of foreign technologies was considerable and broadly comparable to total federal budget expenditure on science, amounting to roughly 60 % in 2019—2021.[6]

Thus, alongside the search for priority directions for investment in the development of domestic technologies, changes in external economic relations raise the issue of utilising funds that require partial reallocation.

At the same time, the problem area of efficient spending and distribution of financial resources across the country's regions is shaped by two factors:

[1] 2030 Concept for Technological Development, approved in 2023. Order of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 20.05.2023 № 1315-r (as amended on 21.10.2024), URL: https://www.consultant.ru/law/hotdocs/80349.html (accessed 15.05.2025).

[2] Trade Data, 2025, *UN Comtrade*, URL: https://comtradeplus.un.org/TradeFlow (accessed 16.08.2025).

[3] The Russian Federation is directly indicated as a partner (as of August 2025).

[4] Russia's Interntional Trade in Services within the Structure of the Expanded Classification of Services, 2025, *Bank of Russia*, URL: https://cbr.ru/statistics/macro_itm/external_sector/ets/ (accessed 16.08.2025).

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[6] Payments for Technology Imports under Agreements with Foreign Countries Since 2017, 2017, *Unified Interdepartmental Statistical Information System*, URL: https://www.fedstat.ru/indicator/58697 (accessed 17.08.2025) ; Annual Report on the Execution of the Federal Budget, 2025, *Ministry of Finance*, URL: https://minfin.gov.ru/ru/perfomance/budget/process/otchet/ (accessed 17.08.2025).

1) disparities in the development of Russian regions;[1]

2) the need to maintain a balance between the level of investment and the results achieved, the returns generated, and the objectives set, for example, within the framework of technological development.[2]

This context calls for determining the specific position of each region[3] within the functioning of the country's research and technological subsystem. This is essential for the effective allocation of existing and future funding across regions, with a greater likelihood of securing returns on these investments. Determining a region's position is also necessary to assess the degree of regional differentiation by analysing key indicators of RTD levels, based on the construction of a typology of Russian regions according to this parameter. This paper presents such a study, using data covering 13 years, from 2012 to 2024 inclusive.

The time interval selected by the authors is limited to 2012—2024, as during this period the country, and consequently regional economies, encountered three 'transition points' to new operating conditions[4] (Fig. 1).

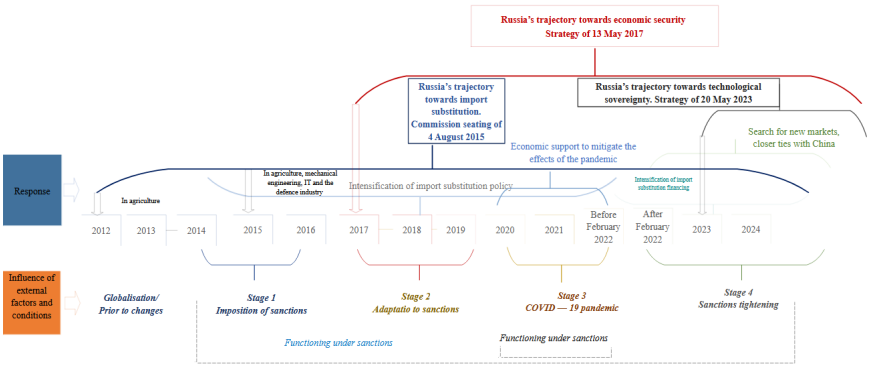

Fig. 1. Intensification of national development trajectories under external factors and conditions

This study aims to develop a robust typology of Russian regions for the period 2012—2024 by clustering key statistical indicators that capture the resource and performance dimensions of regional research and technological subsystems. The objective is to identify pillar regions for advancing research and technological development in accordance with current state policy.

The research hypothesis posits that pillar regions exhibit the highest levels of development of their research and technological subsystems over an extended

[1] Spatial Development Strategy of Russia with Outlook to 2036 (Order of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 28.12.2024 № 4146-r), URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_495567/ (accessed 17.08.2025).

[2] Strategy for the Scientific and Technological Development of the Russian Federation (approved by Presidential Decree of 28.02.2024 № 145), URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_470973/ (accessed 17.08.2025).

[3] Taking into account the data available for Russian regions.

[4] 1) March 2014; 2) March 2020; 3) February 2022.

period and show limited sensitivity[1] to changes in external factors and economic conditions. This is particularly important for ensuring the sustainability of the country's research and technological development, achieving technological sovereignty and addressing economic security objectives by concentrating research and technological activity in these pillar regions.

To some extent, the geographical connectivity of Russia's regions mitigates regional development disparities. In this regard, particular attention is paid in this study to examining the performance of the research and technological subsystem of the Kaliningrad exclave, one of Russia's regions most sensitive to external conditions [2]. This allows for an assessment of the prospects for achieving the region's research and technological development objectives under new conditions.

Theoretical framework

Differentiating regions according to indicators of the level of their research and technological development and innovation potential [3] has been the subject of prolonged scientific discussion. This stems from the fact that such a distribution serves as a fundamental condition for implementing virtually any national economic development strategy that assumes the independence of the domestic technological framework (Fig. 2).

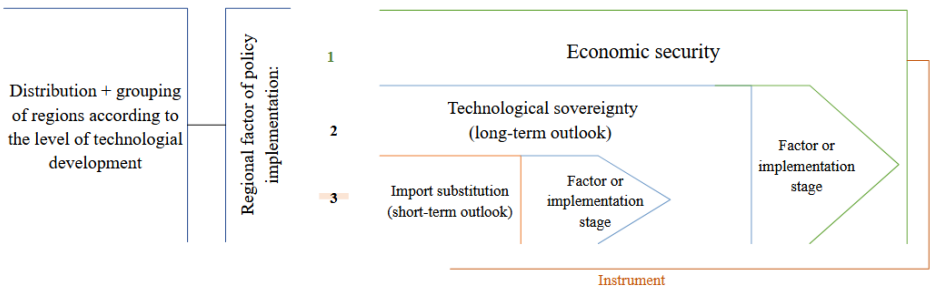

Fig. 2. Grouping of regions by the level of research and technological development as a prerequisite for devising and implementing various types of development strategies

Compiled based on data from [1; 5; 7; 9; 11; 15; 21].

Research interest in indicators, criteria, and the essential conditions for classifying regions by the level of R&D and utilising the results of such classification is generally linked to a transition to a new avenue of national policy, often driven by external factors or expectations of their future change [2; 4—6] (see Fig. 1).

[1] In most cases, the level of sensitivity is below average or they adapt swiftly to changing conditions.

Currently, the contribution of each region to the country's economic security as the 'protection of the economy from external challenges and threats' [7],[1] including those arising from high dependence on external partners, their resources, personnel and technologies [8—10], seems crucial. Thus, differentiation of regions by R&D level is primarily used to address issues of research and technological [9; 10] and innovation security [11—13], the latter incorporating a research and technological component [13]. Although research and technological activity (RTA) is significant for all aspects of security, not all regions need to attain high levels of R&D indicators; rather, they should operate in balance and complementarity to ensure the fulfilment of national objectives.

Russia's current transition from import substitution to technological sovereignty[2] [5], which can be seen as a shift in priorities from the use of tactical measures to long-term development requiring either an existing or rapidly developed domestic R&D framework (Fig. 2), underscores the urgency of identifying regions where such a framework is already functioning, as well as those where its development would be most appropriate.

The term 'technological sovereignty' is interpreted in the literature in various ways, ranging from an emphasis on state independence in the technosphere and the protection of national interests to its understanding as the ability to maintain agency in global technological chains without pursuing autarky [4; 14; 15].

A consensus exists in distinguishing between sovereignty and import substitution: the former entails the creation and control of critical domestic technologies, while the latter merely replaces imports without ensuring competitiveness.

In Russia, the updated Strategy for Research and Technological Development has formalised the priorities and mechanisms for implementing R&D policy. Yet, institutional barriers persist, including misalignment of priorities and low absorptive capacity of the economy for innovation. Without addressing these issues, even large-scale support from the state does not lead to a sustained reduction in technological dependence. General scholarly consensus holds that the key drivers of sovereignty include investment in R&D and human capital, the development of institutions and infrastructure, and network-based forms of cooperation. At the same time, the sovereignisation of critical technologies may temporarily reduce efficiency, but, in the long term, it lowers the risks of external pressure [16—18].

Serving as the foundation for economic security [9], the research and technological component underpins and determines the capacity to achieve national technological sovereignty.

Various assessments of the research and technological subsystem, including ranking-based approaches, are used to evaluate the state of the national research and technological framework at a given point in time, to identify potential sources of technological breakthroughs and to turn to advantage the most

[1] Strategy for the Scientific and Technological Development of the Russian Federation (approved by Presidential Decree of 28.02.2024 № 145), URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_216629/ (accessed 11.08.2025).

[2] Note that transiting to technological sovereignty is being considered by many technologically advanced nations.

favourable conditions for adopting new technologies. For example, a scientific report by researchers from the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which focuses on the spatial aspects of innovation and research and technological development in Russia [19], brings together seven regional rankings based on research and technological indicators, along with an equal number of methodologies for assessing the innovation potential of the country's regions. Natalia Volkova and Evelina Romanyuk, within their research and technological development (RTD) ranking, featuring 28 indicators grouped into four categories, also note the 'increased relevance of producing research RTD rankings under anti-Russian sanctions, as a result of which access to international technology has been blocked for the country' [20, p. 50].

Among existing rankings, particular attention should be accorded to studies produced by the Higher School of Economics National Research University, which, for more than a decade, has systematically differentiated Russian regions for a range of purposes, taking into account the availability of primary statistical data. The research and technological potential of regions was presented as a standalone block until 2019 and has since been incorporated into the Regional Innovation Development Ranking (RIDR). The first edition of the ranking (2012) was based on 35 indicators, whereas the current tenth iteration, published in July 2025,[1] relies on an original methodology comprising 51 indicators (the sixth, 2019, edition included 53 indicators).The ranking draws on data from around 20 different databases and information platforms. In addition, the authors of the Higher School of Economics methodology acknowledge that the normalisation methods they employ enable comparisons between regions but do not allow for comparisons over time.

On 28 October 2024, the *RIA Rating e*conomic research centre presented another ranking of regions by R&D level.[2] This ranking draws on Rosstat data and comprises 19 aggregated indicators characterising various components of research and technological activity, funding volumes, search for innovation and related aspects. In addition, for two consecutive years — 2022 and 2023 — the Ministry of Education and Science has published a national ranking of the research and technological development of Russian regions. The 2022 ranking comprised 33 indicators, while the 2023 edition included 43 indicators grouped into three categories.[3]

Substantial differences in the methodologies used to compile these rankings significantly hinder direct comparisons and the assessment of changes, even over a single year. For instance, the positions of 22 Russian regions shifted by several dozen positions within one year (Table 1). This raises the question of the extent to which such results reflect not only rapidly changing conditions in the regions but also revisions to the evaluation criteria.

[1] Since 2012, the ranking has been produced by the Institute for Statistical Studies and Economics of Knowledge Higher School of Economics national research university.

[2] Ranking of Regions by Scientific and Technological Development, 2024, *RIA Novosti*, URL: https://ria.ru/20241028/razvitie-1979499343.html (accessed 22.09.2025).

[3] National Ranking of the Regions of the Russian Federation, 2025, *Ministry of Education and Science*, URL: https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/action/stat/rating/ (accessed 12.09.2025).

Table 1

Data on rankings and classifications of Russian regions by research and technological development indicators[1]

Region	Ranking						Differentiation	Clustering			Performance within robust typology	
	Ranking by the Ministry of Education and Science (environment for RTD)			RIA Rating (RTD) Rosstat			Differentiation of regions (2017—2021) / 40 indicators (31 indicator in category 1)	According to 2022 data: 29 / 31 indicators		According to data from 2012—2024 / 4 indicators	Variability from 2012—2024, %	Region type
	Ranking in 2022	Ranking in 2023	Change in a region's position (2023 compared with 2022)	Ranking in 2022	Ranking in 2023	Change in a region's position (in 2023 compared to 2022)	Region group by differentiation	Region's group by initial indicators (29)	Region's group by new indicators (31)	Regio s group within robust typology: 2012—2024		
Moscow	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	33	Pillar
St Petersburg	3	2	−1	2	2	0	1	2	2	1	17	Pillar
Republic of Tatarstan	2	3	1	3	3	0	1	2	2	1	15	Pillar
Nizhny Novgorod region	9	6	−3	4	4	0	1	2	2	1	21	Pillar
Moscow region	4	7	3	5	5	0	1	2	2	1	19	Pillar
Tomsk region	6	4	−2	14	13	−1	1	2	2	1	20	Pillar
Sverdlovsk region	7	9	2	10	10	0	1	3	3	1	20	Pillar
Chelyabinsk region	10	22	12	16	20	4	1	2	3	1	192	Pillar
Perm Krai	25	13	−12	7	8	1	1	3	3	1	45	Pillar
Voronezh region	24	21	−3	21	18	−3	1	3	3	1	40	Pillar
Novosibirsk region	5	5	0	13	16	3	1	2	2	1	24	Pillar
Krasnoyarsk Krai	21	23	2	22	22	0	2	3	3	1	44	Pillar

[1] For cluster analyses, a region group (1-2-3-4-5) corresponds to the cluster number (C1-C2-C3-C4-C5). For differentiating subjects, a region group corresponds to the assigned region type (1(I)-2(II)-3(III)-4(IV)). A detailed table with the results of the grouping is provided. Azhinov, D. 2025, Ratings and groupings of Russian regions by the level of scientific and technological development, *Mendeley Data*, vol. 1, doi: 10.17632/95pkdj68ht.1.

Continuation of Table 1

Region	Ranking						Differentiation	Clustering			Performance within robust typology	
	Ranking by the Ministry of Education and Science (environment for RTD)			RIA Rating (RTD) Rosstat			Differentiation of regions (2017—2021) / 40 indicators (31 indicator in category 1)	According to 2022 data: 29 / 31 indicators		According to data from 2012—2024 / 4 indicators	Variability from 2012—2024, %	Region type
	Ranking in 2022	Ranking in 2023	Change in a region's position (2023 compared with 2022)	Ranking in 2022	Ranking in 2023	Change in a region's position (in 2023 compared to 2022)	Region group by differentiation	Region's group by initial indicators (29)	Region's group by new indicators (31)	Regio s group within robust typology: 2012—2024		
Samara region	20	10	−10	6	6	0	2	3	3	1	26	Pillar
Ulyanovsk region	11	16	5	9	9	0	2	3	3	1	31	Pillar
Yaroslavl region	45	18	−27	18	21	3	2	3	3	1	48	Pillar
Kaluga region	33	27	−6	20	15	−5	2	2	3	1	36	Pillar
Tyumen region	12	12	0	11	7	−4	2	3	3	1	72	Pillar
Penza region	32	38	6	27	27	0	2	3	4	1	28	Pillar
Republic of Bashkortostan	8	8	0	12	12	0	2	3	3	2	18	Promising: Tier I
Rostov region	15	17	2	15	14	−1	2	3	3	2	35	Promising: Tier I
Saratov region	48	40	−8	36	33	−3	2	3	3	2	53	Promising: Tier I
Belgorod region	18	11	−7	24	23	−1	2	3	4	2	33	Promising: Tier I
Khabarovsk Krai	36	47	11	28	29	1	2	3	4	2	64	Promising: Tier I
Omsk region	14	19	5	17	17	0	2	3	3	2	143	Promising: Tier I

Republic of Udmurtia	37	30	−7	25	26	1	2	4	4	2	94	Promising: Tier I
Tver region	31	32	1	40	40	0	2	4	4	2	52	Promising: Tier I
Vladimir region	39	43	4	30	25	−5	2	3	3	2	33	Promising: Tier I
Tula region	16	25	9	8	11	3	2	3	3	2	38	Promising: Tier I
Republic of Chuvashia	35	29	−6	26	31	5	2	4	4	2	65	Promising: Tier I
Volgogad region	43	45	2	33	34	1	3	4	4	2	53	Promising: Tier I
Ryazan region	29	35	6	23	24	1	3	4	4	2	40	Promising: Tier I
Republic of Mordovia	17	14	−3	19	19	0	3	3	4	2	23	Promising: Tier I
Novgorod region	30	57	27	29	32	3	3	4	4	2	69	Promising: Tier I
Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug	47	66	19	45	41	−4	3	4	4	3	36	Promising: Tier II
Murmansk region	40	48	8	31	28	−3	3	3	4	3	127	Promising: Tier II
Republic of Komi	44	46	2	61	64	3	3	3	4	3	95	Promising: Tier II
Republic of Karelia	28	34	6	63	53	−10	3	3	4	3	121	Promising: Tier II
Smolensk region	65	80	15	50	52	2	3	3	4	3	60	Promising: Tier II
Magadan region	68	73	5	68	67	−1	3	4	4	3	331	Promising: Tier II

Continuation of Table 1

Region	Ranking						Differentiation	Clustering			Performance within robust typology	
	Ranking by the Ministry of Education and Science (environment for RTD)			RIA Rating (RTD) Rosstat			Differentiation of regions (2017—2021) / 40 indicators (31 indicator in category 1)	According to 2022 data: 29 / 31 indicators		According to data from 2012—2024 / 4 indicators	Variability from 2012—2024, %	Region type
	Ranking in 2022	Ranking in 2023	Change in a region's position (2023 compared with 2022)	Ranking in 2022	Ranking in 2023	Change in a region's position (in 2023 compared to 2022)	Region group by differentiation	Region's group by initial indicators (29)	Region's group by new indicators (31)	Regio s group within robust typology: 2012—2024		
Republic of Buryatia	58	70	12	59	50	−9	3	5	5	3	73	Promising: Tier II
Sakhalin region	64	50	−14	65	63	−2	3	4	5	3	150	Promising: Tier II
Leningrad region	75	51	−24	37	36	−1	3	3	3	3	76	Promising: Tier II
Kamchatka Krai	62	65	3	64	65	1	3	4	4	3	76	Promising: Tier II
Sevastopol	66	26	−40	60	62	2	3	5	5	3	47	Promising: Tier II
Kaliningrad region	22	24	2	56	51	−5	3	4	4	3	82	Promising: Tier II
Krasnodar Krai	34	53	19	46	48	2	2	3	3	4	153	Promising: Tier III
Stavropol Krai	23	42	19	44	45	1	2	4	4	4	26	Promising: Tier III

Altay Krai	46	39	−7	51	54	3	2	3	3	4	22	Promising: Tier III
Kemerovo region	13	15	2	55	56	1	2	4	4	4	90	Promising: Tier III
Lipetsk region	60	69	9	42	47	5	3	3	4	4	66	Promising: Tier III
Ivanovo region	27	36	9	52	60	8	3	4	4	4	118	Promising: Tier III
Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug	80	54	−26	49	49	0	3	3	4	4	274	Promising: Tier III
Astrakhan region	55	59	4	66	70	4	3	4	5	4	82	Promising: Tier III
Orenburg region	42	44	2	47	55	8	3	4	4	4	49	Promising: Tier III
Tambov region	50	33	−17	54	42	−12	3	3	4	4	42	Promising: Tier III
Vologda region	70	41	−29	35	38	3	3	4	4	4	102	Promising: Tier III
Oryol region	69	64	−5	62	57	−5	3	4	4	4	67	Promising: Tier III
Bryansk region	57	63	6	48	44	−4	3	4	4	4	96	Promising: Tier III
Amur region	67	72	5	70	68	−2	3	4	4	4	31	Promising: Tier III
Republic of Mari El	49	37	−12	39	43	4	3	4	5	4	117	Promising: Tier III
Kurgan region	71	58	−13	57	58	1	3	4	4	4	49	Promising: Tier III
Republic of Kabardin-Balkaria	56	78	22	72	74	2	3	5	5	4	55	Promising: Tier III
Pskov region	73	68	−5	67	69	2	4	4	5	4	63	Promising: Tier III

The end of Table 1

Region	Ranking						Differentiation	Clustering			Performance within robust typology	
	Ranking by the Ministry of Education and Science (environment for RTD)			RIA Rating (RTD) Rosstat			Differentiation of regions (2017—2021) / 40 indicators (31 indicator in category 1)	According to 2022 data: 29 / 31 indicators		According to data from 2012—2024 / 4 indicators	Variability from 2012—2024, %	Region type
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Kostroma region	76	56	−20	69	66	−3	4	3	4	4	91	Promising: Tier III
Republic of Dagestan	61	79	18	73	76	3	3	5	5	5	86	Developing
Republic of Crimea	51	55	4	53	61	8	3	5	5	5	108	Developing
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania	78	71	−7	74	71	−3	3	4	5	5	71	Developing
Zabaikalsky Krai	72	74	2	80	80	0	4	4	5	5	63	Developing
Republic of Kalmykia	81	76	−5	78	81	3	4	5	5	5	89	Developing
Republic of Khakassia	59	62	3	82	84	2	4	4	5	5	129	Developing
Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia	63	61	−2	81	79	−2	4	3	5	5	104	Developing
Republic of Ingushetia	83	83	0	85	85	0	4	5	5	5	97	Developing
Republic of Chechnya	79	77	−2	83	77	−6	4	5	5	5	168	Developing
Republic of Altay	84	81	−3	79	75	−4	4	5	5	5	74	Developing
Republic of Adygea	54	75	21	71	73	2	4	5	5	5	73	Developing
Republic of Tyva	74	67	−7	77	78	1	4	5	5	5	258	Developing

Compiled based on rankings, results of region differentiation [22] and clustering [14].

