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GEOSTRATEGIC TERRITORIES: THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT, FEATURES, AND DEFINITION CRITERIA

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The term 'geostrategic territory' was introduced in the Spatial Development Strategies of the Russian Federation, adopted in 2019 and 2024. However, the principles for identifying such territories remained ambiguous, with no clear priorities or differentiation criteria specified. This study aims to conduct a substantive analysis of the concept of geostrategy and its derivatives across various fields of scholarly knowledge, drawing on both international and Russian literature. Historically, in international scholarship, geostrategy was associated primarily with military geography and geopolitics. Today, geostrategic analysis encompasses not only the potential use of military force beyond national borders but also the pursuit of national interests through non-military means. In Russia, a strategic territory is defined as a region facing actual or potential external threats to its security, necessitating specific policy measures to eliminate or mitigate their consequences. The term 'geostrategic territory' refers to the sources of such threats — specifically, a territory's position within a multi-scale spatial system of network structures. External challenges are closely intertwined with internal ones, including the need to overcome economic backwardness, poverty, depopulation, and related socio-economic problems. The analysis demonstrates that a geostrategic po-

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sition is dynamic and historically contingent, shaped by the geostrategic characteristics of individual settlements and strategic facilities. At the same time, similar geostrategic properties may also characterise extensive macro-regions encompassing several administrative units (e.g., the Arctic or the Russian Far East). The assessment of geostrategic position is inherently discursive, depending not only on material factors but also on the civic identity of the population, including their perception of global political actors, assessment of national security threats, and attitudes toward neighbouring countries. The article concludes by proposing criteria for classifying geostrategic territories and offers a refined definition of the concept.

Keywords:
geostrategic territories, spatial development, strategic planning, national security, regional policy, geostrategy, geopolitics

Introduction

The term 'geostrategic territory' has only recently been introduced into Russian strategic and spatial planning practice. It was first employed in Russia's 2025 Spatial Development Strategy (referred to below as SDS-2019), which was devised to implement federal regulatory acts.[1] The drafting of these documents followed the mid-2010s introduction of a system for creating and updating regional and municipal development strategies. Strategising was to become a tool for mitigating territorial contrasts perceived as a threat to the country's territorial integrity. These disparities resulted from the concentration of economic and human potential in the largest cities, the rapid population decline in most other cities, towns, and villages, and the widening differences in personal income and quality of life both between regions and interregionally, between municipalities.

[1] On Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation, federal law of 28 June 2014, № 172-FZ, URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_164841/ (accessed 11.08.2025) ; On the Content, Composition, Procedure for the Development and Approval of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation, as well as the Procedure for Monitoring and Controlling Its Implementation (alongside the Regulation on the Content, Composition, Procedure for the Development and Approval of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation and the Proposals Prepared within It for Improving the Settlement System in the Territory of the Russian Federation and Priority Directions for the Placement of Productive Forces in the Territory of the Russian Federation; Rules for Monitoring and Controlling the Implementation of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation), Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 20.08.2015 № 870 (as amended on 24.06.2020), URL: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_185091/ (accessed 11.08.2025) ; On the Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for Regional Development of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2025, Presidential Decree of 16 January 2017 № 13, URL: https://base.garant.ru/71587690/ (accessed 11.08.2025).

SDS-2019 defined geostrategic territories as 'regions possessing a substantial significance for ensuring the socioeconomic development, territorial integrity and security of the Russian Federation' characterised by 'specific living and economic conditions'. The list of such territories comprised 47 Russian regions, i.e. more than half of the total number. Alongside the obvious candidates — the Republic of Crimea, Sevastopol and the Kaliningrad regions, which were exclaves at the time lacking an overland connection to mainland Russia — it included all other border regions of the country, as well as 25 territories located in the North Caucasus, Far East and the Arctic Zone.

As expected, the preparation and implementation of SDS-2019 prompted an animated critical discussion [1—4]. The literature highlighted that the architects of the document had not clearly defined what 'geostrategic' means. Geostrategic territories differ significantly in terms of their geographical location, population density, and demographic composition [5; 6]. For some regions, geopolitical position is a decisive factor, as in the Kaliningrad region and Primorski Krai, whereas in others, such as the Kurgan region, it has little impact on development rates and levels. The absence of established priorities and territorial differentiation created a risk that any regional policy in the area would devolve into a disordered mix of measures, further exacerbating spatial development disparities [1].

Another point of criticism towards the identification of geostrategic regions was insufficient operationality. Throughout the years of SDS-2019 implementation, the category of geostrategic regions never appeared in any subsidiary regulations. Almost all geostrategic territories had already employed a diverse range of regional policy instruments within their geographical boundaries. Devising approaches to spatial development in such diverse regions evidently required grouping them and identifying tools tailored to the specific characteristics of each group.

A new version of SDS, covering the period up to 2030 with an outlook to 2036, takes account of criticisms of the initial strategy and offers multiple innovations. Yet, the list of geostrategic territories itself has not undergone significant changes, featuring the Republic of Crimea, Sevastopol and the Kaliningrad region, along with Far Eastern, North Caucasus and Arctic territories, most of them located at the national border. The remaining border regions have lost their geostrategic status. At the same time, the new Russian regions and municipalities of several western regions bordering on "unfriendly countries" have been included in the list. Geostrategic territories, therefore, continue to cover a substantial share of the country, comprising 29 regions in full as well as several municipalities, and accounting for 57 % of its total area. Development pathways and constraints have not been thoroughly elaborated either, with fundamental differences in the nature and characteristics of vulnerabilities overlooked, along with the peculiarities of local subcultures and population identities. The identification of current problems

is supplemented by a general framework for their resolution and an outline of expected outcomes, whereas the gravity of the situation requires concrete, location-specific knowledge.

The following sections focus on definitions of the terms ‘geostrategy’ and ‘geostrategic’ proposed by Russian and international authors, ways of interpreting the combination of their ‘geo’ and ‘strategic’ components, and possible criteria for classifying territories as geostrategic. This paper aims to address these aspects without claiming exhaustiveness or unambiguity in its findings.

What is geostrategy?

Internationally, geostrategic territories are generally defined as areas external to a given state yet possessing military, political, economic and symbolic significance for it.

Geostrategy emerged within military geography, one of the oldest branches of geographical science. The term was first used in 1855 by General Giacomo Durando, war minister of the Kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont) [7]. However, it became firmly established in the scholarly literature of certain countries — primarily Germany, the United States, and France — only in the early twentieth century. From that time, geostrategy gradually differentiated itself from the geographical study of theatres of war and, from the late nineteenth century, became more closely associated with geopolitics.

In many studies, the broader use of the term ‘geostrategy’ is linked to the German school of geopolitics, especially following the works of the German geographer and geopolitician Karl Haushofer [8], who advanced the idea of *Wehrgeopolitik* (‘defence geopolitics’). Unlike military geography, this concept is future-oriented as it presupposes readiness to employ military force and operates with large spaces. This dimension of geostrategy was also highlighted by the eminent French geographer André Vigarié [9], who noted that geostrategy defines the selection of measures to defend against a potential adversary. Political geographer Stéphane Rosière [10] observed that geostrategy studies geographical space not only as an environment and theatre (arena of political and military activity) but also as an object (*enjeu*) of conflict.

The interpretation of geostrategy as a field of knowledge aimed at justifying territorial expansion, together with Haushofer’s links to the leadership of Nazi Germany, led to geostrategy and geopolitics being regarded as marginal disciplines in most countries worldwide during the postwar period until the 1980s [11]. However, after World War II, concepts of geostrategy continued to develop, and geostrategic research was conducted by various organisations and military academies in different countries. The term ‘geostrategy’ appeared regularly in

authoritative dictionaries. For example, the Encyclopaedia Britannica [12] linked it to military policy. The Merriam-Webster International Dictionary [13] defined geostrategy as 'a branch of study of geopolitics dealing with questions concerning strategy'.

The diversification of methods and forms of spatial control in the postwar period, the emergence of military-political blocs and the escalation of international terrorism contributed to increased complexity in geostrategic analysis. It is no longer confined to examining the potential use of military force in specific regions but also encompasses a state's capacity to influence various sectors — such as transport, energy, and agriculture — in countries within its sphere of influence. Overall, the 1980s rehabilitation of geostrategy and geopolitics 'demilitarised' these disciplines. The geostrategic models popularised by Zbigniew Brzeziński[14] and Henry Kissinger [15] rely much less on military force and far more on justifying methods of economic, informational and political dominance. Brzeziński considered geostrategy as strategic management of geopolitical interests, emphasising their dynamism and the need for active forecasting [14].

French geographer Hervé Couteau-Bégarié [16], following these authors, defined geostrategy as a state's search for the most effective ways to transform (political) space in accordance with its interests, for example, by blocking communications, isolating a hostile state and its selected territories, fostering opposition to its political regime or establishing control over specific regions and settlements. Shortly thereafter, the concept of so-called *soft power* [17] gained popularity, suggesting that modern states are more likely to rely on threats of military force and demonstrations of capability rather than their full-scale use. Under this concept, geopolitical objectives are achieved through the creation of appealing images, information manipulation, and appeals to social perceptions and values. Similarly, Pascal Venier [18] argued that geostrategy is an applied branch of geopolitics, focused on developing comprehensive measures to advance a state's interests beyond its borders, including the establishment of control over critical military assets. In his view, geostrategy is also connected to issues of national security and threats from actual and potential adversaries. He asserts that its focus is on the balance of military-political forces on the international stage, including the ability to project military power and exert control over space through the establishment of military bases. Typically, geostrategic research in this sense is conducted in major powers or regional-leading nations and aims to explain variations in a state's approach to relations with specific countries and regions.

A perspective similar to the prevailing international view of geostrategy as an applied branch of geopolitics was, albeit rarely, adopted by Russian

authors. The term first appeared in Russian publications only in the 1990s. For example, Konstantin Sorokin distinguished between fundamental geopolitics, which examines the development of the planet's geopolitical space, and applied geopolitics (geostrategy), which provides recommendations for executing a state's or group of states' overall strategy on the global stage [19].

New global-scale threats, the intensification of strategic competition between leading centres of power, increasing multipolarity, the emergence of new virtual spaces and hybrid wars have contributed to the growing relevance of geostrategic research. The advent of geoinformation technologies, artificial intelligence and the expanding digital environment has also prompted a substantial renewal of the relevant methodological toolkit [7].

Despite these advances, no widely accepted understanding of the essence and objectives of geostrategy has emerged. Most authors consider geostrategy as an independent scientific field or a branch of geopolitics studying the relationship between geographical location, the territorial distribution of military, economic and political forces in the world, and other geographical factors, on the one hand, with national foreign policy strategies, on the other. The authoritative collective monograph *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History* [20], devoted to the theory of geostrategic studies, presents different interpretations of the term 'geostrategy'. Everett Dolman interprets geostrategy as a branch of geopolitics focusing on the application of new technologies based on geographic, topographic and positional data [21]. Gerard Toal argues that geopolitics in general, and geostrategy in particular, should not be confined to the relationship between space, politics and military power, and that in contemporary conditions, geographic images, myths and perceptions — constructed through discourse and relevant practices — play a key role [22].

Over the past twenty years, research has sought to develop a universal conception of the geostrategic character of a territory, regardless of whether it lies abroad or within a state's borders. Geoffrey Sloan [11], following the maxim that 'geography still matters', notes that any strategy with a spatial dimension is geostrategic. A similar view is shared by some Latin American researchers, who advance the concept of 'geostrategies of economic space'. This encompasses plans for developing the economies of large regions, considering global production fragmentation, the strategies of transnational corporations and complex forms of interaction between authorities of different countries and across various spatial levels [23].

The most comprehensive (multi-scalar) approach to geostrategy was proposed by the prominent French geographer, geopolitician, and publicist Yves Lacoste [24]. According to him, geostrategy focuses on the study of rivalries and antagonisms between hostile states and political forces operating abroad, whereas

geopolitics examines conflicts, social perceptions and political discourse within a state's population. Lacoste argued that developing geostrategy presupposes the existence of an adversary or military threat. It involves a set of calculations and analyses justifying a potential response to an external challenge or a plan to seize a specific territory, taking into account the forces and resources available to the state, their distribution across different spatial levels and the likely reactions of the hostile party and other states. Unlike other authors, Lacoste, first, did not distinguish between external and internal threats and, second, emphasised the necessity of geostrategic analysis at the global, regional and local levels. This concept naturally encompasses each state's informal lists of geostrategic territories or objects of varying scales: individual countries and entire regions (Central Asia for Russia, China and the EU; the Pacific region; the Arctic), as well as territories and waters traversed by international transport routes such as the Panama and Suez Canals, the Red Sea and others.

The specific historical and geopolitical characteristics of internal territories abroad are generally reflected not in state programmes, as is done in Russia, but mainly in differences in status — additional competences granted to regions or municipalities situated near borders, on islands, or in regions with distinct ethnic and religious communities. 'Asymmetric' federations, where constituent units have different powers, are a common occurrence. To illustrate, in Italy, the border regions and those with distinctive demographic characteristics — the Aosta Valley, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia — were granted autonomy (special status) long before relatively recent reforms broadened the authority of all regions. Special status is likewise accorded to France's 'overseas communities', situated on islands thousands of kilometres from the metropole, with New Caledonia remaining the largest of these territories until 2025. In India, in addition to the states, there are eight union territories governed directly by the federal government due to their specific geographic location, foreign policy considerations, and historical circumstances.

Features of geostrategic territories

The term 'geostrategic' is more than a mere combination of two roots; it represents a concept that generates new meanings. 'Strategic' signifies, first, the unquestionable *importance of a territory or settlement at the national level* and the presence of potential or real dangers and threats, and second, the need to develop a targeted policy to mitigate them.

Russia, a country marked by exceptional diversity of natural and economic conditions, has always included territories that receive particular attention from the state and are subject to special regimes during certain historical periods.

A characteristic example is the Cossack borderlands [25]. Remarkably, the term 'geostrategic territory' emerged in the years of a radical change in the country's geopolitical position, following the reunification of Crimea with Russia, the start of the conflict in Donbas, and, later, the special military operation.

The goal of distinguishing geostrategic territories is to acknowledge the impact of external factors of national and regional security on Russian territories within SDS and regional strategies. The rejection of the globalist model of a liberal economy, Western sanctions, and the reduced dependence on external suppliers of goods and services imply a predominant reliance on domestic resources, import substitution, and reindustrialisation. Consequently, these factors highlight, inter alia, the particular importance of certain mineral deposits, regions and industrial centres, transport networks. A 'pivot to the east' has become an urgent necessity, increasing the strategic significance of the Far Eastern ports and Russian Railways' Eastern Operating Domain. In this context, external circumstances serve not only as a source of existential threats but rather as a stimulus for state-led modernisation policies and a basic framework for regional development and the country's social fabric.

While some time ago external circumstances were regarded as favourable for Russia, with cross-border contacts seen as an additional resource for the development of its border territories, today these factors have become sources of existential threats. The geostrategic dimension is understood as the *presence of potential or actual external threats to a region's security and its heightened vulnerability to such challenges*, which in turn necessitates the development of targeted policies to eliminate or mitigate their effects. Thus, the introduction of the term 'geostrategic territory' in SDS implied, on the one hand, a link with geopolitics, and on the other, its recognition as an additional form of regional policy alongside advanced development territories, special economic zones and similar instruments [26].

The root 'geo' refers to the source of vulnerabilities, namely the territorial projection of relationships of various kinds — international, bilateral between states, macro-regional, interregional, core–periphery, transboundary , cultural–political, and other types of connections. In other words, following Lacoste's arguments, it can be asserted that geostrategic position is a *position within a multidimensional, multi-scalar space of external and internal connections*, rather than merely a place on the map. For instance, at the beginning of the century, proximity to developed EU countries prompted the Kaliningrad region's economy to rely on cooperation with these states in assembly manufacturing. The resulting products were intended for the Russian market. After 2014, the onset of the Ukraine crisis and particularly the special military operation, the advantages

of the territory's geopolitical position became deficiencies due to the extreme vulnerability of the overland connection to mainland Russia and anti-Russian sanctions imposed by Western states.

At the same time, the *intertwinement of external security challenges faced by regions with internal ones* has become even more apparent, particularly in overcoming underperformance and pronounced territorial disparities, improving the quality of life and ensuring the country's integrity. The global geopolitical agenda has made it untenable to permit the communicative isolation of geostrategic territories from other regions, along with high levels of poverty, migration outflows and population decline linked to ageing and increasing labour market imbalances. In turn, the shortage of skilled personnel has emerged as a major obstacle to restructuring an economy predominantly focused on extraction — primary processing and the export of natural resources. A vicious circle has taken shape: insufficient technological innovation limits the development of human capital, generates migration pressures that highlight depopulation challenges, slows economic renewal and exacerbates the lag of geostrategic territories.

However, neither the first nor the significantly updated second SDS specifically identifies which individual factors (criteria) determine the geostrategic significance of a territory. It can be assumed that these criteria include *peripheral location, remoteness and isolation from major communications* (as seen in the Kaliningrad region, Far Eastern and Arctic Russian regions), *lagging behind* other territories in socio-economic performance and dynamics, and the *implementation of state programmes and large-scale projects*. Nonetheless, unfavourable economic conditions, low household incomes and depopulation are also typical of regions not designated as geostrategic, while some territories identified as such are quite prosperous [27]. Preferential economic regimes are by no means exclusive to geostrategic territories, and state programmes and large-scale projects are implemented beyond these areas as well [28].

The geostrategic position is *volatile and historically specific*. Yet, it can remain unchanged for prolonged periods: for instance, Crimea has retained its strategic significance for the Black Sea area over several centuries. But most often, a geostrategic position changes depending on political and economic circumstances, and the dominant political discourse, in turn, transforms territorial relations. An example is the Russian—Ukrainian borderlands — an extensive area of contacts and mutual influence between two closely related cultures, where conditions for intensive cross-border interaction and cooperation were present [29; 30]. However, in just a few weeks in 2014, the borderlands between the two countries became a zone of sharp division and armed conflict. Thus, a shift in

position within the system of territorial relations decreases or increases the level of potential threats and dangers. Thus, a change in position within the system of territorial relations can either mitigate or amplify potential threats and risks.

In political discourse, geostrategic attributes are often ascribed not only to peripheral territories but also to central ones that play a key role in the economy and/or fulfil crucial symbolic functions, particularly capital cities. History abounds with examples where political events in capitals, with little impact on other regions, determined the fate of the state. The capture of a capital by an adversary during armed conflicts often led to the collapse of the political regime, loss of independence or disintegration of the country. For example, French politicians in the past were especially concerned about Paris's vulnerability, being relatively close to the country's borders and lacking natural protective barriers.

The concept of 'territory' implies the presence of more or less distinct boundaries. Regions and municipalities have legally established territorial boundaries defining the authority of regional governments. However, the 'geostrategic significance' of a Russian region depends not only, and sometimes not so much, on its geographical location, but also on the *geostrategic properties of individual settlements and the objects located within them*. Intra-regional differences in the geostrategic status of a territory are generally more pronounced than interregional ones. The functioning of 'discrete' (local) strategic objects depends on spatial relations at multiple scales — from local to national, and sometimes even supranational. These objects typically influence security provision or are associated with the location of mineral deposits and other facilities, communications, processes of redevelopment (modernisation), and spatial compression under the impact of new technologies [31].

It is no coincidence that in one of the early versions of SDS-2024, 'strategic settlements' were given special priority. These were intended to include closed cities, transport hubs and ports, settlements linked to key enterprises, defence facilities, border crossing points, and similar sites. However, their obvious heterogeneity, large number and frequent overlap with advanced development settlements selected according to other criteria led to the abandonment of this priority. The geostrategic significance of individual settlements and other 'discrete' objects can surpass that of the administrative centre, and their communicative properties may be at least equivalent, reflecting the strengthening of multidimensional network structures that reshape the two-dimensional (Cartesian) linear-nodal, hierarchical configuration of territorial connections [31, p. 33].

At the same time, broad or shared geostrategic properties are characteristic of vast territories that extend well beyond a single region and lack political-administrative agency or governing institutions — for example, the Arctic or the Far

East. These properties are determined by geographical location and accessibility, shared communications, the 'areal' distribution of spatially continuous strategic natural resources, and natural-climatic, socio-climatic and socio-cultural similarities [32]. In such cases, effective coordination of development across multiple sectors is required, extending far beyond the competencies of individual agencies and administrations, together with management practices that integrate traditional regional-hierarchical and network approaches. The scale of these tasks, linked to the fate of 'large spaces', is truly geostrategic in nature and dictated by the country's long-term interests.

Geostrategic territories and national security

The designation of objects and territories as geostrategic, and the establishment of their hierarchy according to their significance for the country, depends on the assessment of internal risks, foreign policy challenges and security threats originating from different regions of the world. Therefore, it has a discursive nature. In the study of public perceptions of security and threats, as part of a geopolitical world-view, critical geopolitics plays a significant role. Within this framework, a geopolitical world-view is determined not so much by actual circumstances as by enduring myths, symbols, stereotypes and evolving opinions, constructed by elites and propagated through the media and the socialisation of new generations.