Rankings should, where possible, be applied independently, with a clear indication of their source, to facilitate clarification of the methodological basis of each study and the set of indicators considered. For example, in the 2023 RTD ranking by the Ministry of Education and Science, the Kaliningrad region occupies 24th place, whereas in a similar RTD ranking[1] compiled by RIA Rating, it ranks 56th.

As a hierarchical list of achievements, any ranking represents a 'snapshot,' even though it is based on real data obtained with some delay.

Another possible approach to classifying regions based on assessing their achieved or potential RTD level is through various groupings, such as classifications or clusterings. Among the results of such groupings, notable examples include: a typology of regions by their predisposition to RTD, comprising nine indicators divided into social, production and institutional blocks, based on data for 2015—2019 [21]; differentiation of regions for implementing regional science, technology and innovation policies, comprising 40 indicators divided into three categories, based on the ranking of Russian regions for 2017—2021 [22]; and a recent cluster-based assessment of regions' contributions to national technological sovereignty. This latter assessment uses indicators grouped into four blocks — capabilities, infrastructure, performance and digitalisation — based on 2022 data in two variants: the original, comprising 29 indicators, and a revised version with 31 indicators [14]. Modifications to some indicators and the inclusion of new ones were partly necessitated by the unavailability of certain data due to sanctions [14].

There is an evident trend towards both a greater number of indicators and increased complexity in the assessment methods employed. However, this approach, particularly when one of its objectives is to track changes over time, may lead to misleading conclusions, partly due to the increasing complexity of the model and the potential subjectivity of expert judgments.

A small number of key indicators provides a clearer, more focused picture, reduces the costs of data collection and processing, and makes results more accessible to both experts and policymakers. In this study, we focus on assessing the feasibility of using multifactor models comprising several dozen indicators. The words of the naturalist Hans Selye might be invoked here: 'You could never learn what a mouse is like by carefully examining each of its cells separately under the electron microscope any more than you could appreciate the beauty of a cathedral through the chemical analysis of each stone that went into its construction' [23]. Moreover, this work will adhere to the principle of 'reasonable sufficiency of empirical material' [24] in forming the research framework.

At the core of the proposed measures is the fact that research and technology require substantial investment and time [25]. Accumulating necessary infrastructure and creating favourable conditions for the development of science and innovation in a region is typically a lengthy process, where impressive achievements and breakthrough technologies certainly play a role [26], yet repetition and consistency

[1] It is considered similar based on the name of the ranking.

of progress are equally important. It is only through the latter that regions can establish a foundation for sustainable research and technological and, ultimately, socio-economic development, as well as form an effective institutional research infrastructure. Studies based on data from a single year or short time periods generally cannot capture long-term trends or the stability of processes occurring in regional RTD. Therefore, this study focuses on a 13-year interval and, as noted above, covers at least three transition points to new economic conditions:

1) 2012—2016 (including the transition point of 2014);

2) 2016—2021 (transition point 2020);

3) 2021 to the present[1] (transition point 2022) (see Fig. 1).

This approach allows for the assessment of the possible responses of each region's research and technological subsystem to changing conditions, as well as the formulation of final typology results relying on a relatively stable structure of regions within each established cluster, given the diversity of external factors operating over the period.

Data and methods

Hierarchical cluster analysis was employed to construct a robust typology of regions by the level of research and technological development for 2012—2024. The procedure included preliminary data standardisation and the application of agglomerative hierarchical clustering, with clusters identified using a reduced dendrogram cut-off threshold [27].[2] All calculations were performed using the Python 3.11 programming language and the following libraries: Pandas 2.2.2, NumPy and Scikit-learn 1.4.2.

A key methodological feature of the approach is clustering based on temporal trajectories. Each observation is represented not by a single indicator value but by a multi-year sequence of values across all four indicators simultaneously. As a result, the Euclidean distance between regions reflects the similarity of their multi-indicator, multi-year profiles: regions that are close in terms of both levels and dynamics (trajectory shape) are grouped within the same dendrogram branches and, at a given cut, within the same cluster. This technique enhances the robustness of the typology to short-term fluctuations and makes it possible to identify 'structural' similarities between regions, one that persists over an extended observation period.

[1] In this work, to 2024 inclusive.

[2] Clustering was carried out in two stages: first, the indicators were prepared with consideration of the long time scale; second, agglomeration was performed using Ward's method in the Euclidean space of standardised indicators. The code imports four input files. Since each source file contains multi-year series for 2012—2024, their integration produces a wide matrix in which each row represents a region and each column represents a specific indicator in a specific year. Thus, each region is represented by a complete time trajectory for all four indicators rather than by single-year values. This approach ensures clustering based on a dynamic profile, capturing stable or shifting regional characteristics over the long observation interval rather than a momentary state.

Empirically, the study relies on statistical data that reflect only the key characteristics of the functioning of regional research and technological subsystems, enabling a focus on the most significant aspects of their RTD. The selection of indicators was driven by the need to capture both resource- and outcome-related components of the research and technological subsystem, the availability of comparable regional data over a sufficiently long period (2012—2024) to identify long-term trends and assess the stability of processes taking place in regional RTD (Fig. 3).

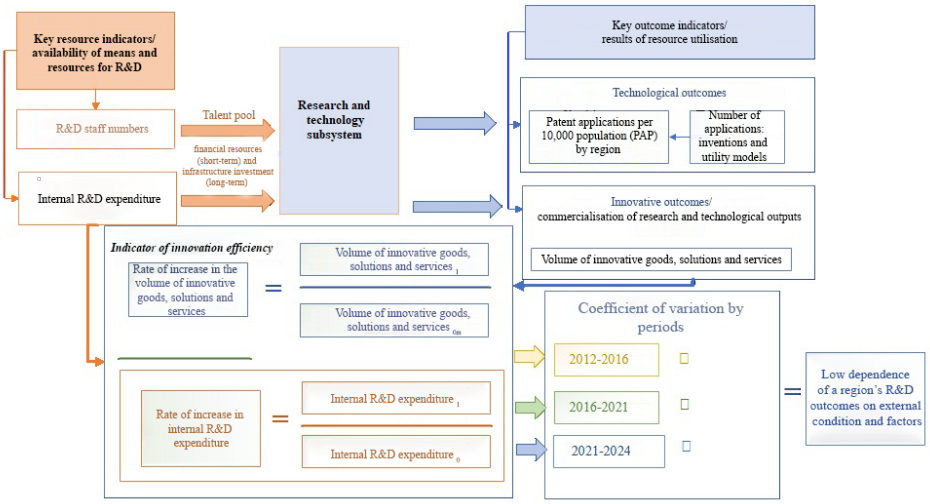

Fig. 3. Relationship between resource and outcome indicators used to assess the RTD level in regions[1]

Compiled based on data from: Statistical Information on the Use of Intellectual Property Objects] 2025, *Federal Institute of Industrial Property*, URL: https://www1.fips.ru/about/deyatelnost/sotrudnichestvo-s-regionami-rossii/statisticheskaya-informatsiya-ob-ispolzovanii-intellektualnoy-sobstvennosti.php?sphrase_id=9130 (accessed 02.06.2025).

[1] Human resources analysis reflects the density of human capital engaged in the creation of new knowledge and technologies. An increase in the number of research personnel indicates the formation of advanced development territories, whereas a decline calls for adjustments to regional and federal R&D support measures.

Internal expenditures on R&D characterise the concentration of financial resources in a region. High values indicate a well-developed research and innovation infrastructure, while low values signal risks of technological lag.

The number of patent applications per 10,000 population shows the intensity of creating and protecting new technical solutions. Its growth reflects a favourable innovation environment and cooperation between research and business, whereas low values indicate structural barriers and weak incentives for patenting activity.

The volume of innovative goods, solutions and services is a composite indicator of research and technological development performance, reflecting the scale of implementation and the degree of commercialisation. High values may indicate a well-established innovation ecosystem, while low values suggest insufficient integration of science and business and weak demand for innovation.

Logarithmic transformation was performed on all the indicators prior to conducting cluster analysis. Information sources for regional RDT analysis were open-access data from 2012—2024.[1] Comparability per 1,000 population was ensured by using demographic data.[2] Analysing key indicators of RTD made it possible to determine the position of each region[3] in Russia's research and technological subsystem, which is treated as part of the manufacturing system, as discussed in detail in the authors' previous works, for example, in [28]. The presented clustering of regions, based on data over an extended period,[4] is aimed at developing a stable typology of regions, including the identification of pillar regions among them.

The study's central hypothesis posits that pillar regions — those demonstrating the highest levels of development in their research and technological subsystems over an extended period — are either only moderately dependent on changes in external factors and economic conditions or adapt to them rapidly. Consequently, an additional indicator is employed after clustering to assess the extent of regional RTD's dependence on external factors and conditions. Here, the degree of dependence of regional RTD on external conditions is evaluated through the variability of the innovation performance indicator (for details, see the calculation procedure in Fig. 3). It is assumed that regions exhibiting a low level of dependence on external factors and conditions demonstrate stable innovation performance results across all three time stages, including the 'transition points', which, in turn, may indicate a high degree of autonomy independent of external context. The stability of the achieved results was assessed by calculating the coefficient of variation at each time stage. Regions with low variability in innovation performance are considered less dependent on external conditions.

This study assumes that regions with lower dependence on external factors and conditions have exhibited stable innovation performance — interpreted as the outcome of research and technological activity — across all three periods, including the transition points. This may indicate a high degree of autonomy from

[1] Science, Innovation and Technology, 2025, *Rosstat*, URL: https://rosstat.gov.ru/statistics/science (accessed 02.06.2025) ; Statistical Information on the Use of Intellectual Property Objects, 2025, *Federal Institute of Industrial Property*, URL: https://www1.fips.ru/about/deyatelnost/sotrudnichestvo-s-regionami-rossii/statisticheskaya-informatsiya-ob-ispolzovanii-intellektualnoy-sobstvennosti.php?sphrase_id=9130 (accessed 02.06.2025).

[2] PPopulation Census, 2020, *Rosstat*, URL: https://rosstat.gov.ru/perepisi_naseleniya (accessed 02.06.2025).

[3] Due to the lack of date, the analysis does not cover Chukotka autonomous okrug, the Jewish autonomous region, Nenets autonomous region, the Kherson region, the Zaparozhye region, the Lugansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic. To ensure comparability and dataset completeness, lacking data for the city of Sevastopol and the Republic of Crimea for 2012 and 2013 were replaced with 2014 data.

[4] The GDP deflator was used to ensure comparability of financial indicators over a long period.

the external context. The stability of achieved results was assessed by calculating the coefficient of variation for each period; regions with low variability in innovation performance were considered less sensitive to external conditions.

Clustering over a long-term period based on regional research and technological activity makes it possible to construct a robust typology of regions. An extended typology, combined with calculations of variability in innovation performance across different periods, enables the identification of regions with consistent performance under varying conditions and, therefore, lower sensitivity to corresponding changes.

Results

Clustering led to the identification of five regional clusters distinguished by levels and rates of growth in research and technology. Figure 4 shows the results of hierarchical clustering.

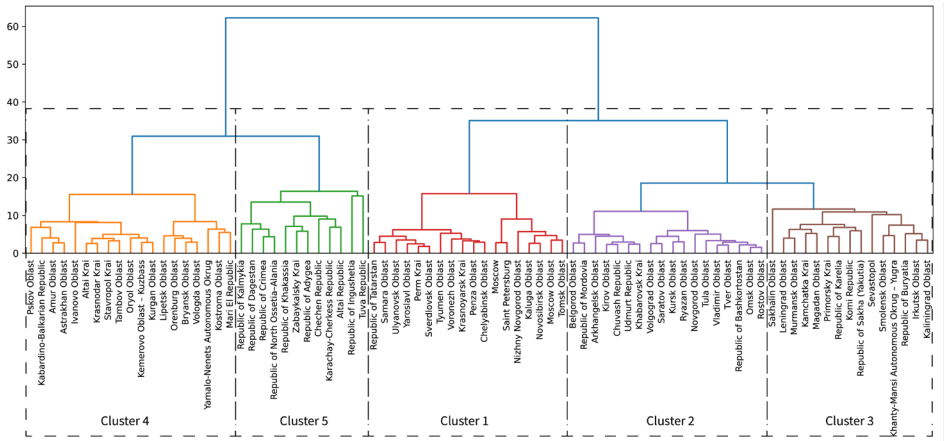

Fig. 4. Hierarchical clustering dendrogram (Ward's method)

Cluster 1, which comprises 18 'pillar regions', constitutes the core of Russia's research and technological system. The average values of all four indicators significantly exceed the national level, and, over 2012—2024, the cluster exhibited sustained growth accompanied by a relative reduction in intra-cluster heterogeneity. The cluster brings together the country's largest research, educational and industrial centres, attracting research talent and continuously expanding their R&D efforts. For most regions in this group, a moderate growth rate combined with the maintenance of leading positions is typical, indicating a transition to a stage of sustainable technological leadership.

Cluster 2, which includes 18 'tier I promising regions', occupies an intermediate position between the core and the periphery. Indicators of R&D personnel availability and internal expenditure approach those of the 'pillar regions', whereas invention and innovation output remain moderate. At the same

time, this group demonstrates the highest compound annual growth rates (CAGR) across a number of indicators, particularly the volume of innovative goods and R&D expenditure, indicating a gradual narrowing of the gap with the leaders.

Cluster 3, comprising 15 'tier II promising regions', corresponds to an intermediate level of development. Average indicator values remain below the national figures, although growth rates in certain areas, particularly innovation output, are comparable to those observed in Cluster 2 regions. Growth is accompanied by high variability, reflecting heterogeneous initial conditions and a sporadic pattern of technological renewal. Geographically, this group predominantly comprises industrial regions with emerging research and educational centres and distinctive niches.

Cluster 4, which includes 18 'tier III promising regions', is characterised by relatively low average values across all indicators and pronounced intra-group differentiation. Several regions exhibit short-term spikes in inventive activity or innovation output, reflecting sensitivity to local factors such as the presence of flagship enterprises, participation in federal programmes or the development of university initiatives. Despite isolated successes, overall growth rates remain lower than in the higher-level clusters, confirming a persistent lag in key RTD parameters.

Cluster 5, consisting of 12 'developing regions', occupies the lowest positions across all indicators. These regions are marked by minimal levels of research personnel and R&D expenditure, low inventive activity and limited innovation output. Nonetheless, between 2012 and 2024, some regions displayed relatively high growth rates in specific indicators, attributable to the low-base effect and the implementation of individual RTD projects. High intra-cluster dispersion reflects the presence of isolated growth points amid generally weak R&D infrastructure.

A comparative analysis across four indicators reveals several discernible patterns. First, human capital remains a key marker of sustainable technological leadership: the availability of research staff is the most stable indicator over time and clearly differentiates the clusters. Second, R&D expenditure shows the sharpest polarisation between the top and bottom groups, with the 'runner-up clusters' (tiers I—II) demonstrating faster growth rates. Third, inventive activity is highly volatile and sensitive to institutional changes. Finally, innovation output reveals divergent trajectories: for the 'pillar regions' it is high and stable, whereas for the 'runner-up' regions growth rates are high but absolute volumes remain moderate.

Thus, the analysis confirms the existence of a hierarchically organised and spatially differentiated structure of Russia's research and technological development, in which the 'pillar' and 'tier I promising' regions form the core of the national research and technological space, while the remaining clusters represent zones of transformation and catch-up growth (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. A choropleth map of RTD cluster distribution across Russia

The persistence of positive trends from 2012 to 2024 suggests a gradual narrowing of the gap between the upper and middle groups, although peripheral regions remain at the stage of developing the basic infrastructure and human capital required for integration into the national research and technological system.

It should be noted that the conducted clustering and dynamic analysis not only captures the current state of regional research and technological systems but also helps identify avenues for spatially targeted regional policy.

The Kaliningrad region in the robust typology of regions

The exclave of Kaliningrad is a border and coastal region of Russia [29]. The region's economy is — or was, since data on the region's international trade have not been published since 2022 — among the most open to international connections of all Russia's regions. At certain periods, imports substantially exceeded the region's GRP (for example, 1.6-fold in 2014) [2]. This indicates a relatively higher degree of the exclave's dependence on changes in external conditions compared with other regions across the country [30].

In the Ministry of Education and Science ranking, which evaluates the conditions for conducting RTD, the Kaliningrad region dropped two places in 2023,[1] from 22nd to 24th. In the RIA Rating ranking, which covers funding volumes, inventive activity, and RTD performance according to Rosstat data, the region likewise fell, from 51st to 56th place. Overall, both rankings indicate a general decline in the region's performance. According to the RTD components analysed using different ranking methodologies, the region's potential — measured in terms of conditions for RTD created by authorities and

[1] As of September 2025, the ranking for 2024 has not yet been published.

environmental parameters for knowledge-intensive business — is approximately 2.3 times greater than its actual performance under unfavourable conditions (56th in performance versus 24th in conditions).

Moreover, the unfavourable conditions for knowledge-intensive activity do not currently allow for a significant increase in the Kaliningrad region's R&D expenditure, since the exclave's share of total R&D expenditure in Russia was 0.13 % in 2012 (7.7 times lower than 1 %) and 0.16 % in 2024 (6 times lower than 1 %). According to the typology results for 2012—2024, the region is classified in Cluster 3 ('tier II promising regions') and has not yet joined the 'pillar regions' that could serve as a reliable platform for implementing current national policy objectives.

Furthermore, the baseline RTD variability for the Kaliningrad region across periods corresponding to the transition points is as follows: 1) 92 % in 2012—2016; 2) 100 % in 2016—2021; 3) 64 % in 2021—2024. Thus, in each period it exceeded not only the 33 % threshold regarded as the boundary of stable change but also the national average of 79 %, except for 2021—2024. The region's RTD is characterised by high sensitivity to external changes, whereas the dynamics of the region's indicators are largely divergent compared with the Russian average (Fig. 6).

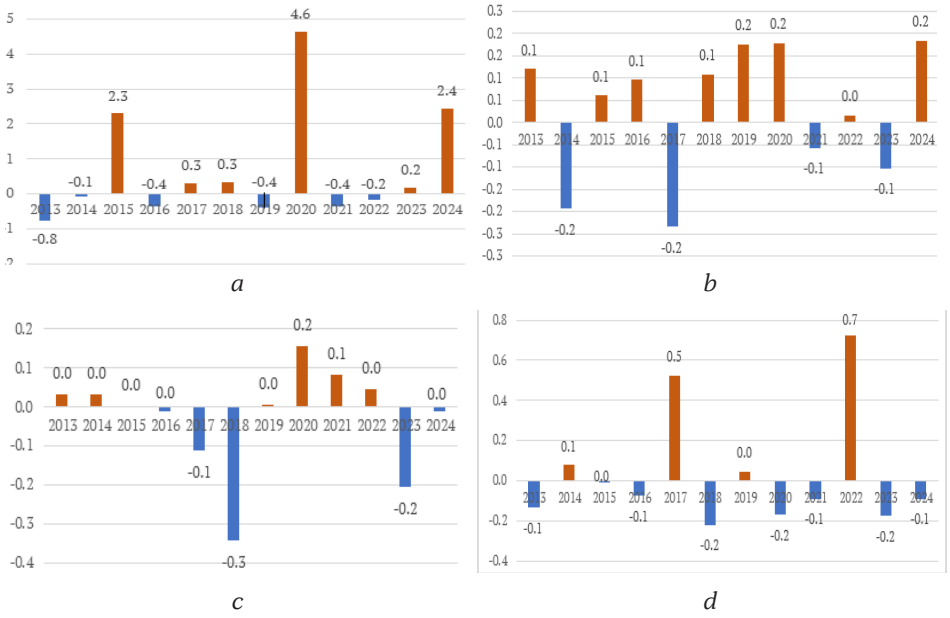

Fig. 6. Difference between the growth rates of key RTD indicators in the Kaliningrad region and Russia, percentage points; a) volume of innovative products; b) internal R&D expenditure; c) number of personnel engaged in research; d) patent applications per 10,000 population

Calculated based on Rosstat data.

R&D funding in the region, with an average annual growth rate of 112 % over 2012—2024, has increased slightly faster than the national average of 109 %. This figure slightly exceeds the average official inflation rate of about 7 %.[1] Over the period, the efficiency of research and technological activity in the Kaliningrad region has changed markedly relative to national indicators, or 'returns on innovation investment', assessed here as the ratio of innovative output to internal R&D expenditure, roubles per rouble.

At the beginning of the period under consideration, the region's performance amounted to less than one rouble of innovative output per rouble invested in research, corresponding on average to 17 % of the national level (Fig. 7). After 2020, the return on invested funds consistently exceeded unity, reaching 84 % of the national level in 2021—2024 and surpassing it by 64 % in 2024, with a return of 8 roubles per rouble compared with the national average of 5 roubles per rouble. Over the same period, internal R&D expenditure increased by only 14 %. This may be interpreted as evidence of the region's RTD capabilities, provided that funding volumes are sufficient to achieve the planned outcomes.

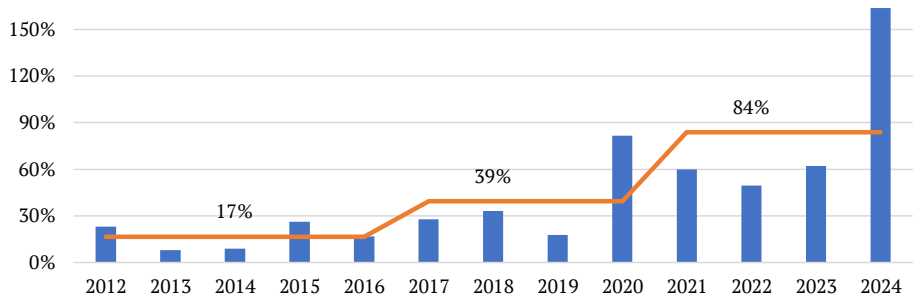

Fig. 7. Contribution of the Kaliningrad region to the national total return on expenditure in terms of innovative output, %

Calculated based on Rosstat data.

Results of current rankings and groupings (typologies and clustering) of Russian regions according to RTD

The relevance of assessing the actual and/or potential contribution of regions or regional groups to general economic security objectives, technological sovereignty as a key component, the consistency of the country's research and technological development, and understanding the hierarchy of regional performance based on RTD indicators prompts a summary of the specific outcomes of the most pertinent studies on the topic, including the present one (see Table 1).

[1] Key Rate of the Bank of Russia and Inflation, 2025, *Bank of Russia*, URL: https://cbr.ru/hd_base/infl/?UniDbQuery.Posted=True&UniDbQuery.From=17.09.2013&UniDbQuery.To=22.09.2025 (accessed 22.09.2025).

The diversity of rankings, each emphasising different aspects of regional RTD, has been noted above, with a comparison of the robust typology results and current research and technological development rankings revealing several fundamental discrepancies stemming from differences in methodological approaches.

First, several regions exhibit high variability in their ranking positions, reflecting the sensitivity of rankings to changes in the combination of indicators and normalisation methods. For example, the Sverdlovsk, Samara and Nizhny Novgorod regions can shift by dozens of positions across different rankings, whereas in the multi-year cluster analysis, they consistently fall within the leading groups (clusters 1 and 2).

Second, some regions show a marked gap between the assessment of enabling conditions (according to the Ministry of Education and Science ranking) and actual RTD outcomes (according to RIA Rating and the robust typology). For example, the Kaliningrad region, despite high institutional environment scores, maintains moderate performance levels in multi-year dynamic profiles, falling within cluster 3.

Third, several regions that sit high in annual rankings due to individual large projects or short-term increases in funding (e. g., the Republic of Sakha [Yakutia], Krasnodar Krai, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug) exhibit considerable instability in their indicators when trajectories over 2012—2024 are considered, preventing them from entering the upper clusters of the robust typology.

Finally, 'covert leader' regions have been identified: those whose ranking positions remain average, but whose long-term stability and high intensity of research and technological activity per 10,000 population place them in the 'pillar regions' group, most notably, the Penza region. These discrepancies highlight that rankings primarily capture the momentary state of regional RTD, whereas stable multi-year profiles, which underlie the proposed typology, make it possible to reveal structural stability, tracing the patterns of changes and regions' ability to retain performance levels regardless of external shocks and methodological adjustments. Accordingly, ranking assessments and regional hierarchies in RTD are not planning instruments, especially not for long-term purposes, nor are they intended as such.

Another approach to classifying regions involves grouping them according to specified criteria, primarily based on whether the values of the indicators under consideration fall within certain author-defined thresholds. Vladimir Byvshev et al. [22] present results of regional differentiation for more targeted regional policy in RTD, drawing on regional ranking assessments for 2017—2021.[1] However, the time interval is considered in the aggregated format as the sum of scores across rankings over five years.[2]

[1] The journal publication appeared on 30 September 2024 and examines data for Russian regions from 2017—2021, which reduced the period of result relevance.

[2] It should be noted that the classification of regions into groups was performed independently by the authors of this study, taking into account the boundaries of the aggregated ranking, as study [22] considers not only R&D indicators but also spatial and administrative-historical factors.

Despite differing initial assumptions and study periods, the regions [22] were classified as 'advanced' based on 40 indicators[1] (group 1 within the differentiation). They are fully included in cluster 1 of the four-indicator robust typology, which is significant for the present study.

Let us consider the results of region clustering as a final basis for comparison. One of the most relevant studies as of October 2025 is a 2024 work [14] offering two clustering variants for assessing the contribution of regions to the country's technological sovereignty. The first variant is based on a set of 29 indicators, while the second relies on 31 indicators. The authors of the study [14] note that the indicator system was modified due to the unavailability of certain data under sanctions (for example, data on regions' international trade), which necessitated the search for alternatives. The challenges of ensuring valid comparisons of grouping results over extended periods with a large number of indicators involved have already been discussed. In contrast to the present study, the mentioned work [14] employs the iterative *k*-means method for clustering. Unlike Ward's method, *k*-means requires the number of clusters to be specified in advance, which may result in the formation of suboptimal clusters. Moreover, according to [14], the first cluster consists of a single region, Moscow.

Let us employ the results of differentiation and clustering of regions (see Table 1) to verify the basic hypothesis of the present study. The hypothesis posits that regions with the most developed research and technological subsystems[2] also exhibit stable rates of innovative activity, which in this study is interpreted as a high degree of independence from changes in external factors and economic conditions (Table 2).

Table 2

Indicators of the variability of innovative activity growth rates relative to internal R&D expenditure growth rates according to the results of region grouping and clustering by RTD levels

Group of regions	Robust clustering (2012—2024)	Clustering according to 29 indicators [14]	Clustering according to 31 indicators [14]	Regional differentiation [22]
	Average variation in regional innovation performance within a group / cluster, %[3]			
1	41	33	33	40
2	65	43	19	60
3	111	71	65	94
4	84	90	87	110
5	110	103	100	—
Difference in variability between the utmost groups / clusters	2.7-fold	3.1-fold	3-fold	2.2-fold

[1] In addition to R&D indicators, the authors in [22] use indicators from the socio-economic, spatial, and administrative-historical categories.

[2] The authors consider this circumstance using different basic premises and methodologies.

[3] To allow for comparability of the results for 2012—2024.

Indeed, across all available studies, regions in groups 1 and 2, which exhibit the highest RTD performance, consistently show the greatest stability of change rates or the lowest variability, compared with other groups identified in various studies, despite differences in their initial premises. As noted above, establishing necessary infrastructure and creating favourable conditions for the development of research and the generation of innovations in a region is typically a lengthy process, in which the repeatability and consistency of progress are particularly important, as clearly demonstrated by 'pillar regions' (cluster 1) and 'tier I promising regions' (cluster 2). Let us compare regional ranking and clustering results (based on two groups of indicators) with those obtained in this study through the typology of regions for 2012—2024,[1] taking into account the constraints imposed by differing study periods. This comparison aims to assess the feasibility of using only key indicators to allocate regions by RTD performance. For the rankings, the ordinal position of each region in the respective year is used, while for the typology of clustering results, the ordinal position of each region is similarly employed, as presented in [14] according to the innovation index (RTD index)[2] (Table 3).

Table 3

Results of producing a typology of Russian regions by RTD indicators

Intra-group difference	RTD rankings				Clustering			
	19 indicators		19 indicators		29 indicators		31 indicators	
	According to RTD ranking, 2022	Percentage from the total number of regions %	According to RTD ranking, 2023	Percentage of the total number of regions %	Based on the initial clustering data, 2022	Percentage of the total number of regions %	Based on the new clustering indicators, 2022	Percentage from the total number of regions %
−3					1	1		
−2					5	6	4	5
−1	16	20	15	18	12	15	14	17
0	51	62	52	63	45	55	47	57
1	14	17	15	18	13	16	13	16
2	1	1			6	7	3	4

[1] Results of clustering-based classification of regions for 2012—2024: cluster 1: 18 regions; cluster 2: 18; cluster 3: 15; cluster 4: 19; cluster 5: 12.

[2] The results of classification based on the composite ranking for differentiating regions in study [22] are not included, as the evaluations there are based not only on R&D indicators but also on a range of socio-economic indicators.

The end of Table 1

Intra-group difference	RTD rankings				Clustering			
	19 indicators		19 indicators		29 indicators		31 indicators	
	According to RTD ranking, 2022	Percentage from the total number of regions %	According to RTD ranking, 2023	Percentage of the total number of regions %	Based on the initial clustering data, 2022	Percentage of the total number of regions %	Based on the new clustering indicators, 2022	Percentage from the total number of regions %
3							1	1
Total number: from −1 to +1	81	99	82	100	70	85	74	90

The average number of indicators used to accurately distribute regions by RTD level in the presented rankings and clustering results is 25. At the same time, using only the key indicators made it possible to achieve complete group correspondence for an average of 59 % of regions. A further 94 % of all regions fall within adjacent groups, that is, within the range of −1 to +1, providing a sufficiently relevant basis for their use and enabling the monitoring of regional progress in achieving RTD goals solely on the basis of key indicators, which are available for regular monitoring.

Conclusions

The findings of this study present a comprehensive picture of the spatial structure of research and technological development across Russian regions over an extended period, from 2012 to 2024. The hierarchical clustering method applied to multi-year data allows regions to be assessed not by single-year indicator values, but by their consistent temporal trajectories. This approach enabled the formation of a typology reflecting not only the current position of regions, but also the degree of stability of their research and technological potential under varying external economic conditions.

Clustering identified five stable groups of regions differing in the level and pace of research and technological development. At the top of the hierarchy are the ‘pillar regions’, which comprise the core of the national research and technological system as they concentrate human, financial, and institutional resources. These territories exhibit high and consistent performance across all key indicators and the lowest sensitivity to external changes, confirming their

role as spatial anchors of the country's technological sovereignty. Tier I promising regions form the contour closest to the core of the research and technological space: they advance rapidly, exhibiting high growth rates in innovation activity indicators and gradually closing the gap with the leaders. Tier II and III territories display average or below-average indicator values. However, they show significant growth potential and the greatest variability in results, indicating scope for development under sufficient government support. Developing regions occupy the periphery of the national system, often remaining dependent on external factors and limited in resources, yet even among them, certain territories show signs of local advancement in research and technology.

Of particular significance is the comparison of the cluster-based typology with contemporary groupings and rankings of research and technological development, which reveals a pronounced convergence of approaches. Over 90 % of regions remain in similar groups regardless of assessment methods. This demonstrates that the use of a limited set of key indicators — staffing, expenditure, patent applications per 10,000 population and innovative output — adequately captures both the actual position of regions and the dynamics of their research and technological development.

These findings have practical relevance for spatially oriented research and technological policy implementation. Long-term clustering makes it possible to identify regions with proven robustness in research and technology and relatively low dependence on external factors, which may be regarded as pillar territories in pursuing state policy on technological sovereignty. For tier II and tier III regions, the priority lies in strengthening human capital and infrastructure capacity, whereas for peripheral regions the key task is integration into interregional and network-based forms of cooperation to compensate for limited internal resources. These issues are expected to be addressed in subsequent studies.

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VYCLSM

DYNAMICS OF THE TERRITORIAL STRUCTURE OF AGRICULTURAL LAND USE IN THE LENINGRAD REGION

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This study aims to examine the current state and prospects of the territorial transformation of agricultural land use, with a view to identifying key development trajectories and potential risks associated with returning unused land to economic circulation. The analysis focuses on agricultural land use in the Leningrad region, a territory with a highly developed agricultural sector and an important part of the Baltic Sea region. The methodological approach combines an assessment of spatial changes in the territorial structure of agricultural land use with an examination of structural shifts in the distribution of farmland, arable land, and sown areas. Indicators of structural change and their growth rates were analysed at the municipal-district level between the 2006 All-Russian Agricultural Census and the 2021 microcensus. The study traces the intensity of territorial shifts in agricultural land use across three periods (1990—2006, 2006—2016, and 2016—2021) and identifies the main characteristics and directions of these transformations, including north–south and centre—periphery patterns. Particular attention is paid to the influence of urbanisation on territorial change, especially in areas bordering Saint Petersburg. The analysis also highlights spatial differentiation within the region and identifies three principal zones of unused farmland. The case of the northern, peripheral Priozersk District shows that, when supported by favourable socioeconomic and institutional conditions, agricultural land can retain its value for agribusiness despite broader structural pressures. The study concludes by outlining region-specific approaches to mitigating potential risks to agricultural land use, assuming that current transformation trends continue.

Keywords:
territorial shifts, municipal districts, areas, unused lands, land use, Leningrad region

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Introduction

With the national agricultural sector designated a strategic priority, the problems of efficient resource use remain on the agenda and have acquired renewed urgency. Particular emphasis is placed on the territorial aspect, which determines the features and efficacy of agricultural facility distribution across the country.

Under market conditions, Russia's agricultural sector has undergone pronounced spatial shifts. Driven by institutional and socioeconomic factors, these changes pose risks to agricultural land use. Their first stage involved the gradual transition from exclusively public land ownership to the introduction of a wide range of proprietors. The new forms of legal organisation in agriculture included, among others, farms and individual entrepreneurs.

The transition was carried out through dividing agricultural assets of kolkhozes and sovkhozes into land parcels allocated to workers and the educated segment of rural society, alongside the right to own them. This engaged an ineffective mechanism of land use, which proved to be an 'institutional trap' [1]. The allocated parcels did not correspond to actual land plots. Moreover, they were not only leased but also sold, enabling developers to bulk purchase land properties in periurban areas with a view to residential and commercial construction and infrastructure expansion, which entailed the withdrawal of these lands from agricultural use. This process accelerated urbanisation, which, prior to the market transition, the authorities had curbed primarily by restricting opportunities for resident registration in cities.