The response to new risks and 'soft' threats arising from globalisation (international terrorism, pandemics, uncontrolled migration, etc.) has been a growing complexity in public perceptions of security. From now on, the state is not considered the only agent and object of security provision. The distinction between foreign and domestic policy has blurred, and security is differentiated between the state, its constituent parts, social groups, individuals and entire macro-regions.

For border regions, many of which are classified as geostrategic, the intensification of the dialectical tension between the need to ensure international communications — including the facilitation of international trade and the enhancement of relevant infrastructure — and the tightening of control over cross-border flows, with careful filtering, is particularly significant under conditions of 'security obsession' [33]. A comprehensive understanding of security is capable of justifying any emergency measures and hyper-centralisation of authority. Traditional notions of security, based on the leading role of the state in its provision and relying on the power of enforcement machinery, including military force, clash with postmodern understandings, grounded in desecuritisation — a discourse depriving current issues of the aura of existential threat to society.

In this context, openness, cross-border cooperation and the mutual influence of neighbouring cultures come to the fore, promoting the transformation of borderlands into engines of development, while the interaction between law enforcement and modern technologies becomes the primary means of countering 'soft threats'.

Thus, the interests of the state, which extensively employs restrictive measures and in various ways limits the mobility of people, capital and information, are directly or indirectly opposed to the interests of economic actors, borderlands residents and ordinary citizens. As a result, the state is perceived as an external hostile force, obstructing ontological security, understood as the predictability of the conditions governing human activity in border regions.

In practice, desecuritisation of the borderlands between Russia and its western neighbours was limited, and in some cases unfeasible. It depended largely on how the security dilemma was managed. The dilemma arises because measures taken to ensure security in some countries are perceived as potential threats in others, provoking acute conflicts and reciprocal responses. In borderlands, the interpretation of the state as an 'external' or even hostile actor can overlap with spontaneous processes of transboundary regionalisation, triggered by increased economic interaction, or with deliberate attempts by neighbouring states to restructure the space in question through generating challenges to regionalism. Certain areas begin to be perceived as cohesive territories, whose boundaries do not coincide with national borders [34; 35]. Competition for the loyalty of citizens between external and internal social and political actors produces interstate conflicts that are fundamentally incompatible with desecuritisation.

Therefore, the security and vulnerability of geostrategic territories depend not only on material factors, such as the state of the economy, but also on the identity of citizens, which is shaped in part by perceptions of their region's place in Russia, its prospects, its significance for the country, as well as the forces influencing global politics, national security threats, and relations with neighbouring states. The tension between local and national identities, the victimisation of the historical past, the politicisation of contemporary issues and shifts in value orientations can pose a real threat to the country's integrity. Thus, cultural anchors that foster cohesion and solidarity among people, reinforce their connection to the country and to their place of residence, are of critical importance, as is the cultivation of good-neighbourly relations with adjacent states.

According to the well-known statement by Ernest Renan, 'the existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite' or, in other words, a constant struggle by the state for the loyalty of its citizens, their awareness of belonging to a particular community, and the preservation and renewal of markers distinguishing 'us' from 'them'. The 'daily plebiscite' entails recognising the nature and sources of

threats that could undermine national (civic) identity, including mass migration, lagging development and quality of life, or deliberate actions by internal or external actors. A key condition for sustaining the stability of national identity is a resilient collective memory of the past and symbolic capital: iconography, material markers such as sites of commemoration, memorials, holidays, parades, and other rituals essential for forging a strong connection between past and future [36; 37].

Geostrategic territories include areas with a troubled historical legacy. Some of them became part of the Russian state relatively recently in historical terms. A special place in modern Russia is held by the new territories. Members of ethnic groups that constitute titular nations in neighbouring countries account for a substantial proportion of the population in both the new regions and some other geostrategic territories. Many geostrategic regions are located in borderlands, where residents display significant, and particularly transboundary , mobility, which may enhance their susceptibility to cultural and symbolic influences capable of shaping their value orientations and identity. Finally, geostrategic territories include the tightly connected republics of the North Caucasus with a diverse ethnic composition and significant conflict potential, including that arising from the contested historical memories of different ethnic groups, as well as from myths and stereotypes. These factors imply the need for a flexible combination of regional spatial development policies and measures to prevent potential negative trends in its cultural and spiritual life.

Conclusions

Let us summarise and attempt to define geostrategic territories. In Western countries, this term generally relates to a state's foreign policy and military activities, its assessment of external threats and vulnerabilities, its capacity to project influence beyond its borders and its pursuit of opportunities for dominance in its region or globally. Only a few studies do not distinguish between external and internal factors that determine the significance of particular territories for the state. However, it is no longer possible to separate the closely intertwined external and internal, material and immaterial factors that render a territory geostrategic from the interpretation of national and other forms of security.

In Russia, the term 'geostrategic' has only recently been applied more widely, following the development of two SDS, which designate territories of varying significance as geostrategic, forming the focus of an additional dimension of regional policy.

Like geographic location, the 'geostrategic' properties of a territory are historically variable and transient. They depend on the international situation,

technology, including military and transport innovations, socio-economic development and many other factors. Similarly to the related concept of security, they have a discursive nature. These properties are 'asymmetrical': a particular territory may be geostrategic for one country but an 'ordinary' region for another.

Several criteria determining a territory's geostrategic importance are common across many countries:

1) isolated location relative to the main part of the country, translating into military and economic vulnerability;

2) convergence of external and internal challenges to sustainable development, and sometimes to the very existence of the territory within the state;

3) presence of military bases and/or defence enterprises;

4) presence of unique natural resources;

5) specific population composition and historical legacy;

6) frustration, cultural marginalisation, and the population's perception of being 'neglected' by the state, often combined with assertive strategies of influential external actors in the realm of symbolic politics;

7) high dependence of the territory on national social and cultural-symbolic policies and investments, regardless of their direct or indirect profitability, for example, to engage the principle of effective occupation, which confers the right to territorial recognition, to strengthen local support, or to improve communications with hard-to-reach regions;

8) nationwide symbolic significance of the territory as a whole, including its settlements and sites of commemoration, their importance for national identity and heightened public attention and sensitivity to events and the fate of the region, with Crimea being a prime example.

Evidently, a few criteria suffice to classify a region as geostrategic. However, providing an exhaustive list of such criteria is hardly possible.

The root 'geo-' signifies the variability of the position of geostrategic territories and their place within a system of diverse relations at multiple levels — international, bilateral between states, macro-regional, interregional, core–periphery, cross-border, politico-cultural, and other connections. Moreover, it indicates the source of vulnerabilities arising from some of these relations. The volatility of many types of economic and political relations amid the current geopolitical turbulence heightens the mobilisation of resources and efforts to adapt to ongoing changes and underscores the need for state 'oversight' of geostrategic territories. A representative example is the municipalities of Russia's western borderlands, which were affected by sanctions imposed by neighbouring EU states or hostilities after the beginning of the special military operation.

Changes in the position of municipalities and settlements within the network of relations and flows — including international trade, transport, tourism, and other spheres — reshape their hierarchy and role within network structures. Priority is given to those linked to major economic projects, production–distribution networks of large companies or heightened military risks. Intra-regional differences are generally much more pronounced than interregional ones, and insufficient attention to them represents a clear gap in the SDS [38].

Based on the properties and criteria described, geostrategic territories can be defined as areas highly dependent on state regional policy and experiencing the combined impact of acute external and internal, material and immaterial challenges to security and sustainable development.

The application of any spatial development policy instrument requires a rigorous justification of priorities, which has a direct bearing on geostrategic territories. Although the number of such territories was slightly reduced in the second SDS, the problem persists: given the scale of the tasks, it is hard to envisage ever developing a programme of uniform support for all 29 Russian regions classified as geostrategic. The geostrategic territories mentioned in SDS-2024 are extremely heterogeneous: they include the largest republic of the North Caucasus, Dagestan, the Arctic Murmansk region and municipalities along the western border of the country. This necessitates a careful calibration of planned measures based on detailed knowledge of the territory and an analysis of the opportunities, pathways and constraints of their development under conditions of foreign-policy pressure, economic containment and rising internal tensions.

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GEOPOLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

FGILTJ

THE PLACE AND ROLE OF THE BALTIC STATES IN U. S. TRANSATLANTIC POLICY

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This article analyses the place and role of the Baltic States in the U.S. policy in the context of the transformation of transatlantic relations. The topic has received only fragmentary coverage in the academic literature, which underscores the relevance of this study. The article aims to identify the factors that have shaped the position of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in Washington's strategy since the restoration of their independence, as well as to examine how the Baltic States have used interaction with the United States to strengthen their security and advance their national interests. Methodologically, the study relies on a comparative analysis of two principal dimensions of cooperation: the political-diplomatic and the military-political. The theoretical framework draws on alliance theory and scholarship on the foreign policy of small states, which emphasises their dual character — simultaneous dependence on great powers and the capacity to influence them. The findings demonstrate that the United States views the Baltic States as a "forward line of containment" vis-à-vis Russia, reinforcing its military presence and infrastructure in the subregion. At the same time, the Baltic States actively promote an anti-Russian agenda and seek expanded political and military support from Washington. Thus, the Baltic States are both instruments and autonomous actors within U.S. policy, a pattern consistent with theoretical interpretations of the role of small states in asymmetric alliances.

Keywords:
The United States, Baltic States, NATO, the EU, transatlantic relations

Introduction

The Baltic States occupy a special place in U.S. policy toward the post-Soviet space. The United States never recognised the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the Soviet Union. Against this backdrop, and in the con-

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text of mutual aspirations for rapprochement, Washington, following the demise of the USSR, pursued a policy aimed at integrating the Baltic States into the Euro-Atlantic space. As Vorotnikov aptly observes, "it is difficult to find, among the former Soviet republics, states that have so consistently and unwaveringly—often at the expense of their own economic development—sought a deliberate break with their past and a purposeful reorientation of their foreign policy and foreign economic relations towards the West" [1, p. 133].

At the same time, the United States, "owing less to its own ambitions than to the security concerns of its new NATO allies, characterised by a persistent perception of an inevitable 'Russian revanche,' gained the opportunity to become one of the principal actors in the Baltic region" [2, p. 5].

The significance of relations with the Baltic States for the U.S. substantially increased following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, and subsequently in 2022 after the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. The Baltic Sea region, and in particular the three former Soviet republics, came to be perceived as a potential arena for direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO. The Baltic States emerged as among the principal advocates for Ukraine and proponents of the strictest measures against Russia within the transatlantic community. Finally, within the U.S. foreign policy establishment, parallels are frequently drawn between the Baltic and Ukrainian cases, on the assumption that the United States will never recognise Russia's incorporation of Crimea and the new Russian regions, just as it never recognised the annexation of the Baltic States by the USSR.[1] In Russian discourse, for this reason, they have often come to be regarded as small states entirely dependent on the United States. However, this raises several questions: what place did the United States assign to the Baltic States within the framework of Euro-Atlantic relations and the intensification of U.S.-Russia tensions? What role were they intended to play among European states? Finally, a counter-question arises: to what extent did the views and aspirations of the Baltic elites influence shifts in the U.S. foreign policy towards Europe and Russia?

The issue of relations between the United States and the Baltic States has been repeatedly addressed in the scholarly literature. At the same time, the number of studies specifically focused on this topic remains limited. Among these, particular attention may be drawn to the works of Banka [3; 4], Jakstaite [5], and Vargulis [6], which adopt a regional perspective. The topic has also been examined in broader studies of U.S. [2; 7] and NATO [8; 9] policy in the Baltic region, Russia's relations with the Baltic states [10], the foreign policies of the Baltic states [11; 12], and their role within the European Union [13; 14]. However, comprehensive analyses that systematically assess changes in U.S. policy towards the Baltic States, particularly since 2022, remain lacking. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature.

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[1] See, e.g.: Game-Changer: The Baltics Under Pressure, 2022, *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe*, p. 5, URL: https://www.csce.gov/hearings/game-changer/ (accessed 06.07.2025).

Theoretical and methodological framework of the study

From a methodological standpoint, the article is based on a comparative analysis of U.S.-Baltic States interactions across two key dimensions: political-diplomatic and military-political. This approach makes it possible to identify how, and under which factors, the place and role of the Baltic States in U.S. foreign policy have evolved.

In addition, the study draws on selected elements of alliance theory and approaches to analysing small states' foreign policy. Although the interaction between great and small powers does not constitute the primary focus of these theoretical frameworks, it nonetheless receives considerable attention within them. Thus, Walt, in The Origins of Alliances, develops Waltz's concepts of *balancing* and *bandwagoning*, arguing that small states tend to bandwagon with the most powerful state [15, p. 29—30]. In Rothstein's view, the key distinction between great and small powers lies in the latter's inability to "obtain security primarily by use of [their] own capabilities," and their consequent reliance on external support [16, p. 29].

At the same time, as Keohane writes, "small states on the rim of the alliance wheel can pursue active, forceful and even obstreperous policies of their own," as well as "use alliances to influence American policy and alter American policy perspectives" [17, p. 162—163]. It is also worth noting Posen's approach, which observes that middle and small powers allied with the United States often resort to two strategies, "cheap riding" and "reckless behaviour," both aimed at manipulating their powerful ally.[1]

According to prevailing theoretical perspectives, great powers not only utilise small states for their own ends, but small states themselves also seek to influence their patrons and induce them to act in their interests. Smirnov most clearly captures this duality, arguing that small states function "as agents of the major player(s) with a specific functional specialisation aimed at securing resources, status, and guarantees from the 'empire' for the elites of the small state, which can then be leveraged for their own purposes." In his view, "this process does not always take the form of explicit agreements; however, this does not preclude the realisation of such exchanges, even when they occur tacitly through the implicit coordination between the 'empire' and its 'junior' partners." At the same time, he emphasises that "the elites of small states seek to exploit (and often stimulate) the assumption of specific commitments by great powers and the delegation of authority" [19, p. 138—139].

In this context, it is worth mentioning the concept of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, within which relations between the United States and the Baltic States have developed. Undoubtedly, the institutions that constitute this architecture — above all, NATO and the EU — are of considerable significance; however, for the present study, another aspect is more pertinent. The predominance of the United States within this framework, together with its selective and

[1] The classification is provided by [18, p. 33—50]. The essence of "cheap riding" lies in states failing to exert sufficient efforts to ensure their own security, while "reckless behavior" consists in undertaking actions that may harm not only their own interests but also those of the United States.

exclusive character, creates conditions for competition among participating states for Washington's attention, in the hope of gaining access to key actors within the U.S. foreign policy establishment — and, with it, to certain material opportunities, preferential arrangements, and institutional advantages within this structure.

Political-diplomatic dimension

In the early 1990s, following the declarations of independence by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the United States openly articulated its intention to facilitate their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. In 1994, the Baltic States became members of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme, launched at U.S. initiative, and just a decade later they acceded as full members of NATO and — albeit not without American support — of the European Union. In addition, the United States sought to maintain bilateral relations with the newly independent Baltic States. In 1998, President Clinton and the leaders of the three Baltic States signed the "Baltic Charter," which proclaimed the goal of building "special relations" between the U.S. and the Baltic States.[1]

In the history of U.S.—Baltic relations, two system-forming moments may be identified. First, beginning with President George H. W. Bush, the United States presented Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as emblematic examples of the success of its policies across multiple domains. In the 1990s and 2000s, the international system entered a unipolar phase accompanied by a new wave of democratisation. The Baltic States' successful transition to a Western model of market democracy was showcased as evidence of the superiority of American values, capitalism, and the emerging world order [20]. Second, during the first Trump administration, the President pressed NATO member states to increase their defence spending to 2 per cent of GDP. The Baltic States, having significantly raised their military budgets after 2014, joined the so-called "two per cent club" and were subsequently promoted as a model for other European countries [3, p. 167]. Second, the Baltic States themselves largely shaped their foreign policies around the need to attract the United States' attention. They wanted to earn American appreciation to provide greater U.S. involvement in guaranteeing their security. To this end, Baltic military personnel took an active part (relative to their capabilities) in U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq [21, p. 66]. This policy was pursued with the aim of gaining access to greater influence and opportunities to shape the Western agenda [4, p. 167]. Interestingly, American elites were well aware of the readiness of the Baltic States to do nearly anything for Washington's favour and made active use of this fact. Moreover, the pronounced pro-American stance of the Baltic elites was evaluated highly positively not only in official statements by U.S. officials but also in private conversations and confidential documents [4, p. 171—172].

It is also worth noting the domestic political linkages between the United States and the Baltic States. In Washington, there is an active Baltic-American community organised within the Joint Baltic American National Committee,

[1] The Baltic Charter, 1998, *U.S. Department of State*, URL: https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ch_9801_baltic_charter.html (accessed 09.07.2025).

which compensates for its small numbers through close cooperation with other Central and Eastern European diaspora groups, primarily the Polish lobby [22, p. 883]. Their vigorous activity led in 1997 to the creation of the bipartisan Baltic Caucus in the U. S. Congress, which has since been engaged in ongoing legislative work.

U.S. policymakers also played a significant role in shaping the foreign policies of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, particularly their pro-American orientation. It is indicative that, at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, all three Baltic presidents were émigrés from the United States. At the same time, members of the U. S. Congress actively assisted the Baltic States in formulating their Euro-Atlantic policies. The significance of this involvement is vividly illustrated by a remark from the Estonian ambassador in Washington, who once referred to the bipartisan NATO commission in Congress as “our governess” [22, p. 887].

Undoubtedly, one of the central issues in U.S.—Baltic relations concerns Russia. Before 2022, two distinct stages can be identified, each characterised by opposing tendencies. On the one hand, the United States sought to encourage constructive engagement between the Baltic States and Russia to mitigate the negative effects of the former’s integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. On the other hand, it worked to counter the expansion of Moscow’s influence in the region. During the first stage, from the 1990s to 2014, the former approach predominated in Washington, although it gradually gave way to the latter. Following the Ukrainian crisis of 2013—2014, the second approach ultimately prevailed, contributing to the transformation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia from “intermediaries” into “gatekeepers” and “missionaries”.[1] At the same time, it is worth noting that even after 2014, within American expert and political circles remained advocates of maintaining dialogue between the Baltic States and Russia.[2]

Particular attention within this section merits the foreign policy niche of the “missionary,” actively exploited by the Baltic States. Following the escalation of tensions between Western countries and Russia, they successfully began to position themselves within the Euro-Atlantic community as Russia experts who possess and have always possessed a deeper understanding of Moscow’s actions and “have been warning [the West]… 20 years ago” about its allegedly planned aggressive moves.[3] This approach found fertile ground in the U.S. among Cold War veterans and neoconservatives with anti-Russian leanings. Thus, the anti-Russian discourse propagated by the Baltic States, along with other Central and Eastern European countries, partially contributed to the toughening of the American stance toward Russia.

[1] The typology of foreign policy niches of small states is taken from [19, p. 138]. The term “intermediary” refers to a transit state that links spaces of different “empires.” “Gatekeeper” denotes an outpost that prevents other major powers from extending their influence into the “empire.” “Missionary” designates an advocate or expert on neighbouring countries who channels the “empire’s” influence onto them.

[2] U. S. Policy Toward the Baltic States, 2017, *U. S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs*, p. 8, URL: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg24752/pdf/CHRG-115hhrg24752.pdf (accessed 21.08.2025).

[3] Ibid. P. 40.

At the same time, during the period between 2014 and 2022, the Baltic elites were not entirely satisfied with the U.S. approach to Russia. Washington's rhetoric still "differed considerably from the confrontational approach favoured by Poland, the Baltic member states, and [NATO Secretary General] Rasmussen," as it did not portray Russia as "a threat to U.S. security" [23, p. 231].

This suggests that, prior to 2022, the Baltic States' influence on U.S. policy towards Russia remained limited, even when supported by several allies. It is also worth noting two additional modes of interaction between the United States and the Baltic States in the realm of foreign policy.

The first concerns the European dimension. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia act as a "wedge between Europe and Russia" and as "agents of influence" [of the United States] within the European Union [24, p. 21]. They may also be viewed as an instrument for "disciplining" NATO allies that are not always willing "…to allocate sufficient funds for defence needs" [2, p. 30]. For their part, Baltic elites seek to maintain a careful balance between economic interests tied to the EU and security interests linked to the United States.

The second direction, which has emerged in U.S.—Baltic relations only in the past decade, is the China factor. Initially, the Baltic States, along with other European transatlanticists, were reluctant to acknowledge the objective nature of America's "pivot to Asia" [13, p. 30]. Subsequently, however, they came to recognise that "inevitably, the U.S. will judge its European allies according to the level of support they offer in countering the rise of China" [4, p. 175]. Consequently, having identified yet another means of attracting Washington's attention, the Baltic States began pursuing an even tougher China policy than the United States itself. The most striking manifestation of this was Lithuania's stance. Vilnius first withdrew from the "17+1" format established by the PRC for engagement with Central and Eastern European states. It subsequently opened a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius, thereby signalling alignment with U.S. policy and earning Washington's approval.

In Lust's view, one of the primary motivations behind this course of action was precisely the desire to demonstrate solidarity with the United States on the China issue [25]. It is therefore not surprising that Lithuania's démarche was interpreted in China as evidence of Vilnius's determination to closely align with U.S. policy [26, p. 386].