The convergent trajectories of land reform and urbanisation reinforced one another, eroding agricultural land use and accelerating population concentration in cities. Elsewhere in Russian regions, the allocation of land parcels facilitated the accumulation of land resources by major landowners such as Miratorg, the Tkachev Agrocomplex, Rusagro and the EkoNiva Group, while in less favourable locations these lands became idle. In districts remote from urban centres, especially in economically depressed areas, land parcels proved to be in little demand; kolkhozes and sovkhozes went bankrupt, and no new agricultural producers emerged.

The conjunction of these preconditions, accompanied by the dynamics of market relations, caused a substantial proportion of agricultural land, especially cultivated areas, to fall out of economic use. As of 1 January 2021, 44.5 million hectares of land dedicated to agricultural use nationwide, or 11.7 % thereof, remained uncultivated. The share of previously cultivated land that currently

remains unused is even higher, at 16.7 % (33.0 million hectares).[1] In response to the severity of the situation, a special State Programme was adopted in May 2021 for the effective return of agricultural land to economic use and for the development of the reclamation system in Russia.[2]

It should be noted that the distribution of unused land has a clearly defined spatial dimension shaped by the regional characteristics of natural and socioeconomic conditions of land use. As of early 2024, the percentage of cultivated agricultural land no longer in use across Russia's federal districts ranged from 1.3 % (North Caucasian FD) to 58 % (Northwestern FD), and across the country's regions from 0.0 % (Stavropol Krai, Republic of Ingushetia) to 78.9 % (Tver region). Although the share of unused agricultural land, including arable land, has tended to decline throughout the country, it remains markedly elevated in the regions of the Northwestern FD. Land-use indicators likewise exhibit pronounced differentiation within the Russian part of the Baltic region, with the Kaliningrad region at 32.8 %, the Leningrad region at 31.3 %, the Novgorod region at 54.8 %, and the Pskov region at 75.5 %. This situation calls for a regional approach to assessing the potential effectiveness of measures implemented under the relevant state programme, taking into account the territorial structural shifts that occurred during the market reforms and the potential risks associated with bringing abandoned land back into economic use, which is exactly the focus of this article.

Literature review

A review of the literature reveals that the main surge in publications on territorial shifts in agricultural land use and their ambiguous consequences and risks for agricultural production occurred between 2012 and 2020. In particular, the period following the 2016 All-Russian Agricultural Census is notable, as it provided new information on the state and use of land resources, whereas after 2020, only isolated studies have appeared. Publications addressing the territorial aspects of agricultural land use can be grouped into three categories: those examining the intensification of interregional disparities; those devoted to the impact of urbanisation on land use; and those investigating the problems of abandoned land.

Intensification of interregional disparities. In his work, Mikhail Kazmin [2] considers the transformation of agricultural land use across Russian regions

[1] Report on the Status and Use of Agricultural Lands in the Russian Federation in 2023, 2024, Moscow, Rosinformagrotekh, URL: https://cloud.mail.ru/public/k5yz/RJzLaBcqV (accessed 15.06.2025).

[2] Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation of 14 May 2021, № 731, 2021, URL: http://government.ru/docs/all/134619/ (accessed 15.06.2025).

in the course of recent socioeconomic reform. He demonstrates that the most pronounced transformation processes occurred in the European part of Russia, extending from the developed central regions in the north to the forest-steppe and steppe zones in the south, as well as in southern Siberia and the Russian Far East. These changes have prompted a concentration of sown areas within the steppe and dry-steppe natural zones of European Russia, along with shifts in the distribution of agricultural and arable land across the country's economic regions.

Gennady Mukhin analyses the transformation of agricultural land in the European part of Russia from an ecological and economic perspective. His article examines the territorial features of land-use transformation across federal districts, with particular attention to Russia's Non-Black Earth Zone, which has seen high rates of reduction in agricultural land, arable land and sown areas. It is demonstrated that many interregional changes follow a 'north—south' pattern, while within regions they follow a 'core—periphery' one. The dynamics become more favourable when moving from the north (the Non-Black Earth Zone) to the south (the steppe zone), with sown areas, including those under grain crops, contracting to a lesser extent. At the same time, in most regions of the Non-Black Earth Zone, a polarisation in the scale of this reduction has been observed along the 'core—periphery' axis [3].

Evgeniy Kolbovsky, Olga Klimanova and Igor Bavshin present the results of a spatial analysis of the factors and consequences of agricultural land-use transformation in the Smolensk region, focusing on the level of rural settlements [4]. They note that, spatially, the differentiation of land overgrowth processes at the scale of rural settlements is most pronounced within a 30-kilometre band north and south of the main federal motorways crossing the region, while the degree of land development varies in a wave-like pattern from east to west, producing alternating zones of forested and farmland settlements.

Nikita Skobeev examines trends in land-use change in the Tula region through a comparison of data from the 2006 and 2016 All-Russian Agricultural Censuses and Rosreestr. Despite occasional discrepancies between these sources, he concludes that intra-regional polarisation of land use intensified over the study period. In the northern districts of the region, adjacent to the Moscow agglomeration, the area of agricultural land shrank, driven by changes in functional land use, whereas the southern districts saw a concentration of arable land. Moving from the south and south-east of the region towards the north and north-west, an increase in the area of unused land is observed [5].

Impact of urbanisation on land use. Urbanisation gives rise to a range of land-use problems in the suburban zones of major agglomerations, including those of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Across the literature, scholars arrive at similar conclusions: urbanisation and the expansion of cities, industrial zones and built-

up areas lead to a reduction in cultivated agricultural land and its withdrawal from agricultural use, as agricultural enterprises cannot compete for land with actors engaged in alternative forms of land use [6—8].

This situation is characteristic of almost all countries worldwide, most notably China, where rapid urbanisation drives competition between urban territories and highly productive periurban agricultural land, resulting not only in its reduction but also in the loss of fertile agricultural land [9].

Publications addressing uncultivated agricultural land in periurban zones present data from a range of countries. Scholars from Italy [10] describe such spaces on the urban periphery between built-up areas and farmland as marginal. Buildings, structures and infrastructure of expanding cities encroach upon agricultural land, splitting it and producing significant tracts that constitute 'voids at the margins of the city' and will inevitably be absorbed or transformed by urbanisation. The authors propose using these lands for urban recreation, agricultural services, local goods production, greenhouse-gas reduction and biodiversity conservation.

Urbanisation also has an adverse effect on land use in more remote peripheral areas, producing zones of abandoned land. This pattern is characteristic of many countries and is illustrated by the case of the Chinese urban agglomeration in the Pearl River delta [9], where rapid industrial transformation and modernisation triggered intense rural—urban migration, contributing to the abandonment of agricultural land on the periphery.

Problems of abandoned land. Tatyana Nefedova and Andrey Medvedev examined agricultural land use in relation to the contraction of already developed space in Central Russia. They concluded that, within this macro-region, the extensive agricultural and settlement system is being reshaped into a more nodal one as the human-occupied space contracts. The authors also raise entirely pragmatic questions as to which nodes may become drivers of development; what kinds of economic activity may emerge there; and what may occur in territories from which population and agriculture are retreating [11].

Contraction of human-occupied space is directly linked to the problem of agricultural land abandonment, that is, its transformation into desolated areas driven by socio-demographic, economic, technological, political, institutional and cultural factors. Rational economic behaviour aimed at profit maximisation and rising opportunity costs stemming from the specific features of agriculture generally predetermine the abandonment of marginal land [9].

Another contribution [12] presents the results of a study conducted using satellite imagery-based classifications of changes in agricultural land use, together with socioeconomic and agroclimatic data, for Vladimir, Ryazan, Tula, Kaluga and Smolensk regions within the Non-Black earth zone. The authors identify the following as the main factors determining the spatial distribution of

abandoned land: low agricultural productivity; location near the forest edge or seclusion within forest tracts; remoteness from municipal centres, settlements with populations above 500, and target markets. At the same time, it is concluded that biophysical factors exert rather limited influence on the spatial distribution of abandoned land.

Studies have shown a tendency for agricultural land to be abandoned in areas that are agroclimatically and socially marginal for agribusiness, located far from markets for agricultural produce and / or exhibiting negative demographic trends [13]. The reverse process — restoring agricultural land to use — is, from an economic perspective, fairly well explained by David Ricardo's theory of land rent, whereby unused land parcels with better locations (close to settlements), more fertile soils and available labour are prioritised for development [14; 15].

At the same time, decisions on the prospects for reclaiming specific abandoned plots are influenced by the characteristics and performance of the business entities involved, biophysical and natural conditions, evaluations of a plot's potential, and, importantly, by intentions to develop and reintegrate abandoned agricultural land into production [14].

Addressing the issue of unused land, Fellow of the Russian Academy of Sciences Aleksandr Chibilev argues that the steppe zone of Russia requires the revitalisation of sparsely populated areas through the adoption of new models of land use. This concerns 'the implementation of projects for diversifying agricultural production and developing the environmental, ecosystem, recreational and agricultural functions of the underutilised land fund, including the development of meat livestock farming, pasture-based livestock production and horse breeding, agritourism, the creation of protected steppe areas (including transboundary ones), and so on' [16].

Some countries are actively investigating and advancing alternative, non-tillage approaches to the utilisation of abandoned land. While examining uncultivated land in the forest regions of northern, central and southern Sweden, Karl-Ivar Kumm and Anna Hessle, following an economic assessment of alternative options, proposed establishing organic beef production [17].

An alternative perspective on the problem of unused agricultural land is offered by Corresponding Fellow of the Russian Academy of Sciences Yuri Tsypkin, who proposes implementing climate projects on these lands. Particularly, these projects involve creating carbon units and selling them on the carbon market to organisations seeking to offset their emissions [18]. This idea is supported by international publications, which highlight the link between agricultural land use and climate change and note that converting arable land into pastures or forests can aid the restoration and accumulation of organic carbon stocks [19; 20]. At the same time, it is emphasised that, to ensure stable carbon sequestration after agricultural activity ceases, abandoned agricultural land must be properly

managed. Effective management should account for a range of factors, including past and future land-use practices, local climatic conditions, soil quality and soil carbon content [21]. Thus, several approaches can be taken to address the problem of abandoned (unused) agricultural land: returning it to productive use, employing it for alternative activities or converting it into a site for carbon unit production.

The reviewed publications on the transformation of agricultural land distribution indicate that the process exhibits a number of recurrent regularities. allowing its future development to be projected. The following patterns can be distinguished:

— agricultural land transformation unfolds along 'north—south' and 'core—periphery' axes;

— at the local level, land transformation depends on the proximity of agricultural plots to forest edges and federal motorways;

— the driving force behind transformation is urbanisation, which shapes agricultural land use in periurban, peripheral and centrally located areas;

— changes in the structure of agricultural land use constitute the primary manifestation of territorial transformation;

— under market conditions, the transformation of agricultural land use compresses and fragments rural space;

— the most reliable indicator of this transformation is the change in sown areas for all agricultural crops;

— a problematic outcome of territorial transformation is the presence of abandoned (unused) land;

— the determinants of the expansion of abandoned land are defined by a combination of socio-demographic, economic, technological, political, institutional, motivational and other factors;

— unused agricultural land must be managed, and each plot, depending on its socio-economic and environmental efficiency, should be allocated either to agricultural production or to alternative uses.

Consequently, this study aims to analyse the current state and prospects of the territorial transformation of agricultural land use to identify both possible avenues and risks associated with reintegrating unused land into economic use.

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

— identifying territorial structural shifts in agricultural land use;

— determining the impact of urbanisation on the factors and regularities of territorial transformation of agricultural land use;

— revealing the determinants and patterns of the territorial of abandoned land distribution;

— assessing the risks to agricultural land use under ongoing transformation trends and proposing measures for their mitigation.

The object of this study is agricultural land use in the Leningrad region — a territory with highly developed agrarian production whose reproductive processes

are affected by the consequences of adverse conditions accompanying market transformations. The focus of the research is the regularities of territorial transformation in the use of the region's agricultural land.

Materials and methods

The study was carried out using data from the 2006 and 2016 All-Russian Agricultural Censuses (ARAC-2006[1] and ARAC-2016[2]) and the 2021 agricultural micro-census.[3] Additional statistical data were drawn from Rosstat, the Leningrad regional and municipal statistical offices and Petrostat.

The Ryabtsev index was applied as a criterion to identify changes in the territorial structure of agricultural land use across the Leningrad region [22—24]:

$$I_R = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}\left(d_{i_1} - d_{i_0}\right)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^{n}\left(d_{i_1} + d_{i_0}\right)^2}},$$

where d_{i1} is the district proportion within total regional agricultural land, arable land and sown areas over the study period (2021), and d_{i0} is the share of districts in the total regional agricultural land, arable land and sown area in the base period (2006).

The scale proposed by Valery Ryabtsev was used to evaluate the significance of changes in territorial structures.

Scale for assessing the degree of structural differences according to the Ryabtsev index

Ranges of index values	Degree of structural differences
Up to 0.030	Identical structure
0.031—0.070	Very low degree of difference
0.071—0.150	Low degree of difference
0.150—0.300	Substantial degree of difference
0.301—0.500	Significant degree of difference
0.501—0.700	Very significant degree of difference
0.701—0.900	Opposite structure types
0.901 and over	Complete opposites

[1] Preliminary Results of the 2006 All-Russian Agricultural Census for the Municipal Districts of theLeningrad Region (Short Programme), 2007, Statistical Digest, St. Petersburg, Petrostat.

[2] Preliminary Results of the 2006 All-Russian Agricultural Census for the Municipal Districts of theLeningrad Region (Short Programme), 2007, Statistical Digest, St. Petersburg, Petrostat.

[3] Main Results of the 2021 Agricultural Micro-census for Leningrad Region], 2022, Official Publication, St. Petersburg.

Spatial changes in the distribution of agricultural land, arable land and sown areas were assessed using indicators of structural shifts that occurred between the 2006 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census.

The analytical indicators of structural shifts were:

a) absolute increase in structural shifts, pp ($d_{i1} - d_{i0}$);

b) growth rate of structural shifts, %:

$$K_d = (d_{i1}/d_{i0} \cdot 100) - 100.$$

Results

Spatial structural shifts in agricultural land use in the Leningrad region

The land reform entailed fundamental changes in the region's agricultural land use: new categories of commercial producers emerged — farming cooperatives (FCs) and individual entrepreneurs (IEs) — while the significance of agricultural organisations (AOs) and household plots (HPs) declined. According to the 2006 ARAC, the total area of land used by FCs and IEs amounted to 56.5 thousand hectares, or 3.5 % of all agricultural entities in the region. Moreover, almost the entire land area used by FCs and IEs (98.4 %) was cultivated land, whose share increased from 9.2 % to 10.4 % between the 2006 and 2021 agricultural censuses.

Municipal districts of the Leningrad region were grouped (Table 1) to assess how the land-use structure depends on the type of agricultural enterprise, which is largely linked to the size of agricultural land.

Table 1

Structure of agricultural land distribution by type of agricultural enterprise and size in the districts of the Leningrad region, based on data from the 2021 agricultural micro-censuses

District group	Grouping criteria, thousand ha	Number of districts	Share, %		
			AO	CFs and IEs	HPs and small holdings
I	Up to 10	4	33.6	46.2	20.2
II	10—20	6	82.7	9.5	7.8
III	Over 20	7	83.9	8.1	8.0
Total and regional average		17	81.1	10.4	8.5

Prepared based on the 2021 agricultural micro-sensus data.

As Table 1 shows, Group I, with land use up to 10 thousand ha (mainly in the north-east and east), is dominated by FCs and IEs, with a significant share of HPs and other smallholdings. In the other district groups, the share of FCs and IEs decreases, while that of AOs increases.

With regard to the territorial structure of agricultural land use, the intensity of its change across the Leningrad region was first assessed for the periods starting from 1990—2006 (Table 2).

Table 2

Intensity of territorial shifts in agricultural land use by all categories of enterprises in the Leningrad region (according to Valery Ryabtsev's methodology)

Type of land	1990—2006	2006—2016	2016—2021	1990—2021
Cultivated land	Low	Low	Low	Substantial
Arable land	Low	Low	Low	Substantial
Sown areas for all crops	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial

Prepared based on data from the Leningrad Regional Statistics Office, the 2006 ARAC and the 2016 ARAC.

The data in Table 2 give a realistic picture of the transformations in agricultural land use, as the areas of agricultural land, including arable land, changed little over selected periods. Only the comparison of 2021 with 1990 reveals significant changes in the territorial structure. These structural changes occur solely due to differences in the dynamics of the areas under consideration.

The intensity of spatial shifts in the distribution of sown areas was substantial throughout all periods considered. This confirms the conclusion drawn from the literature review that the best indicator of agricultural land-use transformation is changes in sown areas for all crops.

Grouping municipal districts by the rates of negative growth in areas of agricultural land, arable land and sown areas between the 2006 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census made it possible to identify patterns of their territorial concentration and the associated structural shifts (Table 3).

Table 3

Territorial structure and structural shifts in the distribution of agricultural land, arable land and sown areas in the AOs of the Leningrad region by groups of municipal districts classified according to the growth rates of these areas between the 2006 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census

District group	Number of districts	Rate of increase, %	Share in regional total, %			Structural shifts		Rate of increase in structural shifts, %
			2006	2016	2021	2016 / 2006	2021 / 2006	
Cultivated land								
I	6	Up to – 50	38.8	48.3	52	9.5	13.2	34.0
II	5	From– 50 to – 60	34.6	35.5	35.1	0.9	0.5	1.4
III	6	Below – 60	26.6	16.2	12.9	– 10.4	– 13.7	– 51.5
Arable land								
I	5	Up to – 20	20.4	30.2	29.2	9.8	8.8	43.1
II	7	From – 20 to – 70	61.1	60.1	63.4	– 1	2.3	3.8
III	5	below–70	18.5	9.7	7.4	– 8.8	– 11.1	– 60.0
Sown areas for all crops								
I	6	Up to – 10	35.4	43.5	43.0	8.0	7.6	21.5
II	6	From – 10 to – 20	48.6	46.2	47.6	– 2.4	– 0.9	– 2.1
III	5	Below – 20	16.0	10.4	9.4	– 5.6	– 6.6	– 41.3

Prepared based on data from the 2006 ARAC, the 2016 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census.

Figure 1 illustrates the territorial differences among the municipal districts of the Leningrad region in terms of growth rates and structural shifts in agricultural land of AOs between the 2006 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census.

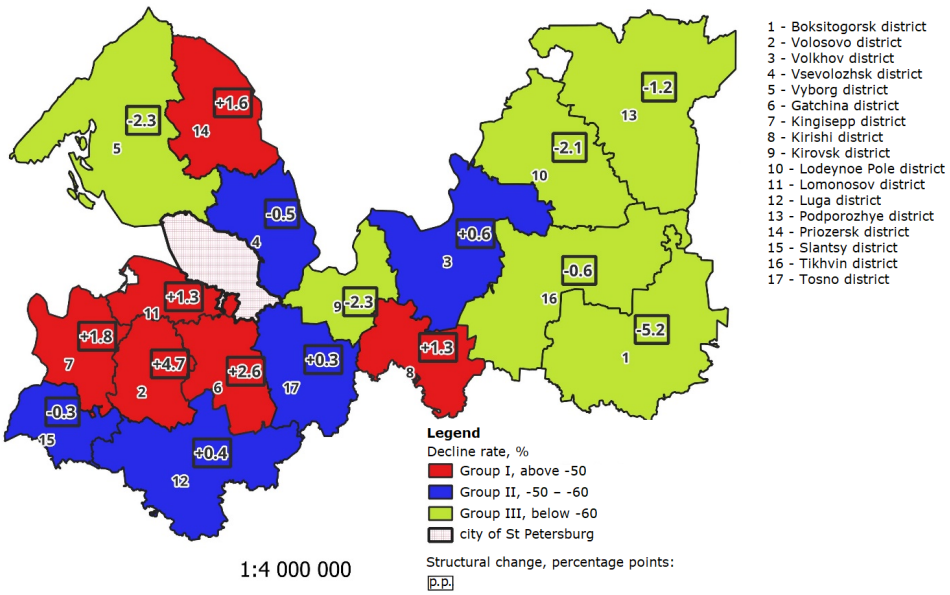

Fig. 1. Territorial differences among municipal districts in negative growth rates of agricultural land of the Leningrad region's AOs and in structural shifts between the 2006 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census

Prepared based on data from the 2006 ARAC, the 2016 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census.

Data in Table 3 show that Group I districts of the Leningrad region are characterised by relatively low rates of reduction in agricultural land (1st criterion), arable land (2nd criterion) and sown areas (3rd criterion). They also exhibit the highest share in the territorial structure of agricultural land and a high share of sown areas (comparable to Group II), along with positive structural shifts and high rates of their increase between the 2006 ARAC, 2016 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census.

Group II is associated with moderate rates of area reduction across all three criteria, the highest shares in the territorial structure of arable land (over 60 % of total regional figures) and sown areas. It also shows minimal values for both positive and negative structural shifts, as well as very low rates of growth.

Group III has the highest rates of reduction in agricultural land, arable land and sown areas, low shares in total regional indicators, high values of negative structural shifts between the censuses and the highest rates of their increase.

Comparison of the results of grouping by agricultural land, arable land and sown areas shows the following:

1. Group I, with all the criteria considered, includes the Kingisepp and Priozersk districts; according to two of the three criteria, the Kirishi, Slantsy and Tosno districts. The Kingisepp and Slantsy districts form a single area.

2. With all the criteria taken into account, Group II includes only the Volkhov district, but it should also include the Volosovo, Volkhov, Vsevolozhsk, Gatchina, Lomonosov and Luga districts, which fall into this group according to two of the three criteria. Notably, the Volosovo, Gatchina, Lomonosov and Luga districts also form a single area.

3. Group III, according to all the criteria, comprises five districts: Boksitogorsk, Vyborg, Kirovsk, Lodeynoye Pole and Podporozhye. The Boksitogorsk, Lodeynoye Pole, and Podporozhye districts form a single area, adjoining the Tikhvin district, which falls into Group III under the first and third criteria and is close to them under the second.

These rates of change thus lead to a reduction in agricultural land, including arable land and sown areas, across all identified groups. The fastest decreases in land use occur in the region's northern and north-eastern districts, as well as in the Kirovsk district adjoining St. Petersburg, and in the Vyborg district in the north-west. Districts south of St. Petersburg have largely maintained the scale of land use over the analysed period.

Hence, as observed by other authors for different regions, territorial shifts in land use in the Leningrad region also follow a 'north—south' axis. An exception is the Priozersk district in the north-west, which falls into Group I according to all the criteria.

The influence of the 'core—periphery' pattern on the transformation of agricultural land use is more complex: the Kirovsk district adjoining St. Petersburg is classified in Group III, with the most negative indicators of changes in territorial structure. Furthermore, in terms of preservation of agricultural land area, the Lomonosov and Gatchina districts south of St. Petersburg belong to Group I, while Vsevolozhsk and Tosno only fall into Group II.

The effect of urbanisation on spatial shifts in agricultural land use

Urbanisation processes in the Leningrad region are developing primarily in the districts adjoining St. Petersburg: Vsevolozhsk, Gatchina, Kirov, Lomonosov and Tosno. The combined urban population in these districts grew by 813.9 thousand people from the pre-reform period to early 2024, reflecting a growth rate of 184.2 %, while in the remaining districts of the region it fell to 90.4 %. In all suburban districts, the urban population grew by between 10.6 % (Kirovsk district) and 333.8 % (Vsevolozhsk district), while in the rest of the region, the population of cities and urban-type settlements declined by almost 10 % (Fig. 2).

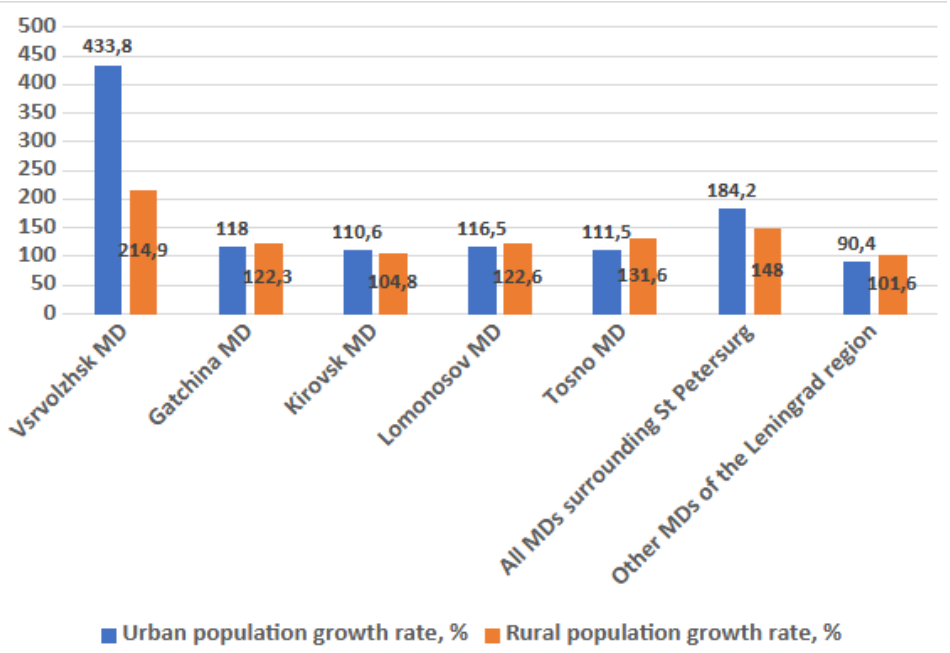

Fig. 2. Growth rates of urban and rural populations in municipal districts adjoining St. Petersburg and in the other districts of the Leningrad region, 1989—2024, %

Prepared using data from the 1989 All-Union Population Census and Rosstat data as of 1 January 2024.

Urbanisation has also had a strong impact on the dynamics of the rural population, which increased overall by 48 % in all suburban districts, compared with only 1.6 % in the other districts. This situation necessitates a reassessment of the role of suburban household plots in the agricultural land-use system. Previously, proximity to a major city was thought to promote intensive agricultural production, with the land effectively safeguarded by the state, but rapid urbanisation has altered this state of affairs. As cities expanded, new industrial enterprises and production and transport infrastructure — such as the ring road, warehouses, wholesale trade facilities, logistics centres, industrial parks, and others — emerged at a fast pace, displacing agricultural production from the land [25]. For example, the Ruchyi stud farm company lost 1,020 hectares of fertile arable land solely due to the construction of the St Peterburg Ring Road. After years of searching for land, it acquired plots in the Luga district of the Leningrad region, relocating part of its suburban production there from the suburbs [7].

Another new phenomenon is detached house communities erected on suburban land (Table 4).

Table 4

Changes in the number of AOs, their agricultural land area, and the number of detached house settlements in the municipal districts of the Leningrad region adjoining St. Petersburg

Municipal district	1990		2021 (agricultural micro-census data)		Rate of agricultural land shrinkage, 2021/1990, %	Number of detached house settlements as of 1 January 2025, each
	Number of sovkhozes and poultry farms, each	Agricultural land area, ha	Number of AOs not classified as small enterprises, each	Agricultural land area, ha		
Vesvolzhsk	12	31 289	14	5496	82.4	240
Gatchina	21	56 348	13	15 433	72.6	44
Kirovsk	7	23 960	6	1730	92.8	21
Lomonosov	19	41 919	8	7951	81.0	81
Tosno	13	46 644	10	9249	80.2	24
Total	72	200 160	51	39 859	80.1	410

Calculated based on data from the Leningrad Regional Statistics Office (Lenoblgorstat),[1] the 2021agircultural micro-census and the official website 'Suburban Real Estate in the Leningrad Region and St. Petersburg'.[2]

As Table 4 illustrates, among the districts bordering St. Petersburg, urbanisation has most strongly affected agricultural land use in Vsevolozhsk, where over the past nine years, four towns — Bugry, Koltushi, Kudrovo and Murino — and the urban-type settlement of Yanino-1 have appeared. Slightly earlier, in 1998, Sertolovo was granted urban status. According to the St. Petersburg and Leningrad Region Statistics Office (Petrostat), the total population of these settlements reached 398.3 thousand at the beginning of 2025.[3] Some of the agricultural land was converted into detached housing developments, the scale of which in the Vsevolozhsk district was an order of magnitude greater than in other suburban districts of the Leningrad region. As a result of urbanisation, the area of agricultural land owned by AOs in the Vsevolozhsk district decreased 5.6-fold; of the 12 AOs in 1990, only seven large enterprises remained listed in the registry as of 31 January 2024.

[1] Main Indicators of the Production and Economic Activities of State Farms in Leningrad Region in 1990, 1991, Statistical Digest, Leningrad.

[2] Detached House Communities intheLeningrad Region, 2025, URL: https://zagorod.spb.ru/kottedjnie-poselki/leningradskaya-oblast/rayon-vsevolozhskiy-lo?page=13 (accessed 15.06.2025).

[3] Petrostat Letter on the Approval of Official Document Forms, 2025, URL: https://78.rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/ЛО%20числ%20на%2001.01.2025%20по%20МО%20.pdf (accessed 15.06.2025).

The effects of urbanisation were less pronounced in other suburban districts. Yet, in Tosno, for example, the former dairy-and-vegetable sovkhozes Shushary, Lensovetovsky and Fedorovskoe ceased operations entirely during the reform period, and their agricultural lands, totalling over 12 thousand hectares, were withdrawn from the agricultural land-use system. The area of agricultural land in the former Thälmann Sovkhoz also declined sharply, and its central facility — the settlement of Telmana — was granted town status in 2024.

Problems of abandoned agricultural land

All-Russian agricultural censuses report unused land only for surveyed entities, while abandoned land, i. e., land outside the boundaries of agricultural producers' holdings, remains unaccounted for. In contrast, the Report on the State and Use of Agricultural Lands of the Russian Federation in 2023 provides data on all unused and abandoned land within each region. Information on such lands is submitted to Russia's Ministry of Agriculture by regions, and it differs significantly from agricultural census data. For instance, according to the 2021 agricultural micro-census, the share of unused agricultural land in the Leningrad region was 21.4 %, whereas the above-mentioned report by the Ministry of Agriculture indicates 47.4 %. This discrepancy is understandable, as since 1990 the number of major commercial producers — AOs considered as census entities —has sharply declined in the region's north-eastern and eastern districts. For example, in the Boksitogorsk, Lodeynoye Pole and Podporozhye districts, no former agricultural enterprises remain despite the presence of agricultural land, now classified as abandoned.

Overall, in the Leningrad region, the proportion of unused land rose during the 2016—2021 intercensal period, with significant territorial variations observed (Table 5, Fig. 3).

Table 5

Grouping of Leningrad region districts by the share of unused agricultural land in AOs, FCs and HPs in 2021 and structural shifts relative to 2016

District group	Number of districts	Grouping criteria, %	Share of unused agricultural land, %		Structural shift, pp
			2016	2021	
I	5	Fewer than 15	11.5	10.3	−1.2
II	6	From15 to 30	20.1	21.9	1.9
III	6	Over 30	30.2	41.9	11.7
Total	17	—	19.6	21.4	1.8

Calculated based on data from the 2016 ARAC-2016and the 2021 micro-census.

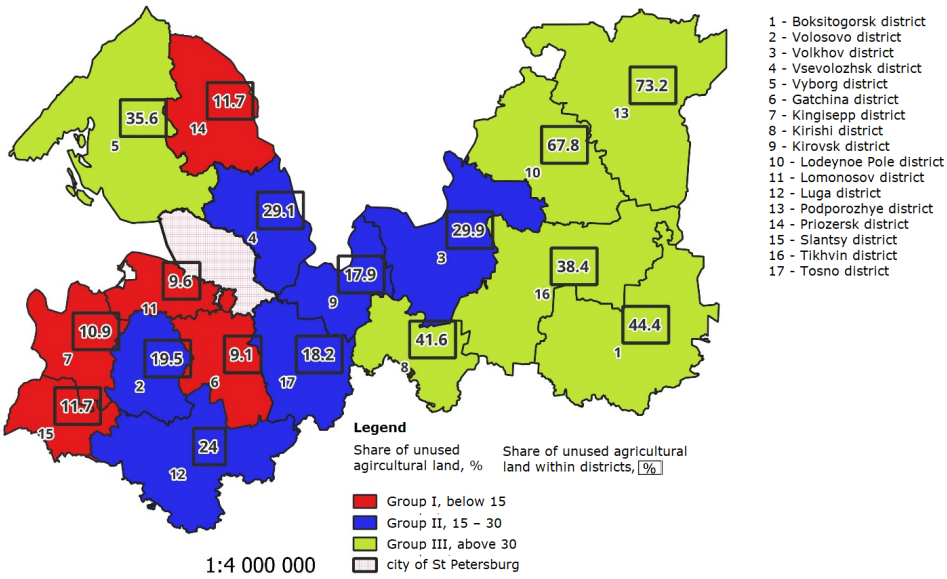

Fig. 3. Groups of Leningrad region districts by the share of unused agricultural land across all categories of farms in 2021, %

Calculated based on data from the 2021 agricultural micro-census.

The distribution of unused agricultural land across the districts of the Leningrad region (Fig. 3) closely relates to territorial differences in the rates of agricultural land increase and structural shifts between the 2006 ARAC and the 2021 agricultural micro-census.

As shown in Fig. 3, the territory of the Leningrad region is clearly divided into three main areas, based on the share of unused agricultural land across all categories of agricultural entities. With the lowest share of unused agricultural land, group I districts —Gatchina, Kingisepp, Lomonosov and Slantsy — are located to the south and south-west of St. Petersburg and belong to the group of the region's territories exhibiting the highest rent potential for this type of land.

The Volosovo and Luga districts, also classified among the territories with the highest land rent potential, fall within the group with medium shares of unused agricultural land. The Luga district is included in this group because of its peripheral location, over 100 km from St. Petersburg, whereas the unused agricultural land in the less remote Volosovo district, which belonged to Group I in 2016, should be prioritised for reintegration into agricultural use.

Lying beyond the zone of districts with a low share of unused agricultural land, the Priozersk district is located on the northern Karelian Isthmus on the periphery relative to St. Petersburg. Based on previous groupings, it ranked among the top

districts of the Leningrad region in terms of the dynamics of agricultural land, arable land and sown areas, while showing one of the lowest land rent potentials, including the lowest soil quality scores for agricultural land and arable land in the region (averaging 51 and 56 points, respectively) [26]. The combination of these factors suggests that the Priozersk district should reasonably be classified in Group III across all the indicators considered above, similar to the neighbouring Vyborg district, which enjoys a more favourable position owing to its southern territories bordering St. Petersburg.

However, the determining factor in maintaining the scale of agricultural land use in the Priozersk district was a coalescence of socio-economic and institutional factors:

— specialisation of AOs almost exclusively in milk production and pedigree livestock breeding contributed to the preservation of agricultural land for the cultivation of roughage and succulent fodder;

— since the pre-reform period, seven AOs in the district, operating as pedigree Holstein cattle breeding farms, have been maintained and further developed, receiving regular state subsidies;

— during the challenging transition to market relations, local AOs secured stable milk sales and fair pricing by entering into a partnership in May 1995 with the dairy processor, the Piskarevsky dairy plant;

— for decades, the district based its activities on scientifically grounded strategies and long-term economic development programmes, and it is currently implementing the 2025—2030 municipal programme Development of the Agro-Industrial Complex of the Priozersk Municipal District of the Leningrad Region;

— within all administrative units of the district, a high standard of management has traditionally been maintained; at different times, the Priozersk district was headed by future Chairman of the Government of Russia Viktor Zubkov and State Duma deputy Sergey Yakhnyuk.

In addition to the Volosovo and Luga districts, Group II also includes three territories directly adjacent to St. Petersburg —Vsevolozhsk, Kirovsk and Tosno. In these districts, the increase in unused agricultural land is associated with the influence of the St. Petersburg agglomeration. The Volkhov district, also part of this area, has a share of unused agricultural land of 29.9 %, just below the group's upper limit of 30 %. In terms of its parameters, Volkhov is closer to Group III, making it a prospective candidate for inclusion in the area formed by the north-eastern and eastern districts of the region.

This area is defined by a combination of factors conducive to further growth in the extent of unused agricultural land, including:

— peripheral location of the districts along the 'core—periphery' axis;

— unfavourable position along the ‘north—south’ axis;

— relatively low land development and a high proportion of irregularly shaped plots (no more than 10 % in the north-east), with agricultural land, particularly arable plots, fragmented into small parcels;

— significantly diminished production and resource potential required to keep agricultural land in the utilised category.

At the same time, the land rent potential, including the average soil quality scores for arable and agricultural land, is relatively high throughout the area, except for the Lodeynoye Pole district, with values of 62—63 and 56—57 points respectively, considerably exceeding those on the Karelian Isthmus [26]. The Vyborg district, due to conditions similar to those in the region’s eastern territories — particularly as long as the ‘north—south’ axis is considered — and the lowest land rent potential across the region, including the lowest average soil quality score for agricultural land (46), has likewise been classified in Group III of districts with a low share of utilised land. Like the Priozersk district, Vyborg lies outside the singled out areas.

Probable threats to agricultural land use under the current transformation trajectory and measures to mitigate them

The multifaceted territorial heterogeneity of agricultural land necessitates a differentiated approach to solving this problem.