After 2022, the aforementioned trends in U.S.—Baltic relations have continued to evolve, leading to a further strengthening of ties between the parties. The geographical position of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia along the border with Russia has reinforced their status as "frontline states" and attracted increased attention from the U.S. foreign policy establishment. They have significantly increased their defence spending to 3—4 per cent of GDP and have transferred military and other equipment to Ukraine valued at approximately 1.2—1.5 per cent of GDP. This behaviour has elevated their standing as "model allies" and exemplars for other NATO members, a point repeatedly emphasised at the highest levels in the United States.

The Baltic Caucus also significantly intensified its activities. From 2022 to 2025, its membership grew from 73 U.S. congressmen and 14 senators to 106 and

21, respectively.[1] Members of the caucus developed a series of bills, including the Baltic Defence and Deterrence Act, the Baltic Reassurance Act, and the Baltic Security Initiative Act. These envisioned increased support for the Baltic States through funding, infrastructure modernisation, and enhanced joint military capabilities within NATO and bilateral programmes. However, none of these bills was eventually passed, vividly illustrating the limits of the Baltic lobby's influence.

The significance of the Baltic States as "experts on Russia" and as sources of intelligence on developments along NATO's borders, as well as in Ukraine, has increased markedly. Moreover, they have begun to provide more frequent opportunities for U.S. reconnaissance aircraft and UAVs to operate in close proximity to Russia's borders [27]. Their role within the European community has also evolved. Whereas major EU states such as Germany and France were previously more inclined towards cooperation with Moscow, it is now the perspective of Central and Eastern European countries, including the Baltic States, on relations with Russia that has become increasingly prominent in European discourse [28, p. 544].

The Baltic States have gained additional influence within Europe through the appointment of their representatives — Kaja Kallas, Andrius Kubilius, and Valdis Dombrovskis — to key positions in the European Commission: High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Commissioner for Defence, and Commissioner for the Economy, respectively. This development can be interpreted as a continuation of Washington's strategy of driving a "wedge" between Russia and Europe.

On the other hand, the Baltic allies of the United States were not entirely satisfied with what they perceived as the excessively cautious policy of the Biden administration toward the Ukrainian crisis, aimed at preventing escalation in Russian-American relations. Official representatives refrained from publicly expressing disagreement with one another to avoid undermining transatlantic unity. According to The Wall Street Journal, however, President Biden had to put pressure on his Baltic allies due to their excessively anti-Russian rhetoric.[2] Representatives of the political elites of the Baltic States and other Central and Eastern European countries ventured to bring the emerging disagreements into the public domain only in September 2024. They published an open letter to President Biden, where they warned that the American president would "stain his legacy" unless he lifted restrictions on the use of Western weapons by the Ukrainian armed forces. Eastern European elites urged him to transfer 300 Abrams tanks and 1,000 Bradley IFVs to Ukraine. They also supported the NATO membership of Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and "any other democratic country."[3]

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[1] Baltic Caucus, 2025, *The Joint Baltic American National Committee*, URL: https://jbanc.org/baltic-caucus/ (accessed 02.10.2025).

[2] Thomas, K., Pancevski, B. 2023, President Biden Discusses Ukraine Strategy With Germany's Olaf Scholz, 04.03.2023, *The Wall Street Journal*, URL: https://www.wsj.com/articles/president-biden-discusses-ukraine-strategy-with-germanys-olaf-scholz-2c940a7f (accessed 13.07.2025).

[3] Dupuis, O. 2024, Open letter: President Biden, this is how you can uphold your legacy by supporting Ukraine, 27.09.2024, *The Kyiv Independent*, URL: https://kyivindependent.com/open-letter-president-biden-this-is-how-you-can-uphold-your-legacy-by-supporting-ukraine/ (accessed 13.07.2025).

The inclusion of the final point in the letter, concerning Indo-Pacific countries, may have been driven by two reasons. On the one hand, it represents the development of previous trends, whereby the Baltic States shifted toward an anti-China policy as part of a strategy to attract U.S. attention. In August 2022, Latvia and Estonia followed Lithuania's example and withdrew from the "16+1" format, earning Washington's approval. Tellingly, Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis accused China of attempting to "replace Pax Americana with Pax Sinica," a new world order governed by the "might is right" principle, in which the Baltic States would evidently feel far less secure.[1] The other reason, which also echoes American rhetoric, is the intensified Russia—China cooperation amid the special military operation, perceived in the Baltic States as a direct threat to their own security.

Thus, the United States and the Baltic States actively sought to leverage one another in pursuit of their respective interests. However, the relationship was asymmetrical: while the Baltic States were generally willing to comply with Washington's expectations and assume the roles assigned to them, the reciprocal dynamic proved less effective. The United States was often reluctant to follow the lead of the Baltic States and other Central and Eastern European countries, as doing so was seen as risking a serious deterioration in relations with Russia and, consequently, instability in Europe. Such outcomes could divert U.S. attention from other strategic priorities, including the "pivot to Asia." At the same time, Baltic States' narratives on Russia found receptive audiences in Washington among a range of policymakers and experts, thereby gradually influencing the evolution of U.S. policy towards Russia.

Military-political dimension

Another facet of our analysis concerns the military-political interaction between the United States and the Baltic States. Returning to the 1990s, it should be noted that the U. S. Department of Defence (DoD) initially opposed the rapid admission of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to NATO. The Pentagon had been disappointed with the military capabilities of the larger and more industrially developed Hungary and the Czech Republic, which had been admitted to the Alliance earlier [22, p. 22]. Under these circumstances, the reluctance of American military leaders to assume responsibility for the Baltic States appears understandable. Nevertheless, the political decision to expand NATO was ultimately taken, and the objections of the military were set aside.

The apprehensions of the Department of Defence proved well-founded: owing to economic difficulties in the early years of independence, the Baltic States required substantial external support. The United States predictably assumed a pivotal role in this process, providing assistance through the Foreign Military Fi-

[1] Varadarajan, T. 2023, Little Lithuania Stands Tall Against Russia and China, 05.05.2023, *The Wall Street Journal*, URL: https://www.wsj.com/world/lithuania-stands-against-russia-and-china-landsbergis-taiwan-ukraine-war-362976d3 (accessed 14.07.2025).

nancing (FMF) programme. It primarily covered the training of military personnel as well as the supply of military equipment and hardware. Additionally, the U.S. transferred obsolete or up-to-be-upgraded military equipment to the Baltic States free of charge [29, p. 11].

Over time, funding for these programmes inevitably declined. At the same time, the strictly military dimension of U.S.—Baltic interaction intensified. As disclosed in 2010 through diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, NATO — at the urging of the United States and Germany — adopted a secret military plan, Eagle Protector, designed to defend Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in the event of military aggression. Notably, in this instance, the initiative for developing the plan originated from military authorities, whereas U.S. diplomats expressed concern that it might create "unnecessary tensions" in relations with Russia. Initially, Poland alone was designated as the object of protection under the plan; the Baltic States were included only after repeatedly requesting more substantial security guarantees in the form of concrete defence arrangements.[1]

Following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, defence cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States, both bilaterally and within NATO, sharpened considerably. Primarily, the institutional and legal framework for military collaboration underwent significant modernisation. The first initiative in this domain was the U.S.—Baltic Dialogue launched in 2016. It addressed various regional security issues and aimed to bolster defence cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States.

In 2017, Washington signed agreements on defence cooperation with the Baltic States. These represented uniform documents granting U.S. armed forces extensive operational capabilities across the territories of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The agreements were designed to ensure unrestricted U.S. access to designated military facilities, the right to pre-position and store military equipment, conduct exercises, and construct infrastructure with minimal restrictions imposed by the host countries. In effect, these documents established the legal foundation for a long-term U.S. military presence in the region, affording American personnel and equipment extensive legal privileges and freedom of movement. Collectively, the agreements transformed the Baltic States into a forward U.S. military base along Russia's borders, enabling the rapid deployment of forces and execution of operations.[2]

In addition, in a similar bilateral format, the U.S. and the Baltic States signed security cooperation roadmaps in 2019. These documents were somewhat more limited in scope and were intended to highlight specific priorities on this matter.

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[1] Traynor, I. 2010, WikiLeaks cables reveal secret Nato plans to defend Baltics from Russia, 06.12.2010, *The Guardian*, URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/06/wikileaks-cables-nato-russia-baltics (accessed 05.08.2025).

[2] See, e. g.: Lithuania (17—227) — Agreement on Defense Cooperation, 2017, U. S. Department of State, 05.04.2017, URL: https://www.state.gov/17-227/ (accessed 03.10.2025).

These included maintaining a U.S. military presence in the subregion, supporting the Baltic States in strengthening their military capabilities, conducting regular exercises and exchanges of expertise, and cooperating in the field of cybersecurity.[1]

Military cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States also took concrete financial form. From 2015 to 2021, the U.S. allocated the following funds to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia:

— $ 250 million under the FMF programme;

— approximately $ 25 million through the International Military Education and Training programme;

— $ 605.5 million under Title 10-funded train and equip programmes.

Over the same period, the Baltic States procured defence products and services from the United States, totalling $ 503.9 million under the Foreign Military Sales program, as well as $ 346.3 million under the Direct Commercial Sales programme.[2] Notably, the amounts allocated and the funds spent on arms procurement are nearly identical — $ 880 million and $ 850 million, respectively. This is unsurprising, given that U.S. grants and loans are typically earmarked for purchases from American suppliers. Thus, the resources transferred were not dissipated but effectively recirculated into the U.S. economy.

In addition, in 2020, the DoD established the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI). Under this initiative, $ 169 million was allocated to the Baltic States for FY2021, primarily for the development of air defence systems, ground forces, and maritime domain awareness.[3] Thereby, the Baltic States became firmly tied to the U.S. as a small but steady market for defence products.

The U. S. also adeptly seized the opportunity to bolster its direct military presence along Russia's borders. Conservative analysts to immediately proceed with a permanent deployment of U.S. troops on NATO's eastern flank in contravention of the NATO—Russia Founding Act.[4] However, despite these calls, the DoD stationed military units in the Baltic States on a rotational basis. The largest initiative of this kind was Operation Atlantic Resolve, funded through the European Deterrence Initiative. The funds allocated for it steadily increased, reaching a peak of $ 6.5 billion at the end of Trump's first administration, before

[1] See, e. g.: U.S., Lithuania Detail Roadmap for Cooperation Through 2024, 2019, U. S. Department of Defense, URL: https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1803578/us-lithuania-detail-roadmap-for-cooperation-through-2024/ (accessed 03.10.2025).

[2] U. S. Security Cooperation With the Baltic States, 2021, *U. S. Department of State*, URL: https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-baltic-states/ (accessed 06.08.2025).

[3] Congressional Record, 2020, vol. 166, № 218, Part 3, *Library of Congress,* p. H8279, URL: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2020-12-21/pdf/CREC-2020-12-21-house-bk3.pdf (accessed 03.10.2025).

[4] Coffee, L., Kochis, D. 2015, The Baltic States: The United States Must Be Prepared to Fulfill Its NATO Treaty Obligations, *The Heritage Foundation*, URL: https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-baltic-states-the-united-states-must-be-prepared-fulfill-its-nato-treaty (accessed 06.08.2025).

beginning to decline gradually. The Pentagon attributed this reduction in funding to the completion of most construction and infrastructure projects [30, p. 13]. At the same time, it can also be linked to the routinization of the "Russian threat" in Western discourse.

Forces deployed to the Baltic States under this operation remained modest. Initially, each country hosted one reinforced company (100—200 personnel). However, from 2019 onwards, company-sized units were replaced by battalion-sized formations (600—800 personnel). Together with multinational NATO battalion-sized battlegroups stationed in the Baltic States under the Enhanced Forward Presence programme since 2016, they were intended to function as a form of "tripwire." These units were designed less to engage in combat with an aggressor than to deter potential aggression through their mere presence. At the same time, concerns persisted in the West regarding the possible reluctance of the United States to become embroiled in a conflict with Russia over the Baltic States. Experts doubted that "any U.S. president would trade Washington for Riga merely to defend the credibility of the Alliance" [31, p. 40].

The issue of missile defence merits separate consideration. In August 2014, Poland and the Baltic States—against the backdrop of the development of the U. S. European missile defence system—appealed to NATO with requests to redirect it towards Russia. However, the Alliance leadership rejected such proposals, evidently unwilling to provoke Moscow excessively in the missile and nuclear domain [7, p. 52—53].

Joint military exercises, both bilateral and within the NATO framework, also emerged as an important instrument for bolstering U.S. military influence in the Baltic region. Among the most significant and largest ones, one can name the BALTOPS naval exercise, conducted under U.S. leadership in the Baltic Sea since 1971, as well as the Saber Strike and Spring Storm land exercises. It is interesting to trace the evolution of these exercises in the contemporary period. Thus, whereas in the early 2000s Russia regularly participated in BALTOPS, and Saber Strike was intended to train Baltic personnel preparing for deployment to Afghanistan, since 2014, the exercises have acquired a distinctly anti-Russian orientation [32].

With the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, defence cooperation between the U.S. and the Baltic States reached a new level. U. S. Army battalion battle groups stationed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were substantially reinforced. President Biden announced this as early as 22 February 2022, in response to Russia's recognition of the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Despite this, by the summer of 2022, the Baltic States were calling for an increase in the NATO military presence on their territory to tens of thousands of personnel, a scale that, at the time, only the United States was capable of providing.[1]

[1] Birnbaum, M., Ryan, M. 2022, Splits open at NATO about how to boost presence in Eastern Europe, *The Washington Post*, URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/05/17/nato-troops-europe-russia-ukraine/ (accessed 07.08.2025).

Two main factors explain the United States' reluctance to take such a step. First, a sharp increase in NATO personnel along Russia's borders risked escalating the Russia—West confrontation, an outcome Washington sought to avoid. Second, practical constraints were significant: the Baltic States lacked — and were unlikely in the near term to develop — the infrastructure required to host such large troop contingents. Accordingly, a decision was taken in Brussels to expand only the multinational NATO units in the Baltic States on a gradual basis, to develop them into full brigades over time. This reflects a shift from a "forward presence" to a "forward defence", in which the objective is no longer limited to deterrence but extends to active defence against potential aggression.

Additionally, it should be noted that other NATO member states have largely assumed responsibility for strengthening the military presence in the Baltic States. Alongside the aforementioned multinational NATO brigades, in which the United States does not participate, one may also highlight operations such as Baltic Air Policing, which patrols the region's airspace.[1] Later, it was accompanied by Baltic Sentry (protection of critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea) and Eastern Sentry (reinforcement of NATO's military presence along the eastern flank following the detection of unidentified drones over the territory of Alliance member states) operations. Nevertheless, the U.S. experts notice that while NATO's guarantees appear ironclad on paper, implementing the new plans in practice will take years to implement.[2]

U.S. military funding for the Baltic States also intensified, albeit unevenly. In FY2022, disbursements under the FMF programme reached $ 426 million — nearly double the total for the entire 2015—2021 period — before declining sharply to $ 59 million in FY2023 and $ 29.25 million in both FY2024 and FY2025. This clearly indicates a downward trend in funding, most likely driven by the need to redirect resources towards support for Ukraine.

Assistance under the BSI grew more steadily, increasing from $ 169 million in FY2021 to $ 225 million in FY2025. However, as noted by Senator Chris Coons, the leading Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defence, in July 2025, the majority of funds requested for FY2026 under this heading are, in practice, expected to be reallocated to Ukraine assistance.[3] In this context, the significance of the BSI for enhancing the Baltic States' defence capabilities appears highly ambiguous.

With the help of both American and domestic funding, the Baltic States increased their procurement of armaments from the U.S. (Table).

[1] Budginaite-Froehly, J. 2024, NATO Air Defense Systems to Secure Baltic Skies, *CEPA*, URL: https://cepa.org/article/nato-air-defense-systems-to-secure-baltic-skies/ (accessed 31.10.2025).

[2] Kepe, M. 2024, From Forward Presence to Forward Defense: NATO's Defense of the Baltics, Freyr Trade & Services.

[3] Zengerle, P. 2025, US Senate committee backs more Ukraine funding, following Trump shift on aid, 31.07.2025, *Reuters*, URL: https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-senate-committee-backs-more-ukraine-funding-following-trump-shift-aid-2025-07-31/ (accessed 07.08.2025).

Procurement of heavy weapons by the Baltic States from the U. S., 2022—2025

Country	Type of weapons	Total cost
Lithuania	M142 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers (8 units) + ammunition ATAMCS (18 missiles) AMRAAM for NASAMS air defence systems (36 missiles)	$ 595 million
Latvia	M142 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers (6 units) + ammunition ATAMCS (10 missiles) NSM CDS anti-ship systems (presumably 1 battery = 3 units)[1] + ammunition	$ 330 million
Estonia	M142 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers (6 units) + ammunition ATAMCS (18 missiles)	$ 500 million

Compiled based on data from the Defence Security Cooperation Agency, U. S. Department of Defence.

The actual volume of armaments procured by the Baltic States from the United States remains relatively modest. However, it should not be overlooked that the subregion in question is geographically compact, meaning that even such quantities of U.S. multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) could pose a serious threat. On the other hand, most of the equipment ordered has yet to be delivered to the region. Given the prioritisation of arms supplies to Ukraine, as well as the heavy workload of U.S. defence industry production facilities, driven by demand from both Ukraine and the U.S. armed forces, the Baltic States are unlikely to receive prompt or large-scale deliveries.

The number and scale of military exercises conducted by the Baltic States within NATO have also increased substantially. The year 2024 proved most indicative in this regard, as the Alliance carried out the largest BALTOPS naval manoeuvres in decades (over 50 ships from 20 countries), and the Steadfast Defender multidomain exercise (90.000 personnel from 32 countries). Although the latter was conducted on a Europe-wide scale, a series of smaller-scale exercises took place under its umbrella directly in the Baltic States, including Saber Strike, Crystal Arrow, Spring Storm, and Swift Response.

It is therefore pertinent to examine how the Baltic States perceive the balance between U.S. and European security guarantees. During the 2000s and 2010s, they unequivocally prioritised NATO and, in particular, the United States as the primary guarantor of their security, while viewing the EU and its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as secondary. A key role in shaping this perception was played by the stance of major continental powers such as France and Germany, which favoured pragmatic engagement with Russia [14, p. 114]. However, developments during President Trump's first administration — a perceived

[1] The DSCA website does not specify the exact number of ordered installations. Based on indirect data obtained by comparing Latvia's order ($ 110 million) with Romania's 2021 order for similar systems (two batteries for $ 286 million), it can be inferred that Latvia ordered only one battery.

decline in U.S. engagement in Central and Eastern Europe and Europe more broadly, Brexit, and the consolidation of the Franco-German tandem —prompted a moderation of the Baltic States' position towards European defence initiatives, including the CSDP and PESCO [1, p. 130; 13, p. 32].

Following the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022 and amid the strengthening of EU—NATO cooperation, a further intensification of Baltic participation in European defence initiatives can be expected, albeit strictly within the framework of reinforcing NATO's European pillar. Such measures include enhanced cooperation with Poland and the Nordic countries, as well as participation in the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force.[1]

Overall, the escalation in the frequency and scale of exercises, as well as the deployment of U.S. Army units in the Baltic States, pursued a dual objective. On the one hand, these measures served as instruments of moral support for the republics, "flag demonstrations", and deterrence against potential "aggression" from the eastern neighbour. On the other hand, the involvement of diverse military units enhanced the quality of interoperability among personnel from various countries, while improving their familiarity with the theatre of operations and the likely adversary. Finally, the potentially provocative nature of such activities cannot be discounted, as they may have been intended to elicit an inadequate response from Moscow. All this indicates that the United States was preparing to employ Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as a springboard for a prospective military conflict with Russia. In this context, the foreign policy conduct of the Baltic States evinced their fervent readiness to assume this role, in anticipation of support from Brussels and Washington. At the same time, certain U.S. actions — such as the partial reduction in military funding for the Baltic States and the eschewal of excessive reinforcement of the military presence along the Russian border — suggest that the United States has no intention of yielding to anti-Russian radicals in Europe and seeks to maintain control over the situation along the Russian-Baltic frontier.

Conclusion

The conducted research demonstrates that the place and role of the Baltic States in U.S. transatlantic policy are determined primarily by their ability to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Washington actively leveraged the Baltic States in its interests as a tool for pressuring uncooperative European countries or as a battering ram in matters of military or economic security pertaining to Russia and China. In turn, despite their limited resources, the Baltic States adeptly capitalised on their status as among the most loyal U.S. allies, transforming it into a means of bolstering their own security and augmenting their political weight.

The United States also had to contend with several instances of "reckless behaviour" on the part of the Baltic States, aimed at compelling Washington to undertake more radical actions vis-à-vis Moscow. Consequently, they could operate

[1] Bajarūnas, E. 2025, The Baltics Adapt to Trump, *Center for European Policy Analysis*, URL: https://cepa.org/article/the-baltics-adapt-to-trump/ (accessed 10.08.2025).

only within the parameters set by American leadership, which underscores their strategic dependence and subordination to U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, it should be noted that such constraints existed primarily at the strategic level, whereas at the tactical level, the Baltic States enjoyed relative autonomy.