In districts bordering St. Petersburg, further expansion of the metropolis’s negative impact on agricultural land use should be anticipated, including a reduction of agricultural land and the emergence of new abandoned plots. The planned construction of additional metro lines to Expoforum and Yuzhny Gorod, together with high-speed tram lines to Kolpino, Slavyanka, Yuzhny Gorod and elsewhere, may stimulate residential development in the Lomonosov and Tosno districts, resulting in the conversion of additional agricultural land. In the Vsevolozhsk, Kirovsk and Tosno districts, abandoned suburban land, which resulted from the disbandment of former sovkhozes, has remained unused for housing, industrial, or infrastructural purposes to this day. These districts require the reclassification of such land from agricultural use to urban or industrial land.

In the north-eastern and eastern districts, owing to the factors outlined above, the trend towards an increase in unused land area may intensify. To mitigate this threat, a strategy of differentiated land use can be proposed, incorporating the following elements:

1. As noted above, highly fertile plots should be incorporated into the agricultural land-use system of FCs, with additional incentives provided in the

form of tax preferences and subsidies. One option is to use these plots for growing medicinal herbs, taking advantage of the favourable environmental conditions in the districts.

2. Irregularly shaped agricultural plots scattered among forests, overgrown with shrubs and young trees, can be used for forestry purposes, including beekeeping, Christmas tree cultivation, and related activities.

3. Plots with unique recreational qualities are suitable for public leisure, tourism, functioning as hunting estates and other similar uses.

In this group of districts, the largest and most favourably located parcels can be brought into economic circulation to substitute for agricultural land that is being lost due to objective reasons.

The south-western districts of Volosovo, Kingisepp, Luga and Slantsy, which have the most favourable soil and climatic conditions and a high proportion of arable land, should become the main focus in plans to bring unused land into economic use and prevent its loss. On the Karelian Isthmus, attention should be given to bringing unused natural forage lands into use, as they are essential for the further development of dairy cattle breeding. Overall, there is an urgent need to implement additional measures to stimulate land demand in areas experiencing depression-marked processes in land use, through mechanisms such as dedicated regional target programmes.

Conclusion

The study identified substantial challenges in the transformation of the agricultural land-use system, many of which stem from the inadequately designed land reforms of the 1990s. These reforms resulted in a marked contraction of agricultural and arable land, as well as a significant decline in crop production. They also contributed to widespread land idling among rural producers and the emergence of abandoned plots outside formal farm holdings.

The ongoing structural changes exhibited a pronounced territorial orientation, including along the ‘north—south’ and ‘core—periphery’ axes, which led to a differentiation of districts according to the severity of agricultural land-use problems. Thus, it became possible to delineate areas within the Leningrad region with relatively homogeneous conditions. The boundaries of areas identified on the basis of different indicators largely coincide and closely align with the existing agricultural zoning, indicating the sufficient accuracy of the findings.

The region has witnessed the active implementation of a comprehensive set of state agrarian policy measures, including initiatives aimed at stimulating investment and innovation among agribusiness entities, which have significantly slowed or mitigated the adverse effects of market mechanisms. Equally important is the factor of ‘path dependence’, namely the high resource potential of the

sector accumulated under the planned economy, which has been preserved and scaled up through technical modernisation of production. This has allowed the Priozersk district, whose territory occupies an unfavourable location in the northern periphery of the region and has low soil quality, to ensure more efficient use of agricultural land through the targeted implementation of a combination of effective socio-economic and institutional factors governing the development of dairy cattle breeding. According to the indicators of agricultural land, arable land and sown area dynamics discussed above, as well as data on unused land, the Priozersk district consistently grouped with the Volosovo, Kingisepp, Luga and Slantsy districts, which have the most favourable soil and climatic conditions for agricultural production.

As a result of urbanisation, the scale of agricultural land use is declining, and abandoned land plots are emerging in territories adjacent to St. Petersburg. In the more remote parts of the region, specifically the Boksitogorsk, Lodeynoye Pole and Podporozhye districts, the rates of agricultural land withdrawal from economic circulation are the highest.

The continuation of the current trend of declining agricultural land area and the rising share of unused land poses significant threats to agricultural land use. Owing to the multifaceted territorial heterogeneity of agricultural land, measures to counter these threats should be implemented through a differentiated approach and the execution of targeted programmes. Such a programme-based approach should be informed by continuous monitoring and in-depth analysis of the situation in the districts, including comparisons with previous years, to evaluate the outcomes achieved and the territorial shifts in land demand and the expansion of sown areas.

However, as correctly noted in a previous study [27], information gaps can lead to distorted and potentially biased assessments of the situation. The primary detailed source of data on land holdings is the All-Russian agricultural census, conducted only once every ten years. Although agricultural micro-censuses are conducted in the intervals between full censuses, they cover only a limited set of indicators. Data from Rosreestr and the Ministry of Agriculture of Russia do not always coincide, and no information is available at the municipal level within regions. The ongoing digital transformation of the agro-industrial complex, which is aligned with state agrarian policy priorities to advance digitalisation in land-use management and to develop regional datasets for the Unified Federal System of Agricultural Land Information and other national and regional databases, has the potential to support the resolution of this issue in the medium term.

The study indicates that the implementation of the state programme for the reintegration of previously withdrawn agricultural land requires new mechanisms and tools to smooth territorial disparities in land use and to ensure that the

quantitative and temporal parameters of expected outcomes are justified and realistic within the contemporary institutional environment. It is also essential to provide the necessary resources simultaneously in accordance with the established planned indicators for the regions. This conclusion is corroborated by other researchers studying the long-term strategic development of the agro-industrial complex [28—30].

In the context of structural shifts in agricultural land use, current territorial changes also underscore the need for a systematic examination of interregional differentiation dynamics to enable timely identification of emerging trends in the formation of growth points or depressed areas in the development of agricultural production and rural territories.

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YATZXZ

SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOURISM SECTOR LABOUR MARKET IN THE KALININGRAD REGION

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Under mounting demographic pressures, restrictions on recruiting foreign labour, and an economy-wide wage race, competition for workers in the tourism sector has intensified considerably. This pressure is further exacerbated by the rapid growth of domestic tourism and the incorporation of new territories into the tourism landscape. These challenges are fully characteristic of the Kaliningrad region; however, efforts to address workforce shortages have become significantly more complex since 2022, owing to the heightened structural costs associated with the region's exclave status. The objective of this study is to identify and evaluate spatial disparities in the development of the tourism labour market in the Kaliningrad region and, on this basis, to propose measures aimed at strengthening human-resource capacity. The empirical basis of this study is drawn from statistical data from Rosstat and its regional office (Kaliningradstat) concerning tourism development in the region. In addition, the analysis uses data from the Ministry of Social Policy of the Kaliningrad region on labour force demand, as well as information from the SPARK-Interfax database on accommodation and food-service enterprises, disaggregated by municipality. General scientific, statistical, and cartographic methods were employed to process and interpret the data. The findings indicate that the spatial evolution of the regional labour market reflects a gradual eastward shift in tourism activities and increasing engagement in the near and distant suburbs of the regional centre — areas that had previously been less affected by tourism development. At the same time, this expansion is driven primarily by the growth of the food-service sector, while the involvement of the working-age population in formal employment in the accommodation sector remains limited. Enhancing human-resource potential

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in these areas requires adapting the vocational training system in cooperation with representatives of the tourism industry and improving mechanisms supporting labour mobility.

Keywords:
labour market, tourism, labour shortage, job vacancies, spatial disparities, Kaliningrad oblast

Introduction

Since 2014, the tourism and recreation sector in the exclave Kaliningrad region has been undergoing marked development: the region has consistently ranked high in tourism attractiveness as new destinations and visitor hubs emerge, tourism and recreation infrastructure expands, and tourist numbers rise year on year. This has led to increasing holiday costs in the exclave's resorts. The principal drivers comprise the hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup and the substitution of foreign travel prompted by the reduced accessibility of overseas holidays during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the period following 2022.

The accommodation and food service sector (it will be referred to as the tourism sector below) accounts for more than 3 % of regional employment, which places the region ahead of many of its Russian counterparts, ranking 12th in 2024. However, the industry's contribution to the development of the region's territories remains uneven: while the north-western coastal area and the administrative centre, Kaliningrad, have traditionally developed most briskly, other areas are only loosely integrated into tourism and recreation activities. This discrepancy creates socio-economic issues and tensions. Increasingly, resort areas become difficult to access during the high season, with hours-long traffic jams on the roads, overcrowded beaches and rising prices for goods and services.

These processes have fostered negative attitudes among local residents towards the increasing inflow of tourists. At the same time, however, in the coastal zone of the Kaliningrad region and in Kaliningrad itself, demand for tourism services has driven income growth among residents employed in the industry. Revenue from tourism is generated through full-time, part-time and seasonal employment, self-employment and the renting out of accommodation to visitors. In addition, the multiplier effect of tourism generates demand for jobs in related industries, such as the production and sale of souvenirs, service provision and retail.

Whereas the resort areas of the coastal zone and Kaliningrad experience excessive recreational pressure, the eastern part of the region remains only marginally integrated into tourism and recreation. Despite the selective development of individual facilities in the east of the region, pronounced socio-economic disparities persist between the western and eastern parts. These disparities have deepened the east—west divide in living standards; extremely low unemployment in the west contrasts with high unemployment in the east. In this context, balanced spatial development of the tourism sector is becoming

increasingly important, given the excessive anthropogenic pressure in the western agglomeration and the eastern region's lagging socio-economic indicators. At the same time, the region's small size, strong transport connectivity and high levels of car ownership [1], combined with the substantial yet underutilised tourism and recreation potential of the extensive eastern territories [2] and the availability of labour resources [3], create favourable conditions for more active integration of eastern territories into the tourism sector.

The aim of this article is therefore to identify and evaluate the spatial disparities in labour market development of the tourism sector in the Kaliningrad region and, based on this assessment, to propose measures to enhance staffing in districts experiencing labour shortages.

State of research

Several global trends have emerged in the labour market for tourism and recreation. First, the adoption of modern technologies, particularly software, is accelerating, enhancing labour productivity and consequently displacing workers with the lowest qualifications [4; 5]. Second, a principal factor prompting staff to leave the tourism sector is the declining attractiveness of work in the industry, caused by low wages, precarious and short-term contracts, inconvenient working hours, stress, limited career prospects, lack of employment security, poor working conditions and health risks [6—8]. Moreover, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment in tourism has been more significant than in other sectors [9—11].

A key factor in the development of the tourism sector is the creation of a system for training competitive personnel [10; 12]. Raising the prestige of occupations in tourism and related sectors is also crucial, including through corporate social responsibility initiatives [13; 14]. The national project 'Tourism and Hospitality' prioritises the development of human capital in the sector. In this context, practice-oriented education assumes particular importance. At present, more than 48.7 thousand students are enrolled in 283 universities in programmes related to tourism, of whom almost 36.5 thousand study at universities administered by Russia's Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The employment rate of graduates trained in the service and tourism sector stands at 73.1 %.[1]

Yet another post-pandemic global trend is the burgeoning of domestic tourism, which aligns closely with Russia's policy in the sector [15]. This fosters the integration of new territories into the tourism sector and stimulates the creation of new jobs, which in turn underscores the need to address labour shortages,

[1] The Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia Prepared Best Practices in the Field of Tourism Education. Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia, 2025, *Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia*, URL: https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/press-center/news/obrazovanie/98033/ (accessed 22.08.2025).

including by involving local residents in the industry [16; 17]. At the same time, there remains a shortage of research examining the spatial characteristics of labour market development in the tourism sector.

In the post-pandemic period, Russia's tourism sector is developing against the backdrop of the special military operation in Ukraine and the implementation of Western sanctions. Consequently, the emerging trends in the country have focused on 'creating favourable conditions for developing the nation's potential, engaging Russian citizens in activities to strengthen national unity and preserve spiritual and cultural-historical heritage, promoting intensive development of cultural and educational, business, ecological tourism and cruises, and ensuring a responsible approach to service quality' [18, p. 101].

Since 2021, the labour market has been recovering, driven by a gradual increase in employment in the tourism sector, primarily in commercial lodging facilities [19]. Demand for personnel has also increased, reaching almost 1.5 times the 2020 level by 2022.[1] According to online recruitment platforms, in the first half of 2022, the most in-demand positions nationwide in the hospitality sector were for personnel with secondary vocational education (90.2 %), including bartenders, waiters, baristas, café and restaurant administrators, cooks, sommeliers, hotel administrators (concierges), hotel housekeepers and porters [19]. A recent trend is the lowering of work experience requirements by employers, prompted by the growing staff shortage [20]. It has been noted in the literature that in Russian regions, against the backdrop of rising domestic tourist inflows and an expanding range of services, the labour market in this sector is becoming more competitive and more attractive to qualified specialists [21].

The issue of labour shortages in the Russian economy, particularly in the tourism sector, is being addressed through the implementation of two national projects, 'Personnel' and 'Tourism and Hospitality' [22]. At the same time, researchers note that, given the expected increase in staff shortages, implementing these projects may prove challenging. The expert community recommends closer integration of IT technologies in tourism, creating conditions for the transfer of personnel from other sectors of the economy, such as construction, and facilitating the migration of labour resources and their adaptation, including seasonal and temporary workers, international migrants and compatriots returning from abroad [22]. Special attention is devoted to developing the training system for tourism personnel, particularly in the most labour-deficient areas such as agritourism and ecotourism [23—25].

The tourism sector in the region, one of the most affected during the pandemic [26], has experienced a post-pandemic surge driven by rising domestic demand [14; 27]. The region consistently features in rankings of tourism attractiveness, and its tourism potential is not yet fully realised [28]. Between 2021 and 2024,

[1] Demand for Workers to Fill Vacant Jobs Since 2018, 2025, *Unified Interdepartmental Statistical Information System*, URL: https://www.fedstat.ru/indicator/59086 (accessed 08.09.2025).

the number of commercial lodging facilities (CLFs) and overall accommodation capacity increased, primarily through compact outlets near 'small resort towns, while the eastern part of the region remains underdeveloped in this regard' [27, p. 175]. With the rapid increase in tourist pressure in the western part of the region, leading to a noticeable rise in holiday costs, experts emphasise the need to develop eastern municipalities with tangible tourism and recreation potential, particularly medium-sized towns such as Chernyakhovsk, Sovetsk and Gusev [29]. The main groups of tourists in the region are visitors from other Russian territories seeking leisure and recreation, and this inflow continues to grow year on year.

Today, the labour market in the Kaliningrad tourism sector, as in other Russian regions, is marked by a shortage of personnel. In the exclave, this problem is further exacerbated by the outflow of professionals abroad [30]. However, an undeniable advantage is the region's net migration gain, as newly arriving migrants often undergo labour adaptation in the tourism sector due to its relatively low employment requirements. At the same time, migrants exhibit high entrepreneurial potential, which is realised in the hotel and restaurant business alongside other industries [31].

Methods and materials

This study examines the hotel and food service sector (classified under Section I of OKVED2:[1] Activities of hotels and food service enterprises) as the most prominent group of economic activities within the tourism sector and, at the same time, as directly related to it, unlike transport or trade. Data available from open sources have been used to characterise the labour market situation in the tourism sector (Table 1).

Table 1

Information sources used to assess the labour market in the tourism sector and the corresponding indicators

Indicator	Unit of measurement	Source
Average annual number of workers by type of economic activity under the Labour Resources Balance Sheet	People and%	Unified Interdepartmental Statistical Information System (UISIS)
Average annual workforce across all organisations by type of economic activity	Persons	UISIS
Number of hers and separations by type of economic activity	Persons	UISIS

[1] Translator's note: OKVED2 is the Russian Classification of Economic Activities, in effect since 2014.

The end of Table 1

Indicator	Unit of measurement	Source
Employer-declared demand for personnel submitted to state employment authorities by type of economic activity and by qualification and work experience requirements (as of 1 August)	Persons	Data provided by the Ministry of Social Policy of the Kaliningrad region in response to an official request
Average monthly nominal wages of workers employed in the economy	Roubles	UISIS
Number of legal entities and individual entrepreneurs engaged in hospitality, by municipality	Each	Statistical Register of Economic Entities of the Kaliningrad Region (SPARK-Interfax)
Number of persons accommodated in CLFs by municipality	Persons	Statistical Bulletin of Kaliningradstat: Information on the Activities of Commercial Lodging Facilities in the Kaliningrad Region
Working-age population as of 1 January	Persons	Kaliningradstat
Average annual workforce in organisations of the Kaliningrad region	Persons	SPARK-Interfax

The study period covers the years of rapid development in the tourism sector following the region's recovery from the economic crises of 2015—2016: the pre-pandemic years 2017—2019, the pandemic years 2020—2021, and the years of regional development under the new closed borders conditions, 2022—2024. This timeframe allows for an analysis of how major changes in the country and the region have influenced the labour market situation in the tourism sector and its adaptation dynamics.

Data on employer-declared demand for personnel submitted to state employment authorities were used, both in total and by type of economic activity — specifically, in the hospitality sector — based on figures as of 1 August for 2019—2024. It was important to assess the structure of personnel demand (by occupation and by municipality) outside the high summer season, as vacancies offered during this period were assumed to involve primarily permanent rather than temporary employment. During the summer season, the analysed structure of personnel demand shifts towards increased need for auxiliary staff requiring no specialised skills, such as hotel housekeepers, general labourers, cargo handlers, cleaners, couriers, waiters, security personnel, etc. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of using data on official unemployment and employer-declared demand submitted to state employment authorities, owing to the complexities of obtaining unemployed status, low benefit levels and the specifics of company personnel policies. For instance, individuals cannot be recognised as unemployed if they refuse two suitable job offers, including

temporary work, within 10 days. Self-employed individuals are also denied unemployed status. Moreover, Russian employers, particularly during crises, often find it more advantageous to transfer an employee to part-time work or reduce wages rather than terminate employment and thereby add to the labour exchange [32]. Therefore, actual personnel demand in the tourism sector may be higher, making additional qualitative and quantitative studies advisable for its accurate assessment.

Results

Regional labour market in the tourism sector. About 17.2 thousand people are employed in the region's hotels and food service establishments, accounting for 3.3 % of the total employed population. This places the region among the top twelve in Russia by this measure. Even before the nationwide boom in domestic tourism and before the COVID-19 pandemic, this share placed the region fifth among all federal subjects in 2017. Today, only Sevastopol, the Republic of Crimea and Krasnodar Krai, with over 5 %, and the Altai Republic and Astrakhan region, with over 4 %, have a significantly higher share of employment in tourism. The absolute number of those employed in the sector grew at the highest rates in Kaliningrad in 2022 and 2023, increasing by 4—7 % annually.

Data on the average annual workforce in the hospitality sector across all organisations show a 27 % decline in 2024 compared with 2017, a steeper drop than that observed across all organisations in the region (−12 %).

This may be explained by intersectoral labour reallocation towards information technology (+159 %), healthcare (+103 %) and mining (+148 %); by rotational work in other Russian regions (a 2.5—3-fold increase compared with 2021—2022[1]); as well as by transitions into informal or partial employment and self-employment.[2]

Overall, workforce movement in the tourism sector over the study period was significantly less active than across the nation or the Northwestern Federal District (NWFD) — the average proportion of hires and separations relative to the average workforce from 2017 to 2024 was 36 %, compared with 62 % for Russia and 58 % for the NWFD (Fig. 1).

[1] Results of the Labour Force Sample Survey: Rosstat Statistical Report, 2025, *Rosstat*, URL: https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/11110/document/13265 (accessed 31.07.2025).

[2] UFNS: Federal Tax Service Directorate: About 2,000 Self-Employed People Rent Out Property Legally in Kaliningrad Region, 2024, *Federal Tax Service*, URL: https://www.nalog.gov.ru/rn39/ifns/ob9/info/14780150/ (accessed 31.07.2025) ; The Number of Self-Employed in Kaliningrad Region Has Sharply Increased — Ministry of Finance, 2025, *Klops,ru*, 28.05.2025, URL: https://klops.ru/kaliningrad/2025-05-28/357726-v-kaliningradskoy-oblasti-rezko-vyroslo-chislo-samozanyatyh-minfin (accessed 31.07.2025).

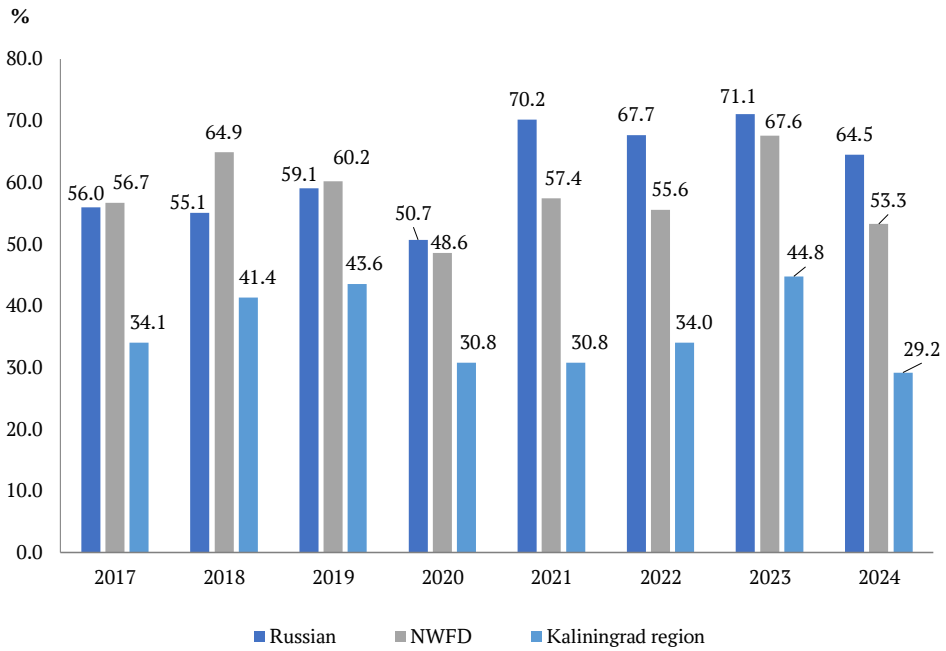

Fig. 1. Hiring and separation rates
in the tourism sector's average workforce, %

The measure fell to its lowest levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, when workforce movement in the sector declined sharply, a pattern also observed in other regions of the country. In the Kaliningrad region, however, this period of reduced workforce mobility has continued — the surge in 2023 cannot be considered a recovery, as it was short-term and driven by an increase in employee departures from the sector. Meanwhile, average figures for Russia and the NWFD show a return to pre-pandemic levels. This may be indicative of two concurrent processes: a significant shortage of labour resources on the one hand, and a lack of interest in employment in the sector on the other. The latter is attributable, firstly, to the fact that the labour rights of workers in this sector were the least secure during the pandemic, leaving them most affected; secondly, to the surge in self-employment and individual entrepreneurship within the sector, which is often more attractive to workers as it offers higher earnings, flexible working hours, and opportunities for remote work — an aspect that has gained increasing relevance in the post-pandemic period.

In the Kaliningrad region's tourism sector, self-employment primarily concerns tour guides. In 2023, 300 tour guides were certified, and as of 1 September 2025, this number had risen to 422, with 240 applications under consideration by the regional Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Most tour guides are not employed directly by tourism companies; they work under service contracts or are self-employed.

Another factor is the ban on the employment of foreign nationals holding work permits in food and beverage organisations from May 2024,[1] which likely contributed to the closure of several food service enterprises.[2]

Analysis of employment structure in the tourism sector shows that nearly three-quarters of employees work in food service outlets (FSOs), reflecting both the numerical predominance of establishments serving visitors and local residents, and the sector's staffing characteristics, which require more service personnel than the hotel industry (Fig. 2, 3). The decline in employment in FSOs despite an increase in the number of establishments is likely explained by the active replacement of staff positions with outsourcing, the adoption of more flexible employment forms (e. g., part-time work), labour-saving technologies and the misuse of self-employment arrangements.

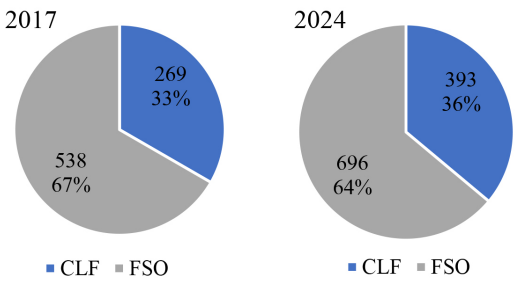

Fig. 2. Number of organisations operating as collective lodging facilities and food service outlets

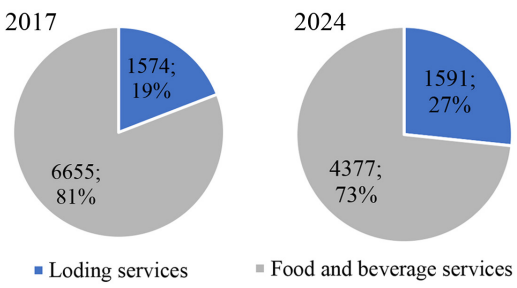

Fig. 3. Average workforce (excluding external part-time employees) across all organisations by type of activity: hotel and food service enterprises in the Kaliningrad region

[1] Ukaz gubernatora Kaliningradskoy oblasti № 38-u ot 13 maya 2024 g. [Decree of the Governor of Kaliningrad Region № 38-u of 13 May 2024], 2024, *Official Regulatory Act Publications*, URL: http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/3900202405140001 (accessed 31.07.2025).

[2] Bez plova i samsy: iz-za zapreta na rabotu migrantov v Kaliningrade zakryvayutsya populyarnye kafe i restorany [No Plov, No Samsa: Popular Cafes and Restaurants Close in Kaliningrad Due to the Ban on Migrant Labour], 2024, *Klops.ru*, 05.09.2024, URL: https://klops.ru/kaliningrad/2024-09-05/303544-bez-plova-i-samsy-iz-za-zapreta-na-rabotu-migrantov-v-kaliningrade-zakryvayutsya-populyarnye-kafe-i-restorany (accessed 31.07.2025).

The observed changes are also reflected in officially reported personnel demand, which declined threefold between 2019 and 2024, to as few as 300 positions (Fig. 4). The structure of demand, however, remained largely unchanged: most positions are for workers with no formal education requirements (55—60 %) and for those with secondary vocational education (35—40 %). One-quarter of vacancies specify work experience requirements. Vacancies for specialists with higher education are rarely posted with the Kaliningrad Regional Employment Centre, which may be explained by direct interactions between employers and regional higher education institutions, employee poaching from competitors and the use of alternative platforms for posting vacancies (for example, hh.ru).

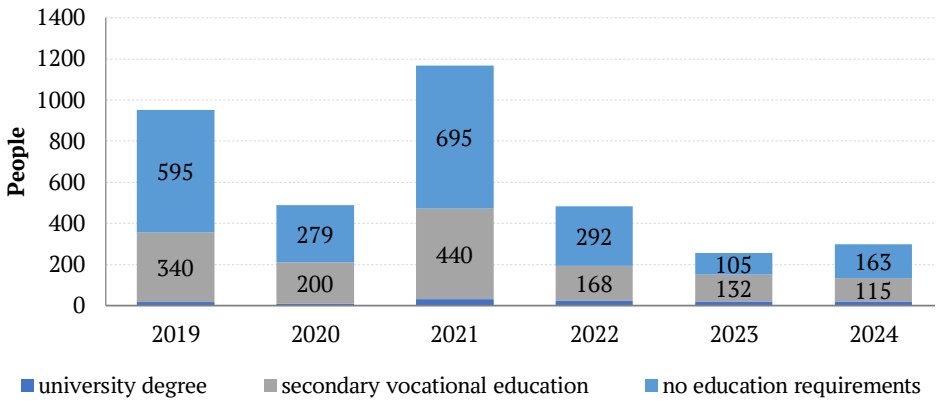

Fig. 4. Employer-declared demand for workers submitted to the Kaliningrad Regional Employment Centre (Section I: Activities of hotels and food service enterprises)

Amid the overall decline in reported personnel demand, a diversification has been observed. As before, the highest demand remains for cooks, bakers, pastry chefs, bartenders and baristas (20 % of reported demand), waiters (16 %), hotel housekeepers (10 %), kitchen staff, general labourers and dishwashers (7 %), and administrators, cashiers and sales personnel (12 %) (Table 2). Together, these categories now account for 59 % of sectoral personnel demand, compared with over 75 % between 2019 and 2023.

Table 2

Employer-declared demand for workers for specific vacancies submitted to the Kaliningrad Regional State Employment Centre (Section I: Activities of Hotels and Food Service Enterprises)

Vacancy	Persons						%					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Cook, baker, pastry chef, bartender, barista	334	149	346	147	82	59	35.1	30.5	29.6	30.4	32.0	19.8

The end of Table 2

Vacancy	Persons						%					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Waiter	194	78	284	69	26	48	20.4	16.0	24.3	14.3	10.2	16.1
Hotel housekeeper	69	66	82	50	37	30	7.3	13.5	7.0	10.3	14.5	10.1
General labourer, kitchen worker, dishwashers, cleaners	137	75	160	88	37	21	14.4	15.3	13.7	18.2	14.5	7.0
Salesperson, cashier	37	11	30	22	15	17	3.9	2.2	2.6	4.5	5.9	5.7
Total	771	379	902	376	197	175	81.1	77.5	77.3	77.7	77.0	58.7

Analysis of the hh.ru recruitment platform confirms that as of September 2025,[1] vacancies in the Tourism, Hotels and Restaurants sector are dominated by positions for cook, baker, pastry chef (61 vacancies), waiter, bartender, barista (52), manager (26, including restaurant and tourism managers), cleaner (20), administrator (17) and hostess (6). The overwhelming majority of these vacancies are located in the regional centre (89 %).

The attractiveness of employment in the regional tourism sector has been declining annually in wage terms, as evidenced by the widening gap between the sector's average monthly nominal earnings and the economy-wide average (Fig. 5). Over eight years from 2017, this gap has increased from 30 % to 41 %. A lag is also observed in comparison with the established wage levels in the tourism sector across the NWFD and Russia as a whole, reaching up to a quarter.

Labour shortages in the tourism sector are generally addressed through methods more flexible than seeking assistance from the Employment Centre. First, there is inter-firm mobility. An example is the inflow of personnel, such as waiters and cooks, to the seaside during the high season and back to Kaliningrad in the low season, driven by seasonal differences in workload and, consequently, wages. Employers work closely with vocational education institutions to recruit both graduates and students, typically for full-time employment. Third, for temporary seasonal work, employers broadly recruit local residents through advertisements, including school students and pensioners. Fourth, employers use all available platforms to post job announcements, with hh.ru and Avito considered the most

[1] Vacancies, Headhunter, URL: https://kaliningrad.hh.ru/search/vacancy?enable_snippets=false&L_save_area=true&area=41&area=1020&industry=50&professional_role=8&professional_role=72&professional_role=74&professional_role=76&professional_role=89&professional_role=94&professional_role=130&professional_role=140&search_field=name&search_field=company_name&search_field=description (accessed 15.09.2025).

effective. Fifth, given the compactness of the region and of the tourism labour market, the professional community maintains active communication and recruits personnel through word-of-mouth referrals. Sixth, high-end employers invest in retaining staff by strengthening brand loyalty and developing incentive systems, thereby reducing employee turnover.

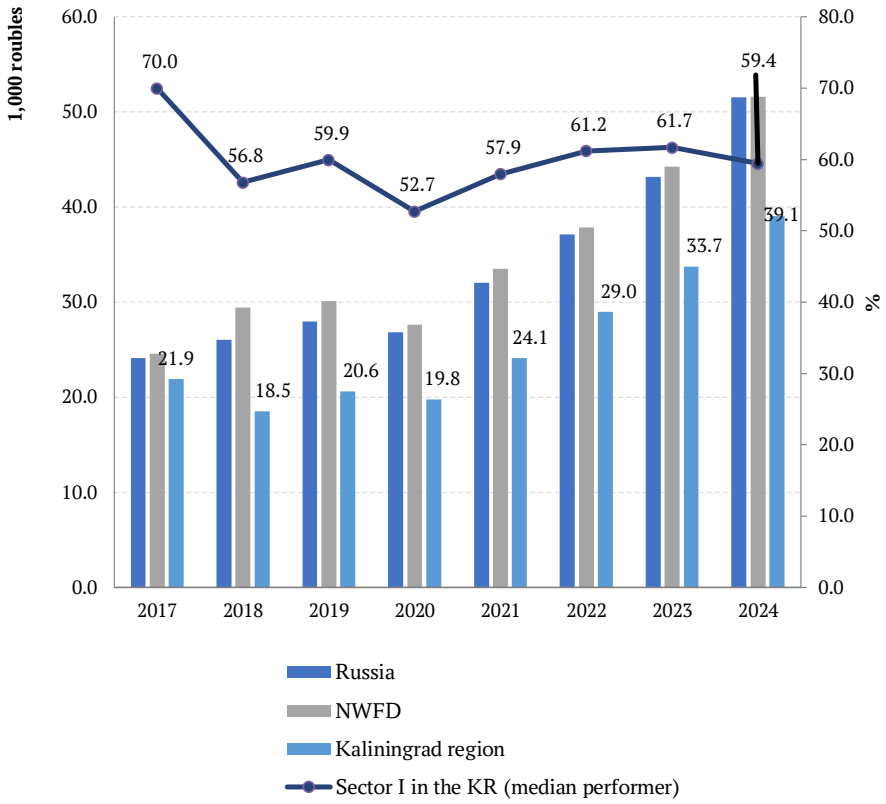

Fig. 5. Average monthly nominal earnings of employees in hotels and food service establishments across all organisations

Overview of tourism development across municipalities. Spatial development of the industry at the municipal level is shaped, on the one hand, by population size and available labour resources and, on the other, by tourist inflows (Table 3). According to 2024 data, the highest ratio of guests accommodated in CLF to working-age residents was recorded in the Svetlogorsk urban district (UD) and the Zelenogradsk municipal district (MD) — over 9.0 persons compared with the regional average of 1.6 — followed by Yantarny (6.0) and Kaliningrad (1.7). Secondary municipalities by these indicators include the Polessk MD (1.3), Baltiysk and Pionersky UDs, while the remaining municipalities experience minimal tourist pressure. Remarkably, in several municipalities, this load has increased substantially compared with 2017 — most notably in the Guryevsk MD (fivefold), the Baltiysk UD (almost fourfold), and the Zelenogradsk MD (2.5-fold).

Table 3

Indicators of the spatial distribution of the tourist industry in the Kaliningrad region

Municipalities	Number of guests accommodated in CLFs per WA resident, persons				Share of the population in the WA group as of 1 January, %				Spatial distribution of organisations in the tourism sector, %				Spatial structure of lodging capacity in CLFs, %				Spatial structure of seating capacity in FSOs, %			
	2017	2024	2024	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
Leaders	1.7	2.7	58.7	73.8	74.9	73.9	73.0	73.1	81.7	82.5	82.5	82.2	80.7	80.0	60.0	59.6	60.7	59.2	58.9	60.1
Kaliningrad	1.3	1.7	58.7	62.6	62.9	61.7	60.5	60.7	41.8	40.8	40.1	37.5	37.0	35.5	43.5	42.9	42.3	41.6	41.1	41.6
Svetlogorsk	9.5	12.0	55.7	4.6	4.6	4.4	4.4	4.3	23.2	23.1	22.7	23.5	22.8	22.0	7.8	8.2	9.0	9.0	9.3	9.2
Yantarny	3.9	6.0	64.2	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.6	1.4	1.7	2.5	2.7	2.9	1.7	1.6	2.5	2.4	2.5	2.6
Zelenogradsk	2.8	9.5	58.5	5.7	6.4	6.8	7.1	7.1	15.2	17.2	17.9	18.7	18.1	19.6	7.0	6.9	7.0	6.1	6.0	6.7
Runners-up		1.0	58.1	4.6	4.7	4.5	4.7	4.7	3.6	4.2	5.0	4.5	5.4	5.5	6.8	7.1	6.8	6.6	6.8	6.6
Baltiysk	0.2	0.8	59.6	1.9	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.0	1.2	1.6	1.9	1.7	2.0	2.3	2.9	3.1	2.9	2.9	2.9	3.0
Pionersk	0.8	0.9	55.4	1.6	1.8	1.7	1.7	1.6	2.3	2.0	2.2	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.5	1.3	1.5	1.5
Polessk	K	1.3	57.6	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.1	K	0.5	1.0	1.2	1.8	1.6	2.1	2.1	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.0
Laggards			60.1	21.6	20.5	21.6	22.3	22.2	13.3	16.5	12.5	13.3	13.9	14.5	33.1	33.3	32.5	34.2	34.3	33.2
Gusev	0.3	0.3	61.6	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.3	1.2	1.5	1.6	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.9	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.4
Ladushkin	K	0.0	55.9	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.1	K	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Mamonovo	0.0	0.0	59.9	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.4
Svetly	0.1	0.2	58.6	2.2	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.3	1.8	3.1	1.4	1.8	1.7	1.7	2.4	2.4	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Sovetsk	0.3	0.4		1.7	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.8	2.7	2.7	2.1	1.7	1.4	1.6	3.9	4.7	4.6	4.5	4.5	4.4
Bagrationovsk	0.2	0.2	59.5	1.4	0.9	0.8	1.0	1.0	1.4	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.7	1.6	1.3	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2
Gvardeysk	0.3	0.3	60.6	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.5	0.5	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.9	3.0	3.5	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.3
Guryevsk	0.1	0.6	62.6	8.2	7.6	8.8	8.6	8.8	3.8	4.8	4.9	4.7	4.4	4.6	5.7	5.9	6.7	6.7	6.7	6.6
Krasnoznamensk	0.0	K	58.0	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.0	K	K	K	K	K	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1
Neman	K	0.6	54.0	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.4	K	K	K	1.0	2.4	2.4	1.2	0.0	0.0	1.8	1.7	1.7
Nesterov	K	0.3	57.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3	K	1.1	0.1	0.6	0.6	0.8	1.9	1.8	1.9	1.8	1.8	1.1
Ozersk	0.0	K	58.1	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.0	0.0	K	0.0	K	K	0.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.0
Pravdinsk	K	0.0	57.9	0.5	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.0	K	K	K	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3
Slavsk	0.0	K	57.7	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	K	K	1.4	0.9	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.8
Chernyakhovsk	0.2	0.3	58.6	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.4	1.6	1.2	1.3	1.0	0.9	1.0	5.4	5.1	4.5	4.5	4.4	4.5
Regional average	1.0	1.6	59.2	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Comment: FSO stands for food service outlet, and WA for working age. Spatial zones according to Gennady Fedorov [33]: **regional centre**, *inner suburban zone*, outer suburban zone, periphery. K indicates that the data are not published by Kaliningradstat to ensure the confidentiality of raw statistical data obtained from organisations under federal law No. 282-FZ On Official Statistical Recording and the System of Public Statistics in the Russian Federation (Para. 5, Article 4; Para. 1, Article 9).