In conclusion, a number of changes may be anticipated in U.S.—Baltic relations following Donald Trump's return to the White House. Although the Baltics undoubtedly anticipated a victory for Kamala Harris, they were compelled to alter course after the Republicans' triumph, asserting that their priority lies in engaging both parties. However, Trump's readiness to negotiate with Russia, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth's inability to unconditionally affirm the continued U.S. troop presence in the Baltic States, and doubts regarding the efficacy of the entire Euro-Atlantic security architecture have begun to engender serious concerns among them.

The new administration is sending mixed signals regarding the Baltic States. On one hand, Estonia has substantially expanded its procurement of U.S. armaments totalling $ 4.73 billion.[1] At the same time, U.S. leadership has announced plans to reduce the scale of military assistance provided to the Baltic States.[2] All this aligns with the second Trump administration's policy of cost reduction and increasing NATO allies' self-reliance. This situation, however, fully conforms to the previously noted trend of expanding Baltic participation in EU defence initiatives as part of bolstering NATO's European pillar.

For Russia, this situation appears highly ambiguous. The United States formally sells substantial quantities of armaments to the Baltic States, yet now the latter must purchase them with their own or European funds. Moreover, given the high workload of U.S. defence factories, it remains uncertain when these deliveries will reach the buyers. Conceivably, such a policy is also employed by Washington as an instrument of pressure on Moscow. Under these circumstances, Russia should avoid overreacting to the prevailing situation, while bearing in mind that the Baltic States' role as Europe's anti-Russian vanguard has remained unchanged under the Trump administration.

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CONTEMPORARY MILITARY-POLITICAL COOPERATION BETWEEN GERMANY AND SWEDEN IN THE CONTEXT OF MILITARISATION: FROM INTERCONNECTEDNESS TO COMPLEMENTARITY

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Germany and Sweden have significantly increased military spending and have also sought to dramatically expand their armed forces, distinguishing themselves from several other NATO member states in this regard. A key objective of this militarisation is to enhance their contributions to NATO's deterrence posture against Russia, thereby advancing their respective leadership aspirations within the Alliance. At the same time, cooperation has consistently outweighed competition in German-Swedish security and defence collaboration. This article examines the dynamics and evolution of this military-political partnership in the late 2020s, with particular emphasis on Sweden's NATO accession in March 2024. Methodologically, it draws on political neorealism and theories of armed forces development. Historically, the two states' peaks of power never coincided, sparing them large-scale conflict and creating a favourable backdrop for cooperation. In the mid-1990s, West Germany viewed Sweden's de facto rapprochement with NATO positively. This process gained greater scale and depth amid the Euro-Atlantic confrontation with Russia that intensified after 2014. Germany pursued a strategy of gradual and consistent deterrence; in the mid-2010s, Berlin still considered formal Swedish NATO membership overly provocative, communicating this stance through the N3 + 1 format (2014—2019), which involved the Nordic EU member states. By the end of the decade, however, Germany had come to accept and actively support Sweden's abandonment of its non-aligned status, as evidenced by the N5 + 1 platform (from 2019, encompassing all five Nordic states) and high-level bilateral contacts. The study compares both countries' militarisation models. Germany particularly values Sweden's reinstatement of conscription in 2017, which has substantially boosted troop numbers, especially in ground forces. It details Armed Forces cooperation in manning NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups in the Scandinavian-Baltic region, including

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geographic burden-sharing. Special focus is given to the risks posed by strengthened German-Swedish eFP contingents, particularly concerning potential attempts to blockade the Kaliningrad region from the east.The conclusions identify the drivers of harmonisation achieved by Berlin and Stockholm in coordinating their military-political plans and actions under NATO auspices.

Keywords:
Germany, Sweden, negotiation formats, militarisation, Baltic region, NATO, deterrence, Russia, Kaliningrad region

In the first half of the 2020s, European NATO member states significantly tightened their approaches to the "deterrence" of the Russian Federation. The Alliance's capabilities as an organisation have increased markedly [1; 2], particularly along the forward edge of its area of responsibility [3]. Militarisation at the national level has been manifested primarily in a notable increase in defence spending, the development of new weapons systems, and the expansion of defence industries. At the same time, many NATO member states, including the largest ones (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France), have not significantly expanded the size of their armed forces. This pattern has been especially evident across North America and Western, Northern, and Southern Europe.[1] An exception to this trend was observed in several Eastern European countries, most notably Lithuania and Poland, as well as in Germany and Sweden. Germany has gradually embarked on a large-scale expansion of its armed forces. By the time of its accession to NATO in March 2024, the Kingdom of Sweden had already entered a phase of substantial growth in the size of its armed forces.[2]

Official Berlin retained its position as the largest contributor to NATO military groups after the United States.[3] Sweden, for its part, has sought to assume a comparable role in Northern Europe. However, the parallel nature of these ambitions has tended to foster cooperation rather than competition. In the context of efforts to shape a new international order, the shared objective of ensuring its maximum possible Western orientation, particularly towards EU member states, has brought the German and Swedish establishments into closer alignment [4; 5, p. 3—6]. In both countries, these establishments are largely composed of adherents of liberal values, including a commitment to multilateralism [6; 7]. This orientation has been reflected in practice: like Germany, Sweden has sought to make a substantial contribution to the manning of NATO's multinational forces. In doing so, both states have highlighted their enhanced capabilities relative to many other European members of the Alliance, as well as their practical value in the context of the intensifying confrontation with Russia. Accordingly, both Germany and Sweden have demonstrated a clear ambition to expand their roles

[1] Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014—2024), 2025, Brussels, *NATO*, p. 13.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Russland darf und wird diesen Krieg nicht gewinnen, 2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 07.06.2022, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/bundeskanzler-in-litauen-2047754 (accessed 19.11.2025).

within the Euro-Atlantic community and to advance their leadership claims. To this end, they have developed close cooperation, characterized by a mutually beneficial distribution of responsibilities.

The article aims to examine cooperation between Germany and Sweden in the field of security and defence in the mid-2020s. To this end, the study pursues the following objectives: to analyse the historical background of bilateral relations; to examine the system of political and diplomatic contacts, with particular attention to negotiation formats; to assess the current militarisation strategies of Germany and Sweden; and, on this basis, to identify trends in cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries.

Comparative analysis is employed to examine the functioning of the N3+1 and N5+1 formats involving Germany and Sweden, as well as to compare their respective approaches to national-level militarisation.

Methodologically, the study draws on theories of political neorealism (structural realism), as well as on approaches to military force development. A central tenet of neorealism, namely that foreign policy is effective only to the extent that it aligns with the expectations of other actors [8, p. 92—93], is illustrated by the case of Germany—Sweden interaction. This is reflected in a consistent effort to maintain mutual support by taking into account each other's preferences and concerns. Paradoxically, Germany has demonstrated an even stronger inclination in this regard. Although disputes over seniority may shift in form, becoming more latent or, at times, more explicit, their underlying nature has remained constant in Germany's relations with most major European NATO members. This is evident, for example, in Germany's relations with Poland [9] and even with France [10]. Accordingly, Germany has had a particular need for the support of its most reliable small and medium-sized partners within NATO, including Sweden.

The theory of military force development interprets changes in force structure — including the creation and disbandment of units, as well as deployments beyond national borders — as indicators of substantive shifts in a state's foreign policy priorities [11]. These propositions are directly applicable to the cases of Germany and Sweden: both states have embarked on large-scale militarisation while simultaneously sharply expanding the overseas deployment of their forces, particularly in the Scandinavian—Baltic region.

Russian and international scholars have produced a substantial body of research on the activities of the Federal Republic of Germany in the international arena. Within the Northern European dimension of German foreign policy, scholarly attention has more often focused on Germany's activities in the Arctic and its relations with Norway [12; 13], while its dialogue with Sweden has received comparatively less attention. Similarly, analyses of Berlin's strategic activity in the Baltic region have tended to prioritise Germany's interactions with the Baltic States (particularly Lithuania) and Poland [9; 14; 15], rather than its relations with Stockholm [16, p. 3; 17, p. 4—6].

In analyses of Sweden's contemporary foreign policy, scholarly attention has primarily focused on its accession to NATO. Researchers have examined the drivers behind this fundamental decision [18; 19, p. 3], the dynamics of Sweden's departure from its policy of non-alignment [20—23], and the implications for

security, particularly for the Russian Federation [24—26]. At the same time, the evolution of Stockholm's bilateral relations with most of its Alliance partners has remained a peripheral topic in the literature.

The study is based primarily on publicly available documents from the defence and foreign ministries of Germany and Sweden, as well as from the Federal Chancellery of Germany, and on official NATO materials. This ensures a high degree of verifiability of the findings. These sources contain a substantial volume of empirical data, particularly statistical information, which makes it possible to construct a comprehensive and sufficiently detailed picture of the subject under study and to trace, without interruption, the course and substance of contacts between the leaderships of the two states.

Historical and political trends in the relations

The favourable context for contemporary dialogue is largely explained by the fact that the respective periods of peak power of Germany and Sweden in early modern and modern history did not coincide chronologically. As a result, the number of conflicts in which Berlin and Stockholm were direct adversaries has been limited. During Sweden's great power era (1611—1721, though its decisive decline began in 1709), much of the German lands remained politically fragmented. In the Swedish (1630—1635) and Franco-Swedish (1636—1648) phases of the Thirty Years' War, a number of smaller northern German states supported the army of Gustav II Adolf, viewing it as a guarantor of Protestant religious freedoms. Under the Peace of Westphalia (1648), parts of Pomerania came under Swedish control. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Brandenburg and later Brandenburg-Prussia made repeated, largely unsuccessful attempts to assert control over Pomerania. Sweden, having effectively turned the Baltic Sea into an "inland lake," increasingly shifted its strategic focus eastwards. This shift is reflected in the Great Northern War (1700—1721), in which Russia inflicted decisive defeats on Sweden, bringing an end to the kingdom's status as a great power.

As a result, Sweden's power and influence were critically undermined. This demonstrates the Swedish contribution to wars in the following century, up to and including the era of the anti-Napoleonic coalitions. As a result of participation in the latter (1815), Stockholm transferred its Pomeranian possessions to Prussia (but Sweden received Norway), thereby being spared from participation in military conflicts for the unification of Germany in 1864—1871. Sweden, de facto since 1815, and de jure since 1834, began to define its foreign policy as a policy of permanent neutrality [18; 23]. In practice, however, it was not always fully observed. During the Crimean War, Sweden prepared to enter the conflict against the Russian Empire as part of the coalition led by Great Britain and France (the so-called November Treaty of 1855), but the end of hostilities prevented this. Against the backdrop of alliance formation in Europe, the German Empire sought to conclude a military convention with formally neutral Sweden in 1910 and encouraged Stockholm to engage in active military cooperation in the Baltic during the First World War [27]. Both this conflict and the Second World War ended with Germany's capitulation. At the same time, between 1940 and 1945,

Sweden's neutrality was broadly favourable towards the Third Reich. In addition to large-scale deliveries of iron ore — important for tank production —Sweden permitted the use of its territory for extensive Wehrmacht transit, primarily in support of German forces in the Far North [18].

During the Cold War, West Germany was regarded as firmly integrated into the community of "Western democracies" and made a significant contribution to the "deterrence" of the USSR and its allies. With the consent of the Western powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France), the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) joined the North Atlantic Alliance in 1955 and subsequently embarked on a large-scale rearmament. Given its location on the front line of confrontation and the salience of the "German question", the territory of the FRG served as the West's principal bastion in countering the East. The Bundeswehr, together with NATO forces deployed in West Germany, formed a unified military-strategic complex.

Sweden, for its part, continued to maintain its policy of non-alignment. Nevertheless, Bonn and Stockholm cooperated closely in the field of security and defence throughout the Cold War. How can this apparent paradox be explained? A key unifying factor was their shared commitment to a capitalist system, albeit one with a strong social orientation. In addition, both states pursued economic and, to a certain extent, military cooperation in the western Baltic, which carried a clear anti-Soviet dimension.

The Swedish establishment, particularly its conservative wing, viewed West Germany's substantial contribution to the "deterrence" of the USSR as indirectly supporting the preservation of Sweden's neutrality. At the same time, the governments of the two countries led by Social Democrats displayed a notable degree of coordination, most prominently under Willy Brandt in West Germany (1969—1974) and Olof Palme in Sweden (1969—1976). Both leaders played a significant role in reducing tensions in Europe and globally. Moreover, Palme's return to office (1982—1986) coincided with the "second Cold War", when Germany, under Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU/CSU), adopted a markedly more stringent approach to the deterrence of the USSR.

During the accelerated resolution of the "German question" (February—September 1990), Stockholm generally adopted a favourable stance towards the Federal Republic of Germany. The FRG succeeded in incorporating the territory of the former GDR. This outcome was formalised in the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany of 12 September 1990. Under the terms of the treaty, Germany acquired full sovereignty, following the renunciation by the victorious powers of their rights and responsibilities, and retained its membership in NATO. At the same time, it undertook a voluntary and indefinite renunciation of the production, possession, and control of weapons of mass destruction, and agreed to cap the size of its armed forces at 370,000 personnel, including no more than 345,000 in the ground forces and the air force. These limits were to apply

upon the completion of the withdrawal of Soviet (later Russian) troops from the territory of the former GDR.[1] This event took place on 31 August 1994 and had a major impact on the policies of both Germany and Sweden.

Both countries began to play a more prominent role in the activities of Euro-Atlantic institutions in the field of security and defence. As early as September 1994, Germany began to support the eastward expansion of NATO into the post-socialist space and significantly intensified the deployment of the Bundeswehr beyond the Alliance's area of responsibility. An illustrative example is the precedent-setting deployment of the Luftwaffe in air operations conducted under NATO auspices against the Republika Srpska (August—September 1995) and Serbia (March—June 1999). Through these actions, Germany sought to strengthen its position as a regional military and political power and to assert itself among the leading NATO member states (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France). For its part, Sweden began to move closer to NATO as early as the end of 1994, when it joined the Partnership for Peace programme.[2]

In 1995, Sweden, as part of a group of European countries with non-aligned status (also Austria and Finland), joined the EU, which also meant joining the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) of the European Union. As a result, the Kingdom's neutral status became conditional. At the same time, Sweden has begun to send contingents to NATO missions outside the bloc's area of responsibility. This was a key manifestation of Sweden's strategy towards the Alliance: to cooperate increasingly closely de facto, but not to join de jure.

For Germany, this approach proved highly advantageous, not only because it enabled the development of practical cooperation with a partner within both the EU and NATO frameworks. Berlin and Stockholm also shared a similarly high threshold for the use of force, which differed markedly from the lower threshold characteristic of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. This convergence with Sweden made it easier for Germany in the early twenty-first century to assert its distinct position vis-à-vis other Western powers on questions of the use of force beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, most notably in the context of the Iraq War in 2003.

At the same time, the two countries actively cooperated in conducting non-combat operations under the auspices of NATO: in the Balkans (in Bosnia in 1995—2003 and Kosovo since 1999) and especially in Afghanistan as part of the activities of *ISAF* in 2003—2014. The Swedish units operated as part of the multilateral forces of Regional Command North, where the role of the "framework nation", that is, the key contributor and coordinator, had belonged to Germany. This cooperation continued in 2015—2021, when the *Resolute Support Mission* (RSM) was launched as a new NATO mission, replacing ISAF. Its main task was no longer peacekeeping, but to provide security sector reform, help to

[1] Vertrag vom 12. September 1990 über die abschließende Regelung in Bezug auf Deutschland (Zwei-plus-Vier-Vertrag), 2025, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/regelbasierte-internationale-ordnung/voelkerrecht-internationales-recht/240218-240218 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Relations with Sweden, 2025, *NATO*, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52535.htm (accessed 19.11.2025).

train and advise the local (Afghan) army and police. After ISAF was replaced by the RSM mission, both the overall scope of the operation and the size of the German and Swedish contingents were reduced; however, the distribution of their roles within Regional Command North remained unchanged.[1] The experience of cooperation in Afghanistan since the mid-2010s has been applied in Mali [28, p. 22—24] through both the EU military training mission (EUTM Mali) and the multi-dimensional UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA). Within the last one, Germany had played the role of a "framework nation" in the matter of tactical reconnaissance and the functioning of the military base in Gao.[2]

At the same time, since the early 2010s, non-aligned Sweden has significantly lowered its threshold for the use of force. Germany, as a member of NATO, demonstrated considerable inertia and, consequently, strategic restraint in this regard until the mid-2010s. This divergence became evident during the NATO air campaign against Libya (March—October 2011), in which the Swedish Air Force participated, while the Luftwaffe did not.[3]

From the spring to the autumn of 2014, immediately after the onset of confrontation between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, Sweden's declared approach to "deterrence" proved more stringent than Germany's. Notably, Sweden reacted cautiously to the proposal to establish the Normandy format in June 2014. Germany, however, as the initiator of the format, regarded this negotiating platform as necessary for engaging Russia in a controlled and demonstrative dialogue, with the dual aim of preventing uncontrolled escalation and promoting a consolidated Western position on Ukraine. This approach contributed to the limited effectiveness of the Normandy format, a sharp decline in the frequency of meetings by the end of the 2010s, and its eventual loss of relevance in the context of Russia's special military operation.

Features of modern political dialogue

Germany pursued a gradual yet consistent strengthening of deterrence vis-à-vis the Russian Federation. Official Berlin consistently communicated to Stockholm its evolving position on Sweden's abandonment of its policy of conditional neutrality, emphasising the value it attached to their relationship of trust. In the late 2010s and the first half of the 2020s, direct bilateral contacts between the heads of government of Germany and Sweden took place frequently, at least once a year.

The two countries also cooperated within the framework of the EU, including in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (since 2009). In this context, Germany and Sweden worked together within the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS, established in 1992). At the initial stage of the

[1] Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (2015—2021), 2022, *NATO*, 30.05.2022, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_113694.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Antrag der Bundesregierung, 2021, *Deutscher Bundestag, 19. Wahlperiode*, Drucksache 19/28803, 21.04.2021, S. 9.

[3] NATO and Libya, 2011, *NATO*, February—October 2011, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_71652.htm (accessed 19.11.2025).

confrontation, the activities of the CBSS were suspended. Sweden supported Germany's efforts to restore the format in 2017, but in a manner that transformed it into a platform for articulating a coordinated position of the Western democracies, while reducing Russia's role within the CBSS to a largely nominal one.[1] The culmination was the call on March 3, 2022, to suspend Russia's participation in the Council[2], an attempt to use its platform to promote decisions aimed at turning the Baltic Sea into an "internal lake" for NATO. Not accepting this approach, Russia withdrew from the CBSS in May 2022.

Coordination between the two countries was even more pronounced within the N3 + 1 and N5 + 1 formats. The " + 1" referred to Germany, while also underscoring its special role within each negotiating platform, whereas the first component of the designation indicated the number of participating Northern European states: three (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) or all five.

The author considers Sweden's (non-)aligned status to be the key factor shaping the format in which Germany preferred to conduct negotiations, involving either a limited group or the full set of regional actors.

The N3 + 1 negotiating format operated at a high level, at the level of foreign ministers, though not at the level of heads of government. The participating Northern European states were EU members; among them, only Denmark was also a member of NATO at the time the format was in operation. This configuration reflected Germany's intention to engage primarily with the then non-aligned Finland and Sweden. The first meeting was held in Copenhagen in December 2014.[3] Preparing the launch of N3 + 1, Germany placed particular emphasis on cooperation with Sweden[4]. Earlier, on 5 September 2014, Sweden, together with Finland, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Alliance on an enhanced strategic partnership at the NATO Wales Summit [20]. At the same time, Sweden decided to participate in the training activities of the NATO Response Force (NRF). The NRF was designed for the rapid deployment of forces from the depth of the Alliance's area of responsibility to its most critical forward areas, enabling a swift shift in the balance of power. From 2014 until its reorganisation in 2023, Germany made the largest contribution to the NATO Response Force. The Federal Republic of Germany served as the principal provider of the land component of the NRF on three occasions, each for a one-

[1] Vertrauen durch Dialog: Gabriel will Ostseerat wiederbeleben, 2017, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 21.06.2017, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/zusammenarbeit-staaten/ostseekooperation/170621-bm-ostseerat/290796 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Ostseekooperation. 2022, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 16.03.2022, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/zusammenarbeit-staaten/ostseekooperation/-/210006 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[3] Enge Beratungen im neuen „N3 + 1"-Format, 2014, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 01.12.2014, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/daenemark-node/141201-n3-1-kopenhagen/267302 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[4] Außenminister Steinmeier trifft schwedische Außenministerin, 2014, Auswärtiges Amt, 04.11.2014, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/141104-am-schweden/266636 (accessed 19.11.2025).

year period (2015, 2019, and 2023) [29]. This development was associated with a noticeable increase in both the scale and the quality of practical cooperation between Germany and Sweden under NATO auspices.