Municipalities in the first group, which comprises the leaders — the resort districts of Svetlogorsk, Zelenogradsk and Yantarny and the regional capital, account for about 73 % of the region's hospitality organisations. Although their combined share remained unchanged between 2020 and 2024, the proportion and number of legal entities and individual entrepreneurs in Kaliningrad and the Svetlogorsk district fell by 3—6 %, whereas the Zelenogradsk and Yantarny districts recorded a rapid growth of more than 20 %. In the distribution of CLF lodging capacity, these municipalities account for an even larger 80 %, and although this share declined slightly over the four years in favour of municipalities less involved in servicing tourists, the Yantarny district recorded a twofold increase in CLF capacity and the Zelenogradsk district a 127 % increase, which added to their respective shares. The group of leading municipalities consistently accounts for about 60 % of the region's total FSO seating capacity; however, between 2017 and 2024, seating capacity shifted in favour of the Svetlogorsk and Yantarny districts, while the share of the regional capital declined slightly from 43.5 % in 2017 to 41.6 % in 2024.

The share of municipalities in the second group, which consists of the *runners-up* — the Baltiysk, Pionersky and Polessk districts, is very small, amounting to no more than 5 % of all hospitality organisations. A slight positive trend in the number of economic entities was observed only in the Baltiysk district. In terms of lodging capacity, the share of these municipalities increased modestly to 5.5 % by 2024, mainly due to the Polessk and Baltiysk districts, with an almost fourfold rise in CLF capacity in the former and more than a twofold rise in the latter. The share of municipalities in this group within the spatial structure of seating capacity is slightly higher, at 6.6 %.

Despite the relatively low tourist load per working-age resident in the remaining *lagging* municipalities, the Guryevsk district stands out with a notable share of registered organisations in the sector (almost 9 %). The municipality does not play a significant role in meeting tourist demand, while its high working-age population reflects its suburban location and, consequently, the industrial and transport specialisation of its economy. Owing to the district's rapid population growth during the last intercensal period, both the number of FSO seats and the district's share in this figure increased by 27 % and 0.9 percentage points, respectively. The Neman and Gvardeysk districts can also be noted, where rapid growth in the number of CLF places (fivefold in Neman) and in FSOs has led to a significant increase in these municipalities' contribution. Other municipalities primarily showed a reduction in seating capacity against the backdrop of population decline.

A trend of the past five years, from 2020 to 2024, has been the increase in the share of individual entrepreneurs in the tourism sector from 58 % to 64 %. In the leading municipalities, this increase exceeded the regional average, although the share of individual entrepreneurs there remains lower than in other districts.

Labour market in the tourism sector at the level of municipalities. Employment in the tourism sector, averaging 2.2 % across all organisations in the region, exceeds this level only in the Zelenogradsk district, where it reaches 3.0 %. In the Svetlogorsk district, the share of employees in large and medium-sized organisations in the sector is 2 %. More comprehensive data on employment from the SPARK-Interfax database, which aggregates information from entities of va-

rious sizes, confirm a higher level of working-age population engagement in hospitality compared with the regional average in the Svetlogorsk and Zelenogradsk districts, as well as in the regional capital (Fig. 6, 7). Notably, the peripheral Krasnoznamensk district also exhibits a relatively high value — 101 % of the regional average — while the other runner-up municipalities lag by more than 70 %.

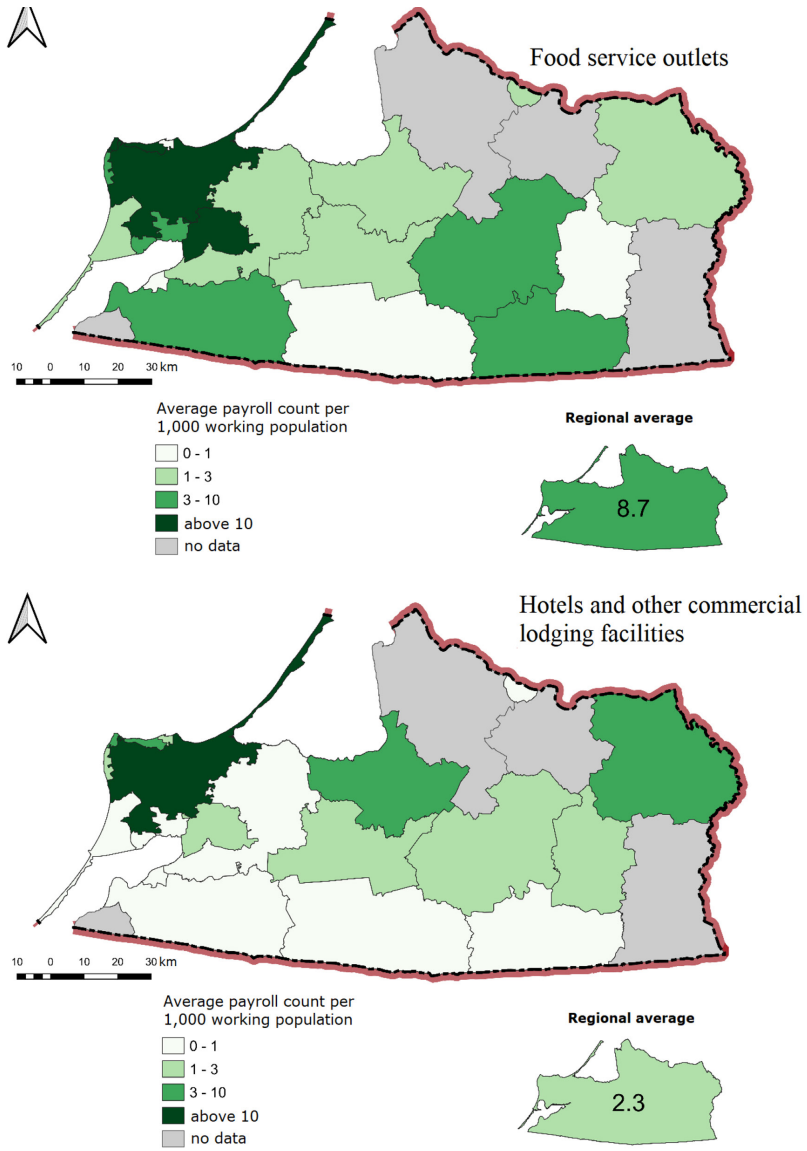

Fig. 6. Number of employees in tourism organisations as of 2023

Calculated based on data from the SPARK-Interfax database.

According to SPARK-Interfax data, almost half of all hotels and other lodging facilities in the region are located in the city of Kaliningrad. However, since 2020, this share has fallen by 5 percentage points, despite an absolute increase in the number of operating entities. By contrast, the share of the Zelenogradsk

district increased over this period, reaching 21.7 % in 2024 compared with 15.4 % in 2020. Noteworthy is the rising contribution of the runner-up municipalities to the distribution of employees in accommodation facilities: their share doubled from 1.6 % in 2020 to 3.2 % in 2024. The share of laggard municipalities also increased (from 17 % in 2020 to 19 % in 2024), primarily due to the suburban Guryevsk district and the Svetly municipality, as well as the more remote Sovetsk and Krasnoznamensk districts.

By the level of working-age population engagement in the operations of hotels and other lodging facilities, seven out of twenty-two districts exceed the regional average: Zelenogradsk, Svetlogorsk and Krasnoznamensk by more than fourfold, and Kaliningrad, Yantarny, Pionersky and Polessk by up to 50 %. Data on employment in CLFs (weighted by the average annual number of working-age residents), which capture small and micro-enterprises, likewise show values above the regional average for the Svetlogorsk district (twentyfold — 163 employees per 1,000 working-age residents) and the Zelenogradsk (5.5-fold), Pionersky and Yantarny districts (2.5—3-fold). Importantly, relative CLF employment grew most markedly in the Zelenogradsk district, more than doubling compared with 2019. In these municipalities, the hotel industry plays a crucial role in ensuring local employment.

The spatial distribution of FSO employment is more clustered: roughly 80 % of all sector employees work in the regional capital, reflecting that food services cater not only to tourists but also to local residents. The most notable increase in food-service employment occurred in the laggard municipalities, raising their combined share from 8.6 % in 2020 to 9.5 % in 2024. In the Gvardeysk, Bagrationovsk and Chernyakhovsk districts, growth exceeded 100 %. Remarkably, by 2024, the Chernyakhovsk district surpassed the coastal resort of Svetlogorsk in the number of FSO employees, whereas in 2020 it lagged by more than 35 %. At the same time, relative indicators of working-age engagement in food-service organisations show consistently high and rising levels only in Kaliningrad and the Svetlogorsk and Zelenogradsk districts, from 50 to 80 % above the regional average. Chernyakhovsk displays a sharply rising trend, from 36 % of the regional average in 2020 to 72 % in 2023.

The main demand for personnel in the tourism sector is concentrated in the regional capital (Table 4), where the majority of key tourism enterprises are located. In addition, large organisations operating in other municipalities are often officially registered here (a prime example is the Fishdorf country retreat located in the Polessk district). The regional capital accounted for between 30 % (2023) and 66 % (2019) of all personnel demand reported to state employment authorities. The share of other leading municipalities in the coastal zone also fluctuated, with Zelenogradsk accounting for 1—12 %, Svetlogorsk 6—20 % and Yantarny 1—6 %. It is noteworthy that hospitality establishments constitute a substantial share of total vacancies in municipalities of the inner suburban zone (Polessk) and in the eastern peripheral districts comprising medium-sized towns (Chernyakhovsk, Gusev and Sovetsk). In these latter three districts, the number of vacancies has grown significantly, with overall personnel demand doubling. By 2024, the Gusev and Chernyakhovsk municipalities accounted for more than 10 % of the region's total demand in the sector.

Table 4

Demand for personnel in the tourism industry, as reported by employers to the Kaliningrad regional state employment services

Municipality	Vacancy structure by municipality, %							Share of sectoral vacancies in total personnel demand, %				Market tightness, unemployed-to-vacancy ratio (total)			
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2019—2024, average	2021	2022	2023	2024	2021	2022	2023	2024
Leaders															
Kaliningrad	66.1	42.7	65.7	57.1	30.1	52.5	*52.4*	6.2	4.5	1.1	2.1	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.1
Svetlogorsk UD	7.2	19.4	6.3	8.1	13.7	14.8	*11.6*	12.4	12.7	15.6	8.8	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1
Zelenogradsk MD	6.1	5.7	11.7	10.0	5.1	1.3	*6.7*	11.9	7.2	2.6	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1
Yantarny UD	6.3	6.5	1.6	1.5	3.1	3.0	*3.7*	8.5	11.7	8.7	7.3	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.0
Runners-up															
Baltiysk UD	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	*0.2*	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1
Pionersky UD	3.2	5.3	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	*1.6*	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1
Polessk MD	2.7	2.7	2.1	3.6	4.7	0.0	*2.6*	10.5	16.0	11.0	0.0	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.4
Laggards															
Gusev UD	1.1	2.7	1.0	0.4	7.4	11.4	*4.0*	1.9	1.3	3.9	6.7	0.5	1.3	0.3	0.2
Svetly UD	0.6	2.9	0.9	2.6	0.4	3.4	*1.8*	1.4	2.5	0.4	1.6	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.1
Sovetsk UD	0.7	0.2	1.0	0.6	11.3	1.7	*2.6*	2.6	2.3	7.2	1.2	0.7	1.3	0.3	0.1
Bagrationovsk MD	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.8	0.0	*0.4*	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.0	0.9	0.5	0.4	0.2
Gvardeysk MD	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.5	0.0	*0.9*	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.5	0.8	0.4	0.3
Guryevsk MD	3.3	5.9	5.3	12.6	4.7	0.7	*5.4*	6.6	7.3	2.4	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.1
Neman MD	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	1.2	0.0	*0.2*	1.3	0.0	1.6	0.0	1.8	5.6	0.6	0.2
Pravdinsk MD	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	*0.0*	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	1.6	0.6	0.5
Chernyakhovsk MD	1.9	5.5	1.7	3.2	12.1	11.1	*5.9*	2.8	5.0	4.7	4.8	0.8	1.3	0.5	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0		5.0	4.4	2.0	2.1	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.2

Comment: spatial zones according to Gennady Fedorov [33]: **regional centre**, *inner suburban zone*, outer suburban zone, periphery.

Conclusion

At the regional level, several trends can be observed in the employment structure of the tourism sector. First, labour demand is diversifying, with a predominance of occupations that do not require high qualifications. Second, requirements for job seekers are decreasing in terms of both educational level and work experience. Third, hiring dynamics in tourism and the decline in vacancies reported to state employment services, against the backdrop of growing tourist flows, indicate the spread of flexible recruiting practices in the sector and the absence of statistical data on labour shortages. Fourth, the wage gap for tourism workers is widening, both relative to the regional average and in comparison with remuneration levels in the tourism sector in other regions of Russia and the Northwestern Federal District.

The spatial organisation of the labour market in the Kaliningrad region's tourism sector reflects a gradual shift in employment towards territories poorly integrated into the industry. These include, primarily, runner-up municipalities (the coastal Pionersky and Baltiysk districts and the Polessk municipality), the rapidly developing Chernyakhovsk district in the east, as well as the near and outer suburban zones of the regional centre (the Svetly, Bagrationovsk and Gvardeysk districts). This is achieved mainly through the development of the food service sector, while the engagement of the working-age population in formal employment in the hotel industry remains low. Demand for labour in the hospitality industry is gradually increasing due to the implementation of projects aimed at creating tourism and recreation facilities, which underscores the need for adequate and timely measures to minimise risks and threats.

Supply and demand in the tourism labour market are balanced within an already established sector, where the main facilities have been operating for more than ten years. Another important factor is the region's spatial compactness, with tourism facilities concentrated in the coastal area and the regional capital. This fosters interactions within the professional tourism community when balancing employment needs during high and low seasons.

Staffing shortages in the region's leading tourism and recreation hubs are addressed through educational programmes offered by higher education institutions and secondary vocational schools. Most of these programmes are practice-oriented, include workplace training in service and tourism enterprises, and involve industry practitioners from various fields and specialisations as faculty.

The potential of the runner-up municipalities could be unlocked by attracting local residents to positions that do not require specialised education or work experience, by developing workplace learning environments and involving tourism businesses in training provision, and by reviewing and

adjusting vocational curricula to labour market needs, including those of the service and hospitality sector. It is advisable to introduce training in the most sought-after occupations, such as cook, baker, hotel housekeeper, waiter, and administrator to meet the growing demand for personnel in the eastern part of the region. To this end, existing vocational education infrastructure in Chernyakhovsk, Gusev and Sovetsk can be used, with the participation of relevant stakeholders. Development of vocational education in these areas should be accompanied by school-level career guidance initiatives, including the establishment of specialised classes. This is particularly important given the elevated unemployment levels in the eastern part of the region, including in neighbouring and nearby municipalities.

The demand for unskilled labour should be addressed by re-equipping and upgrading tourism facilities with new technologies and technical solutions, including artificial intelligence, smart home systems and process automation. This applies to positions such as general labourers and kitchen staff, delivery service workers and taxi drivers.

The problem of informal employment in the tourism sector can be mitigated through measures designed to cultivate favourable perceptions of formal employment and unfavourable perceptions of informal work. These measures include public information campaigns, incentives for compliant employers, such as tax benefits, subsidies, other financial support or exemption from inspections, as well as penalties for individuals engaged in business or professional activity without formalised employment — substantial fines for both employees and employers. The full range of measures should apply to all types of economic activity, while sector-specific measures for tourism may include: 1) restricting landlords' access to aggregators and online platforms listing private accommodation, including Avito, Sutochno.ru and Ostrovok.ru, without formalising their status; 2) raising the prestige of occupations such as waiter and cook; 3) providing incentives for compliant employers in tourism and hospitality, such as professional skill competitions (Hospitality Talent), and financial support instruments.

The labour market analysis for the region's tourism sector, taking into account the spatial organisation of tourism and recreation, suggests the following conclusions: 1) the labour market is fully developed and has a certain capacity (12.5 thousand people officially employed in tourism); 2) flexible employment arrangements are used in the service and tourism sector, particularly for frontline staff (seasonal work, part-time work, student employment); 3) staff turnover occurs along the Kaliningrad—coastal zone trajectory, with movement towards the coast during the high season and back during the low season; 4) due to the concentration of hospitality enterprises in Kaliningrad and the coastal resorts, highly qualified personnel are concentrated there, while the eastern part of the

region and other peripheral areas rely on lower-qualified specialists, with local residents and individuals without specialised education increasingly involved in tourism and recreation services, their professional training provided by enterprise management.

Amid continuous growth in tourist arrivals to the region, a major project — the new resort Belaya Duna — has been planned within the federal programme Five Seas and Lake Baikal, alongside several other regional tourism initiatives. According to the federal tourism scheme for the Russian Baltics macro-territory, the estimated staffing shortage amounts to 2,500—2,700 workers across different qualification levels. A comprehensive workforce development programme for the service and tourism sector is therefore required. It should encompass increasing enrolment in relevant programmes at regional universities and vocational schools; organising and delivering professional training and retraining through educational institutions in line with assessed labour needs for new tourism projects; involving the tourism industry in workforce training within hospitality enterprises, with subsequent job placement for trainees; and ensuring that public authorities implement a favourable migration policy to attract personnel to the sector.

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