However, this did not imply that, in the mid-2010s, Germany was actively encouraging Sweden to join NATO de jure. The primary objective of the N3+1 format was Germany's effort to persuade its partner that its key security and defence concerns could be addressed within the framework of the EU, without the need to abandon its policy of non-alignment in the near term. At the initial stage of the confrontation with Russia, Berlin regarded such a scenario as carrying the risk of uncontrolled escalation. The fact and substance of the N3+1 meetings in December 2014 and November 2016 are illustrative[1], as is Germany's decision to refrain from deploying a Bundeswehr contingent to participate in the Swedish Armed Forces' largest national exercise, Aurora 17 (September 2017). At the same time, the Bundeswehr made a substantial and operationally significant contribution to the NATO exercise Trident Juncture 18 (October—November 2018) in Norway [12].

However, positions that Germany had considered unacceptable in the mid-2010s came to be regarded as possible in the late 2010s, realistic at the turn of the decade, and necessary in the early 2020s. An illustrative example is the evolution of Germany's approach to deploying a military presence in the region, which created an evident security challenge for the Kaliningrad region and the broader north-west of the Russian Federation, as well as for its ally Belarus [30; 31].

In 2014, the FRG refrained from active participation in military training activities in the Baltic States. From January 2017, however, Germany assumed the role of framework nation for the NATO multinational battlegroup in Lithuania, with rotating Bundeswehr contingents. By February 2022, Germany had already expanded its contribution, and in June 2022, Berlin announced its decision to gradually upgrade this formation to brigade level. In November 2023, it was decided that the brigade would be stationed on a permanent basis, would consist predominantly of German personnel, and would be designated under Bundeswehr command (the 45th Armoured Brigade). The existing multinational battlegroup remained an integral component of this formation [15].

North of the Baltic Sea, Germany's approach evolved in a manner similar to that observed in the southern part of the region. In March 2019, the third round of N3+1 talks was held in Helsinki. The participants demonstrated solidarity in containing not only the Russian Federation but also China, and jointly rejected pressure on the EU exerted by the first Trump administration.[2] The negotiating

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[1] Außenminister Steinmeier lädt Außenminister Dänemarks, Finnlands und Schwedens nach Berlin ein, 2016, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 07.11.2016, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/161107-bm-dk-fin-swe/284942 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Europe United: International geschlossen auftreten, 2019, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 19.03.2019, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/zusammenarbeit-staaten/maas-aussenpolitik-europa-daenemark-schweden-finnland-/2200644 (accessed 19.11.2025).

agenda demonstrated the trusting relationship between Germany and its trio of Nordic partners, particularly Sweden. The third meeting in the N3 + 1 format proved to be the final one.

In August 2019, the N5 + 1 format convened for the first time at the highest level[1] and in October 2019, at the level of foreign ministers.[2] The de facto replacement of one platform with another demonstrated not only the general strengthening of Germany's position in the region, but also the fact that it ceased to differentiate contacts with regional players based on their membership in the EU and NATO. This indirectly indicated that the FRG was beginning to view Stockholm's entry into the Alliance as acceptable.

Readiness for joining the Alliance gradually increased and began to be openly articulated in the spring of 2022, with the launch of the special military operation serving as the immediate catalyst. By that time, governments led by Social Democrats were in power in both countries. In Germany, this was the "grand coalition" under Olaf Scholz (with the participation of the CDU/CSU), while in Sweden it was the cabinet of Magdalena Andersson. The first talks between the two leaders took place in Berlin on 28 March 2022. In their public statements, they did not explicitly raise the issue of Sweden's abandonment of its policy of non-alignment. However, the Chancellor noted, "We [Germany] have obligations to our NATO partners. There is a very specific clause on mutual assistance, but also, of course, to all the others with whom we are part of the EU."[3]Accordingly, Olaf Scholz viewed cooperation in the field of security and defence under the auspices of the European Union as necessary but insufficient, demonstrating the advantage of simultaneous membership in NATO.

Olaf Scholz held his next meeting with Margaret Andersson on May 3, 2022, at his residence in Meseberg. The Chancellor emphasised that Germany viewed Sweden (and Finland) as close partners and closely followed the discussions on joining NATO.[4] With this statement, Scholz acknowledged that Stockholm had consistently signalled its readiness to fully abandon its policy of non-alignment,

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[1] Bundeskanzlerin besucht Island, 2019, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 20.08.2019, URL: https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/merkel-in-island-1661974 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Maas und die Nordics: Gemeinsam den Multilateralismus stärken, 2019, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 17.10.2019, URL: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/maas-nordische-botschaften/2258252 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[3] Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und der Ministerpräsidentin des Königreichs Schweden Andersson zu ihrem Besuch in Berlin am 28. März 2022, 2022, Bundeskanzleramt, 28.03.2022, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-der-ministerpraesidentin-des-koenigreichs-schweden-andersson-zu-ihrem-besuch-in-berlin-am-28-maerz-2022-2021168 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[4] Pressestatements von Bundeskanzler Scholz, der finnischen Ministerpräsidentin Marin und der schwedischen Ministerpräsidentin Andersson am 3. Mai 2022 in Schloss Meseberg, 2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 03.05.2022, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-der-finnischen-ministerpraesidentin-marin-und-der-schwedischen-ministerpraesidentin-andersson-am-3-mai-2022-in-schloss-meseberg-2030188 (accessed 19.11.2025).

a move supported by Germany. Both key meetings took place in Germany, rather than alternating between the two countries. This reflects Germany's role as the senior partner in the dialogue, in many respects acting as a facilitator for its formerly conditionally neutral partner in the process of integration into NATO. Sweden and Finland officially submitted their applications to join the Alliance on May 18, 2025.[1] On the eve, Germany published a national statement of support for the actions of these two Scandinavian states, calling their decisions sovereign.[2]

Germany was among the first NATO countries to ratify its accession and began to demonstrate solidarity with Sweden in every possible way, even as Turkey and Hungary spoke out against Sweden's early entry into the Alliance [21; 22]. For the liberal establishments in Germany and Sweden, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán were regarded as ideological opponents within the Western community.

On 15 August 2022, the second round of N5+1 talks at the highest level was held in Norway. The convening of this meeting, its agenda, centred on expressing support for Sweden amid delays in its accession to NATO, and the bilateral talks between Olaf Scholz and Magdalena Andersson held the following day in Stockholm all point in the same direction. Taken together, these developments indicate Germany's heightened attention to Sweden and suggest that one of the principal objectives of the N5+1 format, which replaced N3+1 in 2019, was to facilitate Stockholm's decision to abandon its policy of non-alignment.

Despite the high frequency of face-to-face meetings at the highest level, the heads of government of Germany and Sweden discussed the explosion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline on September 26, 2022, only in a video conference format together with the prime ministers of Denmark, Norway and the NATO Secretary General. This attack was recognised as a terrorist one, but remained a peripheral issue in the interstate dialogue.

The change of government in Sweden did not adversely affect its dialogue with Germany. Following the Riksdag elections, the Moderate Coalition Party, led by Ulf Kristersson, took office in October 2022. At bilateral talks held in Berlin in March 2023, the Chancellor reaffirmed Germany's continued support for Sweden's accession to NATO. Scholz and Kristersson also coordinated efforts to supply military equipment to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, particularly tanks and air defence systems, and discussed further measures to advance EU integration for Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Western Balkan countries. The substance of these discussions reflected Germany's confidence in Sweden's accession to the Alliance, as well as the importance it attached to intensifying efforts to extend the EU's influence in the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav regions.

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[1] Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO, 2022, *NATO*, 18.05.2022, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Nationale Erklärung Deutschlands zum NATO-Beitrittsbegehren Finnlands und Schwedens, 2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 17.05.2022, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/nationale-erklaerung-deutschlands-zum-nato-beitrittsbegehren-finnlands-und-schwedens-2040396 (accessed 19.11.2025).

By the spring of 2024, Turkey and Hungary had withdrawn their objections, and on 7 March, Sweden officially joined NATO. Just two months later, in May 2024, the third N5 + 1 meeting at the highest level was held in Stockholm.[1] Meetings in this format were held shortly after Sweden's application to join NATO and again following the completion of its accession, rather than during the intervening period, which further confirms the functional focus of the N5 + 1. As in August 2022, the six-party meeting was followed the next day by bilateral German — Swedish talks, underscoring the high level of trust in the dialogue and Sweden's importance in Germany's strategic planning. At the same time, Germany remained Sweden's largest trading partner.

The May 2024 negotiations focused less on Sweden's accession itself and more on coordinating concrete measures of cooperation in the new strategic context, particularly with a view to turning the Baltic Sea into an "internal lake" of the Alliance. This agenda, including coordination related to the launch of the new NATO mission Baltic Sentry, was further elaborated at the highest-level talks in January 2025 [32]. The parties also continued to align their positions on support for Ukraine and on the further strengthening of deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.[2]

These priorities remained unchanged under the Friedrich Merz government (CDU/CSU and SPD), which was formed on 6 May 2025 following the Bundestag elections in February. Just three weeks after taking office, Merz held talks in the N5 + 1 format (this time in Finland)[3]. This confirmed the importance of the Northern European dimension in German foreign policy. Cooperation with Sweden has acquired particular significance for Germany. Sweden has been rapidly increasing not only its defence spending but also the size of its armed forces, making it the only regional actor to pursue both trends simultaneously.

Germany and Sweden's approaches to increasing their military power

The militarisation strategies of Berlin and Stockholm are fundamentally similar, although they differ in certain tactical aspects. Each country has traditionally drawn on the other's experience in military force development. Until the early 2020s, this dynamic was primarily one-sided, with Sweden learning from Germany [16]. Subsequently, however, the reverse pattern became evident: faced with persistent constraints on expanding the Bundeswehr, Germany began to draw lessons from Sweden's substantial increase in troop numbers following the reintroduction of conscription in 2017.

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[1] Mehr als nur Nachbarn, 2024, Bundeskanzleramt, 13.05.2024, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kanzler-nordischer-rat-stockholm-2281682 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Infrastruktur schützen, Ukraine unterstützen, 2025, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 17.01.2025, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/bk-kristersson-2330794 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[3] Partnerschaft zwischen Deutschland und „Nordic 5" richtungsweisend für EU, 2025, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 27.05.2025, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pk-merz-finnland-2350434 (accessed 19.11.2025).

Neither country possesses nuclear weapons; consequently, their armed forces are entirely conventional. Over the quarter century following the end of the Cold War, both Germany and Sweden consistently reduced their force levels. By the mid-2010s, their armed forces were relatively compact and structurally balanced. Both countries have traditionally maintained strong air and naval forces, equipped largely with domestically designed and produced aircraft and vessels, while their land forces were reduced to a minimum. As a result, both the Bundeswehr and the Swedish Armed Forces faced the risk of a critical erosion of combat capability [33].

This problem became particularly evident in the context of the growing military commitments assumed by Berlin and Stockholm as confrontation with Russia intensified. By the late 2010s, both states had already recognised the need to significantly expand their land forces. Since the early 1990s, the army had been the primary target of reductions in both the German and Swedish armed forces.

From the early 2020s onwards, the imperative of a rapid, large-scale rebuild of land capabilities became even more pronounced. Developments in the special military operation underscored the continuing centrality of land forces in modern warfare, even as their technological profile has evolved significantly. Accordingly, for both Germany and Sweden, plans and measures to expand land force structures have become a key indicator of their broader militarisation strategies.

Despite the evident disparity in the overall size of their armed forces, Germany and Sweden occupied broadly comparable positions relative to other major European NATO and EU states. In Germany's case, the relevant comparators are the largest countries— the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Poland. For Sweden, the reference group comprises the other Northern European states (Denmark, Norway, and Finland; Iceland is excluded, as it does not maintain standing armed forces).

In 2014, the Bundeswehr had a smaller personnel strength than the armed forces of France and Italy, but exceeded that of the United Kingdom, as shown in Table 1. At the same time, in terms of population (81.7 million), Germany significantly outpaced each of these countries (66.5 million, 60.2 million, and 65.1 million, respectively).

Table 1

Military personnel in major European NATO countries, 2014—2024, thousands

State	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024*
UK	168,7	141,4	139,5	149,4	146,6	144,0	147,3	148,2	143,6	138,1	138,1
Germany	178,8	177,2	177,9	179,8	181,5	183,8	183,9	183,9	183,2	181,7	185,6
Italy	183,5	178,4	176,3	174,6	174,1	176,4	173,4	170,3	170,0	170,7	171,4
Poland	99,0	98,9	101,6	105,3	109,5	113,1	116,2	166,8	176,0	206,5	216,1
France	207,0	204,8	208,1	208,2	208,2	207,8	207,6	207,6	207,1	205,3	204,7

The source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014—2024), 2025, Brussels, *NATO*, p. 13.

Note: * data for 2024 are preliminary.

As shown in Table 2, the Swedish Armed Forces were smaller than those of Denmark, Norway, and Finland, with Finland's armed forces being more than twice as large. At the same time, in terms of population, Sweden (9.8 million) significantly exceeded the other Northern European countries (5.7 million, 5.2 million, and 5.5 million, respectively).

Table 2

The number of armed forces of the Northern European states, thousands

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024*	2025*
Denmark	16,9	17,2	17,3	16,7	17,1	16,3	16,9	16,9	16,7	17,3	17,3	17,3
Norway	21,0	20,9	20,5	20,2	20,2	19,2	20,6	23,1	23,5	24,0	24,3	24,8
Finland	32,5	31,0	31,3	31,0	31,8	31,1	31,3	31,1	30,5	31,0	30,8	30,8
Sweden	14,7	15,0	15,0	15,9	17,8	19,1	20,1	21,1	20,9	21,5	23,1	24,9

The source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014—2024), 2025, Brussels, *NATO*, p. 13.

Note: * data for 2024 and 2025 are preliminary.

However, despite this lagging position, Germany and Sweden have outlined very ambitious plans to increase the size of their armed forces. Since June 2022, the top leadership of Germany — first Chancellor Olaf Scholz and then Friedrich Merz[1] — have consistently declared the goal of transforming the Bundeswehr into the largest conventional armed forces among the European NATO member states. The Bundeswehr should grow to at least 260 thousand active-duty personnel and 200 thousand reservists in the medium term.[2] Between 2014 and 2023, the size of the Bundeswehr fluctuated, recording both increases and decreases, but overall grew only marginally, by approximately 2 %, as shown in Table 1. From 2024 onwards, the German Ministry of Defence has declared a transition to sustained growth. The key issue, however, concerns the pace of expansion. To recruit an additional 80,000 personnel by the mid-2030s, Berlin has been exploring options for reinstating compulsory military service. Since 2011, conscription has not been formally abolished, but has remained suspended in practice. Its reintroduction is intended not only to increase overall force levels and the reserve component but also to expand the pool of potential professional recruits.

By 2025, in terms of active-duty personnel, Germany had already surpassed both the United Kingdom, which was experiencing a marked reduction in force levels, and Italy, where the decline was more gradual. The French armed forces,

[1] Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Friedrich Merz, 2025, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 14.05.2025, URL: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-friedrich-merz-2347888 (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Eckpunkte für neuen Wehrdienst: Sechs Monate Dienstzeit, 260.000 Aktive, 2025, *Augen geradeaus*, 04.07.2025, URL: https://augengeradeaus.net/2025/07/eckpunkte-fuer-neuen-wehrdienst-sechs-monate-dienstzeit-260-000-aktive/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

by contrast, remained broadly stable in size (see Table 1). The Bundeswehr, particularly in the event of the reintroduction of conscription, has the potential to exceed these levels.

At the same time, this objective is considerably more difficult to achieve in relation to Poland, whose armed forces have outpaced Germany in both the rate of force expansion and interim force levels. The target force size announced by Poland, up to 300,000 personnel [9, p. 64—66], exceeds Germany's stated objectives. However, this figure is likely to include reservists undergoing short-term training. Germany has likewise begun to reinstate this practice. Germany's stated objective of maintaining one of the largest force structures among NATO member states, ranking third after the United States and Turkey, reflects its broader leadership ambitions, particularly within the European pillar of the Alliance.

Sweden pursues comparable ambitions, albeit at the regional level, specifically in Northern Europe. Unlike Berlin, Stockholm has not set explicit end-state force targets. At the same time, a further expansion of conscription intake is planned, from 7,000 personnel in 2023 to 10,000 by 2030 and 12,000 by 2032.[1] This trajectory is expected to raise Swedish active-duty strength to at least 27,000 personnel by the early 2030s, based on the data in Table 2, with total force levels projected to reach 30,000—35,000 by the end of the decade. By the mid-2020s, the Swedish Armed Forces had already surpassed those of Denmark, where force levels remained stable, and Norway, where a modest reduction was followed by only limited recovery. Over the longer term, Sweden may also surpass Finland, whose force levels have shown little change since its accession to NATO (see Table 2).

The reintroduction of conscription in 2017 enabled Stockholm to establish new military formations, primarily within the ground forces and closely related supporting units. Sweden has already increased the garrison on Gotland since 2018,[2] established two new infantry regiments and an additional amphibious regiment in 2021- January 2022.[3] In 2025, the Swedish army already formed its first subarctic mechanised brigade in the 19th Norrbotten Regiment.[4] In practice, Germany moved along this path noticeably more slowly.

Plans to deploy what is effectively the first new brigade of the Bundeswehr, the 45th Tank Brigade based in Lithuania, were announced in June 2022 and elaborated in November 2023. Formally established in April 2025, the brigade is expected to be fully staffed by 2027, with personnel drawn primarily from

[1] Försvarsutskottets betänkande 2024/25. Totalförsvaret 2025—2030, 2024, Stockholm, *Riksdag*, s. 38.

[2] Gotland regiment, 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/gotland-regiment-p-18/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

[3] Dalarna Regiment (I 13), 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/dalarna-regiment-i-13/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

[4] Norrbotten Regiment (I 19), 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/norrbotten-regiment-i-19/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

existing battalions and redistributed across other brigades.[1] The Bundeswehr did not field its first newly established battalion until October 2025, and this was an artillery unit rather than an armoured or mechanised infantry formation. Consequently, Germany's efforts in this area lagged seven years behind those of Sweden.

With regard to recruiting additional personnel, Germany, as a long-standing member of NATO, has been slower to respond than Sweden, which maintained a policy of non-alignment until 2024. This difference is commonly attributed to Sweden's reliance on its own capabilities, reflected in its adherence to the concept of 'total defence'.

The two countries have followed broadly similar trajectories in the growth of defence expenditure. Berlin began to increase spending sharply in 2020, while Stockholm did so in 2021 (see Table 3), meaning that both countries increased their military spending prior to the start of the special military operation (SMO). By 2025, Germany had become the leading European member of NATO in absolute defence expenditure, approaching 100 billion US dollars (В какой валюте? Точно миллиард? миллиардов долларов США) and reaching 2 % of GDP. In turn, Sweden had surpassed all other Northern European countries in absolute military spending by 2024 and, in relative terms, had significantly exceeded the 2 % threshold (over 2.3 %). Both countries have expressed confidence in their ability to reach the 3.5 % target by 2030, in line with decisions adopted at the NATO Summit 2025.

Table 3

Military expenditures of Germany and Sweden, million dollars

State	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024*
Germany	46 176	39 833	41 606	45 470	49 772	52 549	58 652	62 054	61 045	73 138	93 747
Sweden	6205	5103	5017	5229	5396	5560	5984	9071	8562	9849	13 967

The source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014—2024), 2025, Brussels, *NATO*, p. 8.

Note: * data for 2024 are preliminary.

Armed Forces Cooperation: NATO's Forward Presence in the Scandinavian-Baltic region

Like Sweden, Germany has sought to play an active role in the manning of NATO's multinational formations in the mid-2020s and has fully supported an approach emphasi-sing the deployment of ground forces. Most of these formations have been multinational, at least de jure, and have gradually acquired a joint

[1] Die Bundeswehr hat eine neue Brigade, 2025, *Bundeswehr*, 01.04.2025, URL: https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/heer/aktuelles/deutsche-panzerbrigade-45-litauen-indienststellung-5927738 (accessed 19.11.2025).

character, with units from other service branches, primarily special forces and unmanned aerial systems, being integrated into their structure. Accordingly, since the early 2020s, the core of the Alliance's Forward Presence has been understood to consist of the Forward Land Forces (FLF).[1] The key element of the NATO Response Force was the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The land component has remained central within the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), which replaced the NRF on 1 July 2024 and is regarded as significantly more mobile [2, p. 3—4]. The ARF is also intended to deploy rapidly from the depth of its area of responsibility to priority areas along its eastern flank.

Germany has sought to increase its contribution to the manning of the full range of the aforementioned NATO force groupings, whereas Sweden has focused primarily on participation in the Alliance's Forward Presence formations. This divergence is largely explained by differences in the size of their armed forces. The Bundeswehr is nearly an order of magnitude larger, and this gap is expected to persist for the foreseeable future (with planned active personnel figures of approximately 260,000 and 35,000, respectively).

Under contemporary conditions, neither state bordered the Alliance's area of responsibility, and both could therefore potentially play an active role in the NATO Response Force and the Allied Reaction Force. Stockholm demonstrated interest in participation from the onset of confrontation with the Russian Federation in 2014 until its accession to the Alliance in 2024. This appears to reflect the fact that the principles governing the manning of NATO Forward Presence did not envisage extensive participation by partner states, that is, countries not formally part of the Alliance. By contrast, such participation was possible within the framework of the NATO Response Force.

After joining NATO, Stockholm set its priorities differently. The new key priority is to send significant contingents to the multilateral FLF formations, specifically those located in the territories that were part of Sweden during the era of its greatest prosperity (1611—1721). As early as January 2025, Sweden deployed a tank battalion to the NATO battlegroup in Latvia, which was being expanded to brigade level, with Canada serving as the "framework" nation.[2]

Sweden has expressed its willingness to assume a similar role for a multinational NATO formation scheduled to be established in Lapland in 2026. The core of the brigade, composed primarily of Swedish units, is expected to be stationed there [34]. Key measures to expand the Swedish Army are aimed at fulfilling these commitments. By 2026, a sub-arctic tank brigade had been established on the basis of the Norrbotten Regiment, which is intended to form the nucleus of the Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Lapland.[3] It represents the vanguard, behind which, in Sweden itself, it is planned to deploy another subarctic Tank Brigade

[1] Strengthening NATO's eastern flank, 2025, *NATO*, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] Historic Swedish force arrives in Latvia, 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, 18.01.2025, URL: https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/news/2025/01/historic-swedish-force-arrives-in-latvia/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

[3] Norrbotten Regiment (I 19), 2025, Försvarsmakten, URL: https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/norrbotten-regiment-i-19/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

(apparently based on the 4th Tank Regiment, which is permanently stationed in the south of the country) and a regiment of mountain rangers (Norrland).[1] The 7th South Skåne Tank Regiment has also begun to be reorganised into a brigade. This unit is responsible for providing a rotational contribution to the NATO multinational battlegroup south of Riga. This multinational formation is expected to operate in coordination with Swedish forces in southern mainland Sweden, namely the remaining elements of the 7th Tank Brigade[2] and especially on Gotland Island (a battle group based on the 18th Tank Regiment).[3] In total, Sweden deployed three brigades and one battlegroup (an understrength brigade), amounting to four formations, all of them heavy in equipment.[4] Each of these formations is intended to contribute to or reinforce NATO's Forward Presence. A limited number of regiments, predominantly light formations, remain outside this framework, although some may be designated for future contribution to the Allied Reaction Force.

To man the NATO Response Force, and subsequently the Allied Reaction Force, Germany allocated a full division, the 1st Tank Division, comprising three heavy brigades, as early as the beginning of the 2020s. A further division, the 10th Tank Division, comprising approximately two and a half brigades, was designated for the operational reinforcement of the Alliance's Forward Presence within NATO's area of responsibility. This division also includes the 45th Tank Brigade of the Bundeswehr, deployed in Lithuania as a Forward Land Forces (FLF) formation.

The underlying concept is comparable to that employed by Sweden for its NATO formation in Lapland. Notably, within NATO's Forward Presence, only two states have established their own brigades as de jure multinational FLF battlegroups: Germany and Sweden. In this context, it is reasonable to suggest that the Swedish Armed Forces drew on the German model, implemented in Lithuania, when shaping the configuration of its ground presence in northern Finland.

By reserving substantial forces for the potential reinforcement of this forward-deployed brigade, a formation centred on the 4th Tank Regiment, an Arctic mountain infantry unit, Sweden appears to have adopted operational patterns similar to those of Germany, where the 10th Tank Division serves as the principal reinforcement for the 45th Tank Brigade. This reflects a high level of bilateral coordination in aligning national force postures with the requirements of NATO's Forward Presence and the operational framework governing the FLF.

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[1] Försvarsutskottets betänkande 2024/25. Totalförsvaret 2025—2030, 2025, Stockholm, *Riksdag*, s. 38, URL: https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/beTankande/totalforsvaret-2025-2030_hc01f%C3%B6u2/html/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

[2] South Skåne Regiment, 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/south-skane-regiment-p-7/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

[3] Krigsorganisationens utveckling 2025—2035, 2025, Stockholm: *Försvarsmakten*, 05.06.2024, s. 2.

[4] Ibid.

Given the vast expanse of the Scandinavian—Baltic region, Germany and Sweden have geographically distributed responsibilities for the employment of their ground forces in a manner that is mutually complementary. Sweden has assumed responsibilities along two axes in the central sector: northern Finland (where no multinational NATO formations were deployed in the south of the country) and Latvia. Germany, by contrast, has concentrated its efforts on the flanks, primarily in Lithuania. In addition, a contingent of the Bundeswehr has actively participated in Alliance exercises in the Arctic regions of Norway [12].

German—Swedish military cooperation is particularly evident in relation to the projection of pressure on the Kaliningrad region, an exclave of Russia [34], as well as on Belarus as a Russian ally [31]. Forces deployed in southern mainland Sweden, primarily the main brigade elements based on the 7th Tank Regiment, on Gotland, where a battlegroup is formed around the 18th Tank Regiment, and the Forward Land Forces (FLF) formation in Latvia, which includes a Swedish contingent, together form a coherent network of formations with the 45th Tank Brigade of the Bundeswehr. This brigade is deployed in proximity to the Suwalki Corridor.[1]

It is noteworthy that almost all of these troop formations, deployed on Gotland and in the territories of the two Baltic States, are located to the east of the Kaliningrad region, which may render their presence particularly sensitive from the perspective of the security of the Russian Federation. These units are likely to assume an increased role in the event of attempts to restrict access to this region.

Germany and Sweden have strengthened cooperation across the land, maritime, and air domains. The 1st Standing NATO Maritime Group (SNMG1) and the 1st Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group (SNMCMG1) have operated in the Baltic Sea and adjacent waters, with their composition maintained on a rotational basis. Since their establishment, Germany has been a consistent contributor to both formations, deploying vessels from the 1st Corvette Squadron and the 3rd Mine Countermeasures Squadron. Sweden, in turn, has contributed ships primarily from its 3rd and 4th Naval Flotillas, which have a mixed composition of corvettes and mine countermeasures vessels.

Since 2025, German—Swedish naval cooperation has developed along a third track, in addition to joint participation in SNMG1 and SNMCMG1, in connection with the launch of the Baltic Sentry mission [32]. This mission has included not only surface vessels but also submarines, thereby enabling bilateral cooperation between the 1st Submarine Squadron of the Bundeswehr and the 1st Submarine Flotilla of the Swedish Navy.

The annual BALTOPS exercises have played a significant role in enhancing overall interoperability between the navies of the two countries, including marine units and naval aviation. Sweden began participating in these exercises well before 2024 as a partner of NATO.

Germany deployed fighter aircraft to the Baltic Air Policing mission. Sweden likewise joined its rotational contributions upon accession to NATO.

[1] A narrow strip of land located along the border between Poland and Lithuania, which separates the Kaliningrad region and Belarus

Another dimension of cooperation between the armed forces of Germany and Sweden has been the coordinated deployment of military instructors to train personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, alongside the supply of various categories of military equipment to Ukraine. A key element of this cooperation has been the provision of Leopard 2A6 tanks by the Bundeswehr and their Swedish-modified variant, the Strv 122. Each country played a decisive role in training specific formations of the Ukrainian Armed Forces: Germany in the case of the 47th Mechanised Brigade, and Sweden in that of the 21st Brigade. Both formations were regarded as elite and played a significant role in Ukrainian offensive operations; however, by 2025, their combat potential had been noticeably degraded, despite repeated replenishment of personnel and equipment.

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Relations between Germany and Sweden are notable for the near absence of large-scale military conflict, including during the period of Prussian statehood. As a result, considerations of Berlin's historical responsibility towards Stockholm have largely been absent, which has had a noticeable impact on bilateral cooperation, particularly in the context of their parallel trajectories of militarisation.

Sweden's deepening cooperation with NATO, culminating in its accession to the Alliance a decade after the onset of confrontation between the West and Russia, has broadly aligned with Germany's gradual, consistent approach to deterrence. In this context, Germany has closely coordinated its strategic planning and practical measures with Sweden, as reflected in the N3 + 1 format (2014—2019), the subsequent N5 + 1 platform, and intensive highest-level bilateral contacts.

Taken together, these mechanisms have been sufficient to address the expanding range of issues in security and defence in a timely and effective manner. This is one of the reasons why the establishment of a formal intergovernmental consultation format appears unlikely in the foreseeable future. Another consideration is that such a step could be interpreted as de facto recognition by Germany of Sweden as the leading political actor in Northern Europe. This, in turn, could undermine Berlin's close relationship with Norway, which is of particular strategic importance given its geographical position, enabling European NATO members to project their presence into the Arctic from Norwegian territory.

At the same time, Berlin continues to view Stockholm as a key regional military contributor to the Alliance's activities.

Overall, Germany and Sweden have increasingly aligned their efforts in distributing the burden of manning NATO's multinational formations, particularly in the Scandinavian—Baltic region. This reflects both the scale of the tasks associated with the deterrence of Russia and the limited resources of the two states, especially in terms of personnel, as well as the high level of mutual trust between them. An additional factor is the shared intention to maximise the effectiveness of joint efforts to ensure a greater European role in the emerging international order.

The nature of current and planned military cooperation makes it possible to speak of mutual support for Sweden's efforts to become the principal contributor to the Alliance's formations in its immediate region, and for Germany's ambition to assume a leading role across Europe by demonstrating military capability.

The efforts of Germany and Sweden have contributed to the accelerated and large-scale Europeanisation of NATO's force structure, both in terms of personnel and financial commitments. On this issue, the positions of political elites in Berlin and Stockholm, broadly aligned with liberal democratic principles, have coincided with those of the Trump administration, despite broader ideological differences. Notably, during his second presidency, since January 2025, Donald Trump has expressed significantly less criticism of the Federal Republic of Germany than during his first term [36].

Cooperation between Germany and Sweden, which are not only actively pursuing a course of militarisation but are also combining it with a desire to further intensify deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, poses serious challenges to the security and defence of the northern and north-western regions of the Russian Federation. Of particular concern is cooperation between the Bundeswehr and Swedish forces in implementing, under the auspices of NATO, measures that could lead to attempts to restrict access to the Kaliningrad region and create the perception that the Baltic Sea constitutes an "internal lake" for the Alliance.

From Russia's perspective, it is appropriate to demonstrate continued resolve to prevent such a scenario, primarily through asymmetric means. In this context, particular importance is given to emphasising the ongoing technological modernisation of delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction and the readiness to employ them in the event of a threat to Russia's vital interests.

It is unlikely that a settlement of the Ukrainian conflict would lead European "liberal democracies" to significantly soften their approaches to deterrence of the Russian Federation or to agree to a partial reduction of NATO's forward presence. In such circumstances, a positive outcome could be the restoration of multilateral diplomatic coordination aimed at preventing the escalation of unintended incidents into a full-scale military conflict. The implementation of such measures in the Scandinavian—Baltic region would depend on the willingness of the foreign ministries of Germany and Sweden to engage in such efforts.

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IPVGIH

THE IMAGE OF RUSSIA IN SWEDISH NATIONAL-CONSERVATIVE DISCOURSE IN 2014—2024

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This paper examines the evolution of Swedish national-conservative discourse on Russia between 2014 and 2024, focusing specifically on the Sweden Democrats (SD) and their affiliated magazine Samtiden. Having become Sweden's second-largest political party, the SD effectively broke through the political 'cordon sanitaire' in the Riksdag prior to the 2022 elections. Throughout this process, the concept of the "Russian menace" played a pivotal role. Employing methodologies from historical and political imagology, the study analyzes the image of Russia within SD narratives and its transformation over time, as the party strategically invokes the "Russian menace" myth for political mobilization. Prior to 2014, the Sweden Democrats did not perceive Russia as an existential threat to Sweden — a position that clearly distinguished them from other Swedish right-wing actors, particularly the conservative Moderate Party (Moderaterna). Following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, however, the SD began reevaluating their stance. Before the 2018 Skripal case, both the party and its affiliated commentators largely framed Russia as a legitimate participant in the international order. Subsequently, their discourse gradually shifted toward more pronounced criticism of Russian foreign policy and political system. Since February 2022, the Sweden Democrats have actively employed the "Russian menace" narrative more intensively than any other Swedish political party. In doing so, they frequently reference arguments from historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars. These discursive developments have profoundly shaped the party's evolving position on Sweden's NATO membership and constitute a central pillar of its broader political messaging. Within this context, the "Russian menace" narrative has emerged as a cornerstone of the Sweden Democrats' political agenda.

Keywords:
Sweden, Sweden Democrats, Samtiden, Rysskräcken, Russian menace, national-conservatism, Russophobia

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Introduction

The perception of Russia in the public opinion of the Baltic region countries remains an acute problem for Russian foreign policy and, consequently, regional and European security. The sequence of events that took place between 2014 and 2024, coinciding with the emergence of an anti-Russian discourse during geopolitical transformations, exposed the existence of political and cultural Russophobia in multiple nations. A notable instance was that of Sweden, which exhibited a distinctive pattern due to its formal non-alignment policy before March 2024. Despite its "Freedom from Alliances" after 1814, Swedish society continues to refer to the "Russian menace" myth in its historical consciousness, despite its long-standing, multilateral relations with Russia. The myth appeared to be a part of Swedish scepticism towards Russia both before and after 1991. In 2022, Sweden revised its foreign policy strategy and submitted an application for membership in NATO, citing anti-Russian rhetoric and policy as a primary motivation. Before 2014, the *Sweden Democrats* Party had not articulated a particular stance toward Russia, in contrast to the positions adopted by the other Swedish political parties. This position underwent a shift, which was concomitant with the evolving dynamics between Sweden, NATO, and Russia.

The escalation of tensions between Russia and Sweden occurred during the final months of the *Moderaterna* government led by Fredrik Reinfeldt in 2014. Concurrently, deliberations concerning Sweden's potential accession to NATO emerged, with the notion of the "Russian menace" assuming a pivotal role in this discourse. The leading political parties in Sweden, for example, the Social Demiocratic Workers' Party, *Moderaterna*, and the *Sweden Democrats*, have expressed a range of opinions on NATO membership and Russia in general. These opinions have been articulated during the general elections of 2014, 2018, and 2022, as well as during parliamentary and expert debates [1]. Nevertheless, the "freedom from alliances" was not abolished, despite the expansion of cooperation between Sweden and NATO before 2022—2024.[1]

Following Russia's special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine in 2022, Sweden submitted its application for NATO membership, which was approved in March 2024, resulting in its full accession to the alliance. The dissemination of both historical and contemporary portrayals of "the Russian menace" within Swedish public discourse proved to be a pivotal element in this process. The *Moderaterna* and the *Sweden Democrats* have demonstrated a consistent stance on NATO membership and relations with Russia, maintaining a unified position that contrasts with their previous divergence. This shift in position is noteworthy, as it indicates a shift in their ideological stance, or lack thereof, on the matter of NATO membership.

The objective of the survey is to identify the primary components of the negative image of Russia that was established between 2014 and 2024 within the discourse of the national conservative party of Sweden, the *Sweden Democrats* (SD). The decision is associated with the shifts in the role of the SD in Swedish politics. According to the results of the Riksdag elections of 2014, 2018, and 2022, the *Sweden Democrats* emerged as the second largest faction in parliament.

[1] The term "Alliansfrihet" is a Swedish concept that refers to a non-alignment policy. The term literally translates to "freedom from any alliances." The concept cannot be considered a replacement for the "neutrality" concept.

The Tidö Agreement of October 14, 2022, between the *Moderaterna*, Liberal, and Christian Democratic parties, resulted in the dissolution of the "sanitary cordon" that had been imposed on the Swedish Democrats in the Riksdag. The *Sweden Democrats* exhibited a shift in their stance toward Russia during the period spanning from 2014 to 2024. Initially exhibiting indifference or partial support for Russia, the party has since adopted Russophobia as a fundamental tenet of its ideology and programme. The aforementioned changes have demonstrated the acceptance of the "Russian menace" myth and the formation of a specific version within the discourse of security policy. This shift in perspective has also influenced the position adopted on several pressing issues of Swedish foreign policy, including NATO accession.

Literature review

The dynamics of Russia's perception in Sweden have long been a subject of study among historians and political scientists. A fundamental study of Swedish perception of Russia throughout history is "The Russian Menace Towards Sweden: A View of Smaller Power Elites on Strategy During the Imperialism Era" by Gunnar Åselius [2]. Åselius's work is predicated on the "Russian menace" myth, a concept that gained traction in Swedish public opinion during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This myth served as a foundational archetype in the perception of Russia and Russians within the Swedish culture. The phenomenon under scrutiny in this study has been demonstrated to be intimately intertwined with the historical struggle for dominance over the Baltic Sea that transpired during the 16th—18th centuries. This dynamic relationship is further contextualised by the collapse of the Swedish Empire and the subsequent historical upheavals that befell the nation. Subsequently, Russia and Russians were perceived to pose an existential threat to Sweden, as evidenced by the nation's strategic culture and prevailing public opinion.

Works devoted to the strategic culture of Sweden continue this trend. Jakob Westberg's research focused on the role of "the Russian menace" as a mobilising factor in Swedish society and as a strategic imperative in Swedish foreign policy from 1815 to 2015 [3; 4]. The research conducted by Olof Kronvall and Magnus Petterson, which focused on the dynamics of the USSR and the USA's perception during the Cold War, yielded similar patterns of analysis [5]. Michael Nilsson opted for an alternative approach, focusing on the incorporation of Sweden into the U.S. strategy through the implementation of soft power policy [6]. Carl Marklund conducted a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of anti-American discourse in Sweden during the Olof Palme government from 1973 to 1986 [7].

Moreover, research focusing on Russia's image in Sweden has also addressed the subject of Sweden's accession to NATO. Political scientists and historians specialising in Swedish-Russian relations posit that the bilateral relationship is a pivotal element in the escalating collaboration between Sweden and NATO,[1] thereby necessitating a reevaluation of Sweden's national security strategy (Wahlbäck, Holmström, Blydal, Gyllensporre) [8—11]. In their analysis, Ohlsson and Wieslander examined the emergence of anti-Russian rhetoric in Sweden in the con-

[1] Holmström, M. 2016, "Säpo: Ryska agenter motarbetar på svensk mark", *Dagens Nyheter*, April 30, URL: https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/sapo-ryska-agentermotarbetar-pa-svensk-mark/ (accessed 02.06.2024).

text of the Ukrainian crisis that began in 2013 [12; 13]. It was determined that this outcome was made possible by the EU's "Eastern Partnership". The persistent negative image of Russia in Swedish society, as well as its integration into the new European and national security strategies, are also considered factors that have contributed to the deterioration of attitudes toward Russia and Swedish—Russian relations. (Brommerson, Eckengren, Michalski, Persson, Wildmalm, Savić, Ydén, Berndtsson) [14—17]. The collective work led by Jesper Strömsbäck and Lars Nord centred on the role of public opinion as a catalyst for national foreign policy in Sweden [18].

In the broader international context, the issue remains largely confined to comparative analyses of the superpowers' perceptions in Scandinavian countries (Roslyng-Jensen) [19]; Scandinavian security issues (Pettersson) [20]; Swedish policy towards the Baltic States and their secession from the USSR in 1988—1991 (Kuldkepp) [21]. In this context, scholars analyse attitudes toward Russia through the lens of criticism of Soviet and Russian foreign policy. Moreover, the issue is examined within the framework of several research questions, including the relationship between Swedish and Finnish participation in the European security system outside NATO until 2022 (Forsberg, Vaahtoranta) and after Sweden and Finland were admitted to the Alliance (Alberque, Schreer); as well as the role of Arctic security issues in tensions between Russia and NATO (Odgaard, Depledge).

Russian historians and political scientists have examined the image of Russia in Sweden, focusing on the myth of the "Russian menace," which has persisted for centuries (Zaretskaya). Additionally, Voronov has explored the concept of "traumas" in Swedish historical consciousness, examining their connection with the contemporary image of Russia [27; 28]. As indicated in the works cited, the phenomenon known as the "Poltava Syndrome" refers to the decline of the Swedish Empire and the subsequent shift in Swedish Baltic supremacy. These works also address the role of historical memory and historical policy in the context of Sweden. Furthermore, the scholars have analysed the cultivation of a negative attitude toward Russian statehood, based on the aforementioned myths, across various periods. In the context of right-wing discourse, criticism directed towards Russia has been identified as a part of a strategy for mobilisation.

In addition, Russian scholars have examined the role of right-wing populism in the transformation of European political systems, particularly in the Nordic countries (Okuneva, Tevdoy-Burmulli) [29]. They have also explored the impact of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013 on the perception of Russia and the policies directed towards it in Northern Europe (Vorotnikov) [30]. Research on this topic has also been conducted in collaboration between Russian and Swedish political scientists (Simons, Manoilo, Trunov) [31].

Methodology and methods

The study was conducted using materials such as articles published in the online media outlet *Samtiden*, which is affiliated with the *Sweden Democrats*. Party members serve as its editors and columnists, and the publication functions as a platform for promoting the party's agenda. It also collaborates with historians, political scientists, and specialists in international relations, thereby shaping and reinforcing the party's ideological position in public discourse. Furthermore, *Samtiden* publishes reviews of works on the history of Sweden and Swedish-

Russian relations.[1] *Samtiden* provides information, critical reviews and discussions on party agendas, global and national issues. Thirty-five essays published on the *Samtiden* portal were analysed. They are devoted to the role of Russia in world history and politics. The second source of data is the official website of the *Sweden Democrats*, which contains the party's programmes and speeches delivered by its leaders.[2]

The study is based on historical and political imagology approaches, as the constructed image of the "other" has become an important subject of analysis. Ethnostereotypes and perceptions of previous experiences of bilateral relations are shaped by the broader political context. These components are exposed via the dichotomy of "me and the other" through symbolic interaction and the immanent perception of the state as part of "me" and the other state as part of "the other," as well as the mission of "my" state [32]. The perception of "the other" also impacts personal identity in a changing world [33].

The main emphasis in the image of Russia and its behaviour in international relations, particularly towards Sweden, is the difference in political and strategic culture, as well as rivalry and the struggle for dominance in the Baltic Sea region. The survey conducted through discourse analysis reveals how the following concepts are redefined and implemented in Swedish national conservative discourse: "authoritarianism," "empire," "nationalism," and "Russian threat".

Russia in the world politics within the discourse of the Sweden Democrats (2014—2024)

Swedish-Russian relations began to deteriorate during the initial phase of the Ukrainian crisis from 2013 to 2014, which coincided with the final months of Fredrik Reinfeldt's *Moderaterna* Party cabinet. At the same time, the *Sweden Democrats* gained stronger positions, becoming the second largest party in the Riksdag after the 2022 general election. Furthermore, on October 14, 2022, the right-wing parties, including the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, agreed to sign the Tidö Agreement on a parliamentary coalition.[3]

During the 2022 general elections, the *Sweden Democrats* excessively referred to the "Russian menace" image. Nonetheless, over the previous eight years, active discussion took place on the pages of *Samtiden*, involving party members, columnists, historians, and specialists in international relations. They presented different perspectives on Russia's role in world politics. This debate contributed to the formation of Russia's image by 2022 and was closely connected to Sweden's prospective membership in NATO.

In the 2014 party programme, *the Sweden Democrats* did not present Russia as a hostile state. During the Riksdag legislature from 2014 to 2018, *Samtiden* published articles by the *SD*-affiliated columnists that welcomed Russian foreign policy initiatives, such as fighting against the "Islamic State" (a terrorist organ-

[1] Samtiden, 2025, URL: https://samtiden.nu/om-oss/ (accessed 12.08.2024).

[2] Sverigedemokraterna, 2925, URL: https://sd.se/ (accessed 12.08.2024).

[3] Överenskommelse för Sverige, 2022, Tidöavtalet, 14.10.2022, *Liberalerna*, URL: https://moderaterna.se/app/uploads/2022/10/Tidoavtalet-Overenskommelse-for-Sverige.pdf (accessed 26.06.2024).

isation banned in Russia) and radical Islamism in general;[1] supporting dialogue on European security issues aimed at further détente in the Baltic Sea area, particularly through the Council of the Baltic Sea States.[2] The *SD* condemned the "excessive and unfair scepticism" towards Russia, given that the country is a permanent guarantor of world security.[3]

Moreover, the *SD*-affiliated columnists agreed with President Donald Trump's preference for dealing with Russia rather than the EU. They presented his position under the motto "Shame on Europe" and condemned the anti-Trump campaigns, portraying the United States as "the country that saved Europe from Nazism and communism."[4] Nevertheless, the *Samtiden* columnists claimed that the ideal role for Russia would be to engage in "a constructive Russian-American dialogue" and "joint efforts to provide global stability," despite the low chance of this occurring. The *SD* leaders claimed that maintaining a dialogue with Moscow is crucial for détente in the Baltic Sea region, Europe, and the world.[5]

The *SD*'s criticism of Russia was accompanied by discussions about Sweden's possible cooperation with NATO. *Samtiden* addressed the issue of recognising Crimea as part of Russia and the status of the Donbass region, using them to justify Sweden's tentative cooperation with NATO, referencing the "traumatic" experiences of Finland and the Baltic States with the USSR. In this way, Russia was portrayed as follows: "Russia only understands force in international relations, not talks about humanitarian superpowers and feminism." This was all connected to criticising the UN and Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström for being "inactive".[6]

Following accusations that Russia had launched cyberattacks aimed at interfering in the 2016 US presidential election, the *Sweden Democrats'* discourse began referring to the "Russian menace" more frequently.[7] The *SD* columnists portrayed the emergence of the BRICS countries in the world economy as "a factor downgraded by corruption and slow democratic reforms".[8] According to the *Sweden Democrats*, the Russian government employed disinformation campaigns as

[1] 2016 — hopp och förtvivlan, 2025, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/01/2016-hopp-och-fortvivlan/ (accessed 27.06.2024) ; Donald Trump har rätt om Syrien, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/10/donald-trump-har-ratt-om-syrien/ (accessed 27.06.2024).

[2] Oberoende utredare vägleder de osäkra om Nato, 2016, Samtiden, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/08/oberoende-utredare-vagleder-de-osakra-om-nato/ (accessed 20.06.2024).

[3] Ny världsordning med Donald Trump, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/11/ny-varldsordning-med-donald-trump/ (accessed 20.06.2024).

[4] Trump avskyr Europas eliter så som de avskyr honom, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2018/07/trump-avskyr-europas-eliter-sa-som-de-avskyr-honom/ (accessed 21.06.2024).

[5] Oberoende utredare vägleder de osäkra om Nato, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/08/oberoende-utredare-vagleder-de-osakra-om-nato/ (accessed 24.06.2024).

[6] Nato är det bästa alternativet, 2026, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/05/nato-ar-det-basta-alternativet/ (accessed 25.04.2023) ; Meningslös seger i FN, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/06/meningslos-seger-fn/ (accessed 27.06.2024).

[7] Cybersäkerhet i fokus efter ryska attacker, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/12/cybersakerhet-fokus-efter-ryska-attacker/ (accessed 25.06.2024).

[8] Årskrönika: Väst dominerar världen också 2017, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/12/arskronika-vast-dominerar-varlden-ocksa-2017/ (accessed 25.06.2024).

a means to undermine the cohesion of the Western bloc, thereby creating a negative environment in Sweden. The political party exploited the issue to its advantage, utilising it as a means of attacking its opponents from the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party. These opponents were accused of creating a breach in national security and providing assistance to Russian influence agents.[1]

Consequently, the *Sweden Democrats* initiated the development of a thesis on Russia as a revanchist country. The party advanced the hypothesis that revanchism had gained popularity in Russia due to a "failed comeback to Europe," which they attributed to a perceived lack of a consistent course by Boris Yeltsin. They further speculated that the United States and the EU actions between 1991 and 2014, characterised by a perceived shift in their soft power toward the East, contributed to this perception. According to the *SD*, the aforementioned factors contributed to the emergence of anti-Western political sentiment in Moscow, which subsequently manifested as unrest and a shift in geopolitical orientation towards the East.[2] The aforementioned factors were portrayed as a threat to Sweden: the Georgian and Ukrainian crises, in conjunction with the escalating Russian military presence in the Baltic Sea region, were presented as evidence of a negative stance toward Russia.[3] The term "hypocritical" was used to describe the position of national elites within the European Union, who criticised Russia while continuing to engage in commercial activities with it, as illustrated by Germany's active trade relations with Moscow. This characterisation aligns with the perspective of Donald Trump.[4]

Following the Skripal incident, the leader of the *Sweden Democrats*, Jimmie Åkesson, publicly declared that Russia posed a threat to Sweden. The issue of foreign intervention in the US presidential elections, for example, from Russia, was referred to as an internal American "witch hunt."[5] These statements emerged during the period of preparations for the 2018 Riksdag elections, thereby indicating that the anti-Russian agenda was integrated into the *SD* programme and discourses.

Subsequently, the *SD* called to prohibit Russia from exercising its vote in the Council of Europe, a decision that was precipitated by the ongoing Ukrainian affairs;[6] condemned the invitations sent to representatives of Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, also referring to these countries as "murdering regimes";[7] en-

[1] Varning för falska nyheter! 2017, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2017/01/varning-falska-nyheter/ (accessed 25.04.2024).

[2] Hur agera när Ryssland söker revansch? 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/12/hur-agera-nar-ryssland-soker-revansch/ (accessed 25.06.2024).

[3] Räcker Sveriges underfinansierade försvar mot krigshot i Östersjöområdet? 2017, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2017/07/racker-sveriges-underfinansierade-forsvar-mot-krigshot-ostersjoomradet/ (accessed 25.06.2024) ; Försvarsmakten behöver pengar akut, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2018/02/forsvarsmakten-behover-pengar-akut/ (accessed 25.04.2024).

[4] Trump är oförskämd nog att säga sanningar, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2018/07/trump-ar-oforskamd-nog-att-saga-sanningar/ (accessed 25.06.2024).

[5] Ryssutredningen var en grundlös häxjakt, 2019, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2019/04/ryssutredningen-var-en-grundlos-haxjakt/ (accessed 25.05.2024).

[6] Löfven hårt pressad om EU:s sociala pelare, 2019, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2019/11/lofven-hart-pressad-om-eus-sociala-pelare/ (accessed 26.06.2024).

[7] Nobelstiftelsen: "Rutin" att bjuda in mördarregimer, 2019, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2019/12/nobelstiftelsen-rutin-att-bjuda-in-mordarregimer/ (accessed 26.06.2024).

dorsed the "self-sufficient Sweden" proposal in anticipation of a potential embargo by Russia on power source supplies to Europe.[1] The *Sweden Democrats* have asserted that "the humanitarian superpowers" have reached their demise, with Sweden being a prime example of this decline. Therefore, it can be posited that the *SD* began to disseminate negative portrayals of Russia during the period of heightened international tensions between 2014 and 2020. Nonetheless, the party denounced the propagation of anti-Russian rhetoric as a means of disseminating "Western values" as "dangerous and leading to a war of world views."[2]

Following the initiation of Russia's special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine, the discourse within the *Sweden Democrats* underwent a shift, adopting an absolutely anti-Russian stance. The political party advocated for the continuation of economic sanctions against "regressive countries," such as Russia, Belarus, and Turkey, as outlined in its programme before the 2022 Riksdag elections. Additionally, the necessity of the *SD* is predicated on its role in containing Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic, in conjunction with the persistent promotion of Swedish interests.[3] Subsequently, the political party's stance toward Russia exhibited a shift, aligning more closely with the positions taken by *Moderaterna*.[4] Subsequently, members of the Swedish Democrats and affiliated columnists initiated a campaign of defamation against left-wing parties in Sweden, characterising them as "pro-Russian" and "pursuing surrender".[5]

The "Russian menace" myths as a contributing factor to the evolution of the Sweden Democrats' attitude towards the NATO accession of Sweden

During the initiative phase of the Ukrainian crisis, which occurred concurrently with the Riksdag election campaign in 2014, the *Sweden Democrats* expressed disapproval of any prospective Swedish NATO membership. The aforementioned statements were contradictory to those made by the *Moderaterna*, which advocated for collaborative efforts with the Alliance to address the perceived threat posed by Russia. The initial reaction of the Swedish Democrats to the prospect of NATO membership was characterised as "an unacceptable means of counter-

[1] Sverige utan självförsörjning — Vad händer när handeln inte fungerar? 2020, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2020/03/sverige-utan-sjalvforsorjning-vad-hander-nar-handeln-inte-fungerar/ (accessed 26.06.2024).

[2] Kinas makthunger en del av globaliseringens baksida, 2021, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2021/02/kinas-makthunger-en-del-av-globaliseringens-baksida/ (accessed 26.06.2024).

[3] Sverigedemokraternas Valplattform 2022, 2022, Inriktningsprogram för Sverigedemokraternas inflytande över svensk politik under nästa mandatperiod, Stockholm, p. 57, *Sverigedemokraterna*, URL: https://www.sd.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/sverigedemokraternas-valplattform-2022-april.pdf (accessed 26.06.2024).

[4] Tid att visa blågul solidaritet — i praktisk handling, 2022, *Moderaterna*, URL: https://moderaterna.se/nyhet/tid-att-visa-blagul-solidaritet-i-praktisk-handling/ (accessed 25.06.2024).

[5] Vänstern redo att ge upp Sverige och kapitulera vid krig, 2024, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2024/01/vanstern-redo-att-ge-upp-sverige-och-kapitulera-vid-krig/ (accessed 26.06.2024).

action towards Russia, despite Swedish involvement in NATO infrastructures".[1] The *Sweden Democrats* leaders asserted that the issue demanded a thorough examination, complemented by constructive engagement between Sweden, Russia, and NATO in a provisional détente within the Baltic region. The party cited research from a monograph entitled "Sweden, NATO, and Security," which was published in 2016.[2]

From this perspective, the *Sweden Democrats* have expressed disapproval of the expansion of the US military presence in Europe. They have emphasised that this development would not contribute to improving relations with Russia.[3] Simultaneously, the party placed a particular emphasis on the necessity of enforcing the Swedish army, which was deficient in both financial resources and modernisation.[4] According to the *SD*, the responsibility for these outcomes lies with Carl Bildt, who served as Prime Minister of Sweden from 1991 to 1994. This is attributable to his revision of Swedish security policy in the Baltic region in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR.[5] The *Sweden Democrats* reached the conclusion that the policy of "freedom from alliances" required revision in order to correspond to the changing geopolitical circumstances.

At the onset of the 2018 Riksdag election campaign, the *Sweden Democrats*' stance on NATO membership remained constant. The party's position on NATO accession for Sweden remained in opposition. According to the aforementioned position, the Swedish society "did not desire, nor should it have relinquished, the lives of their soldiers for the benefit of foreign interests".[6] Conversely, the SD proposed an alternative plan that focused on enhancing national defence, e. g. the armed forces, voluntary organisations, police units, and the military production industry. The Swedish military-industrial complex was to be prioritised in the allocation of orders for the production of military equipment for the Swedish army and navy. Concurrently, the *SD*-affiliated columnists, historians, and political scientists underscored the pivotal role of NATO in world and European politics during the latter half of the 20th century and the initial years of the 21st century.

Olof Hedengren asserted that NATO had the potential to "die peacefully." However, following the outbreak of the Korean War, Western nations recognised the imperative of containing the expansion of the Soviet Union. According to Hedengren, the Soviet Union was a "superpower led by the megalomaniac Joseph Stalin". In his second pro-NATO statement, Hedengren referred to the division of Germany, attributing full responsibility to the Soviet Union because of its role in forcing the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to accept its terms. According to Hedengren, the Alliance demonstrated its capacity to contain the

[1] Nato är det bästa alternativet, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/05/nato-ar-det-basta-alternativet/ (accessed 25.04.2023).

[2] Blix, H., Ekéus, R., Hirdman, S., Schori, P., Åkerström, L., Oscarson, S., Ingelstam, L. 2016*, Sweden, NATO and security*, Stockholm, Celanders Förlag, 222 p.

[3] USA skickar 330 marinkårssoldater till Norge, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2016/10/usa-skickar-330-marinkarssoldater-till-norge/ (accessed 27.06.2024).

[4] Försvarsmakten behöver pengar akut, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2018/02/forsvarsmakten-behover-pengar-akut/ (accessed 28.06.2024).

[5] Carl Bildt i halvfigur, 2017, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2017/10/carl-bildt-halvfigur/ (accessed 27.06.2024).

[6] Sverigedemorkaterna. Försvarspolitik, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20181028000252/https://sd.se/vad-vi-vill/forsvarspolitik/ (accessed 28.06.2024).

"Soviet empire" and facilitated the unification of both Germany and Europe. The columnist also advanced the argument that, for Sweden, NATO represents an opportunity to modernise its defence system in response to a growing security threat.[1] In the 2018 elections, the *Sweden Democrats* demonstrated inconsistencies in their programme. On the one hand, they advocated for the enforcement of national defence without acceding to NATO. On the other hand, they denied any willingness to make "sacrifices in favour of the interests of another." At the same time, they expressed support for the Alliance, acknowledging its capacity to strengthen Swedish defence and its role in maintaining security in Europe and beyond since 1949.

Following Russia's initiation of SMO in Ukraine, the *Sweden Democrats* have modified their stance on the prospect of Sweden's accession to NATO. In the course of the 2022 Riksdag election campaign, the party articulated its commitment to allocating additional financial resources to national defence and to reinforcing the capabilities of the armed forces, the national military production industry, and auxiliary units. This commitment was made irrespective of the nation's NATO membership status. The party has articulated its rationale for this decision, attributing it to the perceived escalating threat posed by Russia to Sweden and Finland. The proposal included the establishment of a collective defence mechanism with this country.[2]

In the subsequent endorsement of Sweden's application for NATO accession, the political entity characterised Sweden's integration into the Alliance as "more advantageous for the Alliance than for Sweden" on the grounds that "more vulnerable Finland required support." Concurrently, the endorsement of the Swedish application by NATO members was characterised as a form of "bazaar bargaining". According to the *Samtiden* position, the underlying factors that precipitated this occurrence can be attributed to the conditions established by the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán.[3] Accusations were levelled against the Swedish Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson, regarding the situation. Moreover, the Sweden Democrats emphasised the fundamental distinction between the European Union and NATO. Columnists affiliated with the party stressed that "each NATO member is responsible for its own defence before an attack is launched against one of the Alliance members." NATO was thus portrayed as a defensive alliance. In contrast, according to the Sweden Democrats, EU policy amounted to a "redistribution of taxes through political decisions."[4] De facto the *Sweden Democrats* acknowledged the value of NATO membership for national defence, perceiving it as a more effective approach than the EU institutions.

Subsequently, the *Sweden Democrats* employed the discourse surrounding the "Russian menace" and NATO membership issues as a means of criticism directed towards their opponents. The *SD* have accused their opponents of "disregard-

[1] Nato, Trump och svensk säkerhetspolitik, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2018/07/nato-trump-och-svensk-sakerhetspolitik/ (accessed 28.06.2024).

[2] Sverigedemokraterna. Försvarspolitik, 2022, *Samtiden*, URL: https://sd.se/vad-vi-vill/svensk-forsvarsmakt/ (accessed 28.06.2024).

[3] Dick Erixon. Plågsamma Nato-processen över — eller? 2024, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2024/02/plagsamma-nato-processen-over-eller/ (accessed 28.06.2024).

[4] Ibid.

ing the historical experience of struggle against Russia"[1] and of facilitating the dissemination of anti-NATO narratives by think tanks affiliated with the Social Democratic Party. For instance, Tarja Kronberg, an employee of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, has been identified as a key figure in this regard.[2] The *Social Democrats* were depicted as leaders who would be willing to surrender to Russia in case they returned to power. Consequently, the *Sweden Democrats* incorporated the concept of the "Russian menace" into their programme and discourse.

The understanding of the relationship between Sweden, NATO, and Russia underwent a substantial transformation within the agenda of the Sweden Democrats between 2014 and 2024. Initially, the party assigned priority to maintaining security in the Baltic Sea region and across Europe while avoiding a direct confrontation with Russia. After 2018, however, the *Sweden Democrats* began to conceptualise Russia as an "existential threat" and to present NATO as the principal instrument of national defence. The "allied duty" towards Finland was also introduced as an additional justification, alongside recognition of NATO's historical role in ensuring European security throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Following the events of 2022, the *Sweden Democrats* fully incorporated an anti-Russian agenda into their political programme.

Conclusion

The image of Russia underwent a comprehensive revision in Swedish national conservative discourse between 2014 and 2024. Before 2018, the *Sweden Democrats* had not adopted a definitive stance on the so-called "Russian menace." They did not advocate for any anti-Russian initiatives and did not articulate a necessity for Sweden to align with NATO, citing the "Russian threat" as a rationale. Conversely, the party accentuated the necessity of engaging in discourse with Moscow concerning regional and European security, as well as the imperative to confront radical Islamism and terrorism.

However, when Russia was accused of imposing cyberattacks to intervene the 2016 US presidential elections, the image of the country started to serve as a means to discredit political opponents within the country. Accusations of posing a threat to national security through collaboration with Russian organizations and officials have been leveled at other Swedish political parties in the Riksdag, as well as against ministers and heads of the government.

The Skripal incident provided the *Sweden Democrats* with an opportunity to further demonise Russia. Party-affiliated columnists began to describe the country and its government as a "murderous regime." A second accusation concerned Russia's use of fossil fuel exports as a "political weapon." Following these allegations, the party intensified the construction of a negative image of Russia. The initial stage involved the mobilisation of historical myths. The *Sweden Democrats* referred to the history of Swedish—Russian rivalry and revived the narrative of the "Russian menace" that had persisted over previous centuries. They

[1] Lars, F. 2024, Eklund. Karl XII och hotet från öster, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2024/03/karl-xii-och-hotet-fran-oster/ (accessed 28.06.2024).

[2] Därför förnekar Socialdemokraterna sin putinism, 2024, *Samtiden*, URL: https://samtiden.nu/2024/05/darfor-fornekar-socialdemokraterna-sin-putinism/ (accessed 28.06.2024).

also reactivated the negative image of the Soviet Union that had previously been employed in political discourse. At the same time, the party began to express regret over its earlier criticism of Sweden's bid for NATO membership before 2018. In the period following the outbreak of the COVID-2019 pandemic and the escalation of tensions between Russia and Western countries from 2020 to early 2022, the *Sweden Democrats* persisted in the development of their anti-Russian agenda. The Russian global conduct was depicted as "a threat to the world". Nonetheless, the *SD* issued a call to avert the "war of values" with Russia. These notions were accompanied by historical myths that cast aspersions on Russia, thereby validating the *SD* position.

The change in the *Sweden Democrats*' stance toward Russia was marked by an overt shift toward hostility following Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. The *Sweden Democrats* called for the introduction of sanctions against Russia, the restriction of Russian activities in the Arctic, and the strengthening of collective defence cooperation with Finland. Furthermore, the party abandoned its opposition to Sweden's prospective accession to NATO.

The image of Russia in the discourse of the *Sweden Democrats* has developed in forms typical of national conservative parties that incorporate Russophobic elements into their political programmes and ideology, such as *Law and Justice* in Poland, the Danish *People's Party*, and the *National Alliance* in Latvia. The *Sweden Democrats'* original position was one of neutrality or positivity with regard to Russia and its Russian population. This position entailed the articulation of a counterargument to the sanctions imposed on Russia, emphasizing the detrimental impact these sanctions would have on national economies, the European Union, and the global community at large. The *SD* further advocated for the initiation of negotiations with Russia concerning global security concerns. Therefore, it can be posited that the *Sweden Democrats* were originally more aligned with the *Alternative for Germany*, the Austrian *Freedom Party*, and FIDESZ of Hungary. Nevertheless, the position of the *Sweden Democrats* has demonstrated a shift in dynamics. Previously exhibiting neutrality towards Russia, the far-right wing party has since integrated numerous anti-Russian narratives into its agenda, which are characteristic of Swedish political culture and historical memory. Consequently, the *Sweden Democrats* have revised traditional historical myths of the "Russian threat" in a new context and incorporated them into political propaganda.

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IRXUVB

TECHNOLOGICAL DIPLOMACY AND THE INTERNATIONAL POSITIONING OF SMALL STATES: THE CASE OF DENMARK

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This article examines Denmark's digital development trajectory and the strategic role of technological diplomacy in elevating 'small states' on the global stage, with Denmark as a prime case study. The introduction of technological diplomacy into Danish foreign policy documents is contextualised against the backdrop of accelerating political and economic digitalisation, alongside the transformative impact of cutting-edge technologies — including big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and neural networks — on the global economy and international relations. Denmark pioneered the appointment of a Technology Ambassador, the world's first, to bolster the country's presence at key multilateral tech fora, draw investment, and pave the way for Danish firms in global markets. The country also led in crafting an industry-specific methodological framework by embedding technology agendas into core foreign policy strategies. Denmark's digital leadership stems from historical foundations, seamless integration of digital tools into domestic governance and economy via phased, comprehensive sector reforms (notably e-government), widespread upskilling in digital competencies, and robust network infrastructure development. The nation now stands poised for the next leap — 'smart government' — fueled by AI, metaverses, blockchain, and VR across public administration and business.

Keywords:
technological diplomacy, technological ambassador, e-government, smart government, information technology, artificial intelligence, metaverses, Denmark

Introduction

Accelerating technological change and the need for state institutions to adapt to new economic realities have contributed to the emergence of technology diplomacy (tech diplomacy or Techplomacy) as an established phenomenon in international relations. The relevance of this concept is driven by the influence

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of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, neural networks, and various big data analysis algorithms on the global economy and international political processes; the establishment of social networks and other digital resources as primary communication channels; the emergence of cryptocurrency as an important element of the global financial architecture; major investments in the metaverse market for building virtual trading platforms and the gaming industry; as well as the emergence of new cybersecurity risks.

A new paradigm of public-private interaction in the international sphere is taking shape against the backdrop of the growing importance of private actors in international relations as key drivers of innovation. The market capitalisation of IT companies often exceeds the GDP of individual countries, placing them among the top 50 global entities by economic size.[1] For example, Apple's market value, which surpassed the $3 trillion mark in 2023, exceeds the GDP of all but six of the largest economies in the world[2], necessitating changes in approaches to assessing the global balance of power. Private actors are accumulating not only economic but also political resources[3], which has highlighted the need for structural changes and institutional transformations in state-business interaction [1].

Integrating the technology agenda into the foreign policy track opens a window of opportunity for so-called *small states*, strengthens their role in the new global technological order, and contributes to the formation of polycentrism in international relations. Rapid societal digitalisation offers them a unique opportunity to both contribute to and benefit from the changing landscape and global technological competition.

The purpose of this article is to examine the origins of the concept of technology diplomacy using the example of a pioneer on this track — Denmark — as well as to analyse the initiatives of the Danish government regarding the digitalisation of domestic political and socio-economic processes in the country, which laid the technological foundation for its leadership. The author sets research tasks to analyse the specifics of the Danish model of technology diplomacy, study the historical cause-and-effect relationships within Denmark's digital transformation, assess the current state of digitalisation of Denmark's public sector and business, review promising initiatives for integrating advanced technologies, and identify risks of slowing down Denmark's digitalisation.

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[1] Chowdhary, M., Diasso, S. 2022, Taxing Big Tech: Policy options for developing countries, *State of Big Tech*, URL: https://projects.itforchange.net/state-of-big-tech/taxing-big-tech-policy-options-for-developing-countries/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Sinha, V. 2023, Apple's market cap is now higher than France, Italy's economy; might soon beat India's GDP, *Hindustan Times*, URL: https://www.hindustantimes.com/business/apples-marketcap-is-now-higher-than-france-italys-economy-might-soon-beat-indias-gdp-101702743469102.html (accessed 01.06.2025).

[3] Bank, M., Duffy, F., Leyendecker, V., Silva, M. 2021, The lobby network — Big Tech's web of influence in the EU, *Corporate Europe Observatory*, URL: https://corporateeurope.org/en/2021/08/ lobby-network-big-techs-web-influence-eu (accessed 01.06.2025).

The methodology includes methods of systematic description, historical-chronological analysis, and the case-study principle. Additionally, a comparative analysis of Denmark with another 'small state' (Sweden) is conducted to highlight the specifics of the Danish model of technology diplomacy and to lend greater objectivity to the work.

The relevance of the study stems from the currently limited body of scientific research on Denmark's technological development. Most of it is devoted to analysing individual industries, sectors, and clusters, which does not contribute to a systemic understanding of cause-and-effect relationships, patterns, and the chronology of development. In particular, a number of works form a highly fragmented theoretical base for Denmark's innovative development: they are devoted mainly to digital transformation in municipal governance, digitalisation of the entrepreneurial sector, building e-government, technology integration in medicine, and the introduction of AI in Denmark's defence sector. Besides contributing to a comprehensive vision of technological evolution problems, the work can fill research gaps regarding the introduction of AI, metaverse, and blockchain technologies by Denmark's public sector and business, which seems extremely relevant in the context of a number of countries transitioning to the stage of establishing 'smart governments'. Finally, there is a significant research gap regarding Russian authors' examination of the concept of "technology diplomacy" and its role in the development of 'small states', given the changing global balance of power in international relations. This work aims to help fill this gap.

Denmark as a flagship of the new diplomacy format

The first example of technology diplomacy was Denmark's appointment in 2017 of a Tech Ambassador to the San Francisco Bay Area, home to Silicon Valley, one of the world's most advanced innovation ecosystems and a global centre for major technology companies.

At the initial stage, the Danish Ambassador's mandate included establishing cooperation with technology companies in the Bay Area to attract investment to the Danish economy and facilitate the international expansion of Danish firms, as well as engaging with international organisations and government bodies on a range of global technological issues and challenges. This initiative subsequently triggered a wave of similar appointments by other countries, which recognised the potential of this instrument for adapting foreign policy institutions to contemporary technological ecosystems. Today, approximately 20 countries have adopted the practice of appointing tech diplomats.[1]

Over time, the functionality of tech ambassadors has expanded; they now oversee issues ranging from developing a unified national technological position abroad to representing the state at key multilateral platforms and forming

[1] Australia, Austria, UK, Germany, Denmark, Israel, Kazakhstan, Canada, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Finland, France, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Estonia, Japan, etc.

alliances and partnerships. The Danish Tech Ambassador's areas of competence include topics such as cybersecurity, combating disinformation, deepfakes, and terrorism on the Internet, digital taxation, online privacy protection, AI technology implementation, and data ethics, among others.[1] A separate block is related to regulatory activities. For example, one of the key tasks of the Danish Tech Ambassador is active participation in the process of institutionalising norms of international law within their competence. Legislative initiatives are a traditional tool for ensuring the integration of 'small states' into international economic and political structures [2].

Furthermore, due to increased operational load and responsibility, tech ambassadors today typically have permanent offices with supporting staff or other flexible forms of representation (e. g., teams consisting of narrow specialists to solve specific tasks). Denmark, which places special emphasis on technology diplomacy in its foreign economic activities, operates several permanent offices (in San Francisco and Copenhagen).[2]

Unlike the area of responsibility of traditional diplomatic representation, the tech ambassador's area of responsibility extends beyond national borders and regions (including consular districts). While maintaining a nominal physical presence in Silicon Valley and Copenhagen, the Danish Tech Ambassador is endowed with a global mandate to represent Denmark's interests at international platforms and fora. This approach seems most optimal for small states as it avoids maintaining a large staff in foreign missions of various levels and purposes (embassies, consulates general, trade missions, etc.).

Another important innovation of the instrument of appointing tech ambassadors as a marker of the global digitalisation of international relations (digital international relations) [3] has been the democratisation of diplomatic protocol, requiring the development of new competencies and skills when interacting with the technology business.[3] Former Danish Tech Ambassador Casper Klynge noted this development, humorously sketching a modern portrait of a diplomat that does not necessarily involve wearing a suit and tie.[4] This same approach is manifested in building modern forms of communication, such as social networks and video hosting sites, to convey non-clichéd information to target audiences.

The skills and competencies of a tech ambassador are directly related to experience in business, government, or academic environments with a special focus on technology. Depending on the state's tasks, a candidate with the necessary

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[1] The TechPlomacy Approach, 2025, *Office of Denmark's Tech Ambassador*, URL: https:// techamb. um.dk/the-techplomacy-approach (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Zonova, T.V. 2019, New in diplomacy: from "Twiplomacy" to "TechPlomacy", *Russian International Affairs Council*, URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/novoe-v-diplomatii-ot-tviplomasi-k-tekhplomasi/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[4] Office of Denmark's Tech Ambassador, 2025, *Facebook (Meta activity is recognized as extremist and banned in the Russian Federation)*, URL: https://www.facebook.com/ DKTechAmb/ (дата обращения: 01.06.2025).

background is selected. In the Danish case, the current Tech Ambassador, Mette Mølgaard, worked at the World Economic Forum in Geneva (2017—2020) before her appointment, where she oversaw the mobilisation of technology companies, governments, and civil society to jointly remove barriers hindering the responsible scaling of new technologies to solve society's biggest problems.[1]

To build a comprehensive technological ecosystem, Denmark became one of the first countries to develop a corresponding methodological framework for the sector by integrating tech diplomacy into its foreign policy strategy documents. At the initial stages, the model of 'stitching' new provisions into an existing, time-tested legislative framework appeared to the Danish Government to be a more flexible and less resource-intensive approach than developing a separate standalone document. The goals and objectives of the TechPlomacy initiative were first included in Denmark's Foreign and Security Policy Strategy for 2017—2018, which specifically notes that the government makes digitalisation and technological development a strategic priority of Denmark's foreign policy. TechPlomacy aims to strengthen the 'Danish voice' in the international technology environment and establish partnerships between Danish and international actors. The document also promoted the thesis of the need for closer international cooperation in regulating the development and use of new technologies[2]. Denmark's visionary proposal for developing a legal framework in the IT field has been implemented at the EU level since 2024.

In 2021, a separate Danish tech diplomacy strategy was developed (Strategy for Denmark's Tech Diplomacy 2021—2023), calling on Denmark to take a leading role in shaping global technology governance by promoting three principles: responsibility, democracy, and security. The strategy expresses scepticism about the situation where technologies are a central component of struggle and strategic competition between state actors (e. g., the US and China), as well as a weapon of authoritarian regimes for digital surveillance, control, oppression, and censorship. The strategy promotes Denmark's readiness to act as a 'saviour' of democratic principles through its leadership in the technology sector.[3]

A clear distinction should be made between the functions and tasks of the Tech Ambassador (and his/her offices) and the Innovation Centre of Denmark, of which there are 7 as of 2025 (Munich, Bangalore, Shanghai, Seoul, Tel Aviv, Silicon Valley, and Boston). The innovation centres, operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of Denmark, provide advisory functions, working pragmatically 'in the

[1] Meet the Ambassador, 2025, *Tech Ambassador*, URL: https://techamb.um.dk/team/meet-the-ambassador (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Udenrigs- og sikkerhedspolitisk strategi for 2017—2018, 2018, *Regeringen*, URL: https://regeringen.dk/aktuelt/tidligere-publikationer/udenrigs-og-sikkerhedspolitisk-strategi-for-2017-2018/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[3] Strategy for Denmark's tech diplomacy 2021—2023, 2023, *Ministry of foreign affairs of Denmark*, URL: https://techamb.um.dk/impact/tech-diplomatic-results (accessed 01.06.2025).

field' with Danish startups, small and medium-sized enterprises, corporations, research centres, and other intermediary organisations, providing them access to relevant knowledge centres through their branches. The Tech Ambassador, as an autonomous unit, performs broader intermediary activities in terms of advocating values, representing Denmark's interests in the global technology industry, and influencing international technology policy.

Although strictly speaking, Denmark's innovation centres are not an integral part of Danish technology diplomacy, broadly speaking, they play a significant role in strengthening the country's technological authority internationally and allowing it to remain at the forefront of development.

To identify the specifics of the Danish model of technology diplomacy, it seems appropriate to conduct a comparative analysis with another "small" country also ranking high globally in digitalisation leadership (Sweden). Unlike Denmark, where the Tech Ambassador acts as an independent structure, in Sweden, the corresponding function is performed by the Ambassador for International Cyber and Digital Affairs[1] within the Security Department of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The agency's website specifically notes that the Ambassador contributes to Sweden's policy development on cyber issues exclusively in close cooperation with responsible groups in other government agencies. This is because digitalisation in Sweden falls under the shared responsibility of various departments. Furthermore, unlike his Danish counterpart, the Swedish Ambassador for International Cyber and Digital Affairs does not have overseas offices, which limits his ability to work 'in the field'. Thus, it can be argued that the Danish government not only pays significant attention to digitalisation issues (as in the Swedish case) but defines technologies as a cross-cutting priority of its foreign and security policy, endowing the Tech Ambassador with a wide range of powers and instruments.

Sweden's Foreign and Security Policy Strategy regarding cyber and digital issues sets more modest goals (compared to Denmark). It concerns enhancing the country's security and prosperity while considering a consolidated position with EU and NATO partners. Nevertheless, the strategic documents of both countries note the importance of strengthening international role and influence through the competitive advantages of technologies developed by local companies. Thus, despite differences in approaches and instruments for implementing technology diplomacy, both Denmark and Sweden view their digitalisation achievements as a unique factor for positioning small states on the international stage.

Historical prerequisites for Denmark's digital transformation

It seems inappropriate to consider Denmark's technology diplomacy without analysing the conditions for the development of the country's innovative leadership, which allowed it to demonstrate its ambitions to participate in

[1] The position was established in 2023.

the international technology agenda. Denmark's right to be called one of the pioneers in technological and information development is explained by historical prerequisites and a phased, comprehensive reform of the sector initiated as early as the 1990s. A supporting factor was the already existing centralised database of Danish residents (the CPR register or personal identification number), created in 1968 [4]. In line with trends observed in several industrialised countries, large centralised government databases and archives using mainframes[1] replaced punch cards[2] in Denmark during the 1960s and 1970s [5]. Furthermore, during the 1950s—1970s, the first steps were taken towards the implementation of standardised, centralised systems in Denmark's public administration, particularly in the areas of wages and taxation. It was the effective digitalisation of data and systematisation of information that became a condition for Denmark's subsequent recognition as the most digital economy and society in the EU.

Another important historical factor of Danish leadership was economic clustering, a unified approach to which was developed in Denmark as early as the late 1980s — early 1990s. At this stage, promising network structures in the country were identified, as well as mechanisms for generating and transferring knowledge and technology at both national and regional levels. By 1992, Denmark was ranked among the world leaders in economic clustering [6]. According to several researchers, clustering represents a successful concept demonstrating its practical effectiveness, including in matters of innovation policy [7].

Since the 1980s, Denmark has also paid attention to electronic commerce — in particular, recommendations were developed to enter the top five countries in this field — and to the introduction of electronic payments via the Dankort product (a universal debit card used by the vast majority of services for the adult population).

At later stages, the methodological gap regarding clearly formulated goals, objectives, and directions for digitalisation was filled. Starting with the Info-Society 2000 initiative (adopted in 1994), which outlined the initial vision of the Danish information society, the process of implementing Denmark's digital strategies began (1994—2000, 2001—2004, 2004—2006, 2007—2010, etc.). Of particular note is the report "Digital Denmark: Conversion to the Network Society" (1999), prepared by the Ministry of Research and Information Technology, which timely and accurately described for the first time the goals of forming the world's first digital government, as well as the digitalisation of the state system and civil society as a whole. The document outlined the development directions for the Danish public sector for the next 20 years and the creation of a full-fledged network society, embodying a departure from autonomous

[1] A mainframe is a powerful, fault-tolerant computer designed to process huge volumes of data and solve critical tasks for large organizations.

[2] A punch card is an information carrier made of thin cardboard, on which data is represented in the form of holes arranged in specific positions.

information systems. Specifically, it was planned that no later than 2003, the Danish public administration should provide the best and most efficient public services in Northern Europe through digital administration.

The theoretical basis was promptly supported by practical steps: by 2001, Denmark had become one of the first EU countries to start implementing an "e-government" project aimed at delivering public services electronically [8]. By 2010, Denmark had developed a range of public digital portals providing reliable, verified information, transactional services, and access to personal data, including healthcare (Sundhed.dk), taxation (Skat.dk), business services (Virk.dk), and citizen services (Borger.dk).[1]

Furthermore, the foundations of a new image of cultural, educational, research, and other forms of diplomacy were being laid, expressed in democratizing citizen access to them by supporting events with interactive Internet services. This initiative aimed to create a single portal serving as a unified entry point for Denmark's citizens, designed to facilitate political debate, public consultations, and the dissemination of information to the population.

A crucial direction that laid the foundation for Denmark's modern technological profile was business support [9]. The government encouraged the introduction of new business models adapted to digital technologies [10] and provided a wide range of support for small and medium-sized businesses to prepare them for digital transformation. Gradually, an effective system for financing digitalisation projects was formed through a combination of government support instruments (budgetary financing, tax deductions) and attracting private investment. Additionally, administrative barriers were minimised, and the business registration process was simplified [11]. For instance, between 2001 and 2010, the level of administrative barriers was reduced by nearly 25 %. From a foreign policy perspective, Denmark's IT policy documents and reports from the late 1990s and early 2000s reflected the political reality of small states due to their limited power element in foreign policy and the need to replace it with "soft" instruments. In particular, they consistently contain calls to be "first," a "pioneer," or "one of the best" (Danish: "foregangsland"), reflecting Denmark's aspirations to be a participant in the "global race" and increased international competition for leadership in the innovative sector as an alternative to being outside the decision-making framework in the military-political dimension. To some extent, this paradigm resembles the actions of the German government after the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations to position itself as a 'humanitarian power'. In the Danish case, digital technologies became a competitive advantage and a niche strategy for entering the international arena. Denmark's ambitions

[1] Nielsen, M., Dhaou, B. 2023, Case studies on digital transformation of social security administration and services: Case study Denmark, *UNU Collections*, URL: http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:9179/case-study-digital-transformation-SSAS-DENMARK.pdf (accessed 01.06.2025).

were regularly manifested in its readiness to actively participate in international forums on digitalisation at platforms such as the UN, ITU, UNESCO, OECD, G20, and others.

Current state of digitalisation of Denmark's public Sector and business

According to most ranking methodologies, Denmark demonstrates leadership in the implementation of online services at all levels of government and data infrastructure projects [12]. For instance, Denmark ranks second after South Korea in the list of countries with the highest level of digital government and public sector, according to the OECD Digital Government Index 2023.[1] The pinnacle of the Danish government's achievements was also the UN's recognition in 2024, for the fourth consecutive time, of Denmark's digital public sector as the best in the world.[2] This indicator has important political significance, as the digital transformation of public administration is currently a global trend.

Furthermore, Denmark ranked third in the IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2024, which demonstrates the country's ability to adapt to digital changes (development of new technologies and infrastructure, training of a skilled workforce, degree of IT integration in various economic sectors, existence of a regulatory framework, etc.).[3] The index indicates that Denmark offers an environment in which companies can operate efficiently and scale rapidly, thereby strengthening the government's negotiating position in technology diplomacy. Notably, Denmark outperformed leading global economies such as the United States, China, Germany, and Japan in the ranking, several of which are actively competing for global technological leadership.

Another important indicator until 2022 was the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), which has been incorporated into the State of the Digital Decade Reports since 2023. This index tracked the digital performance and competitiveness of European Union member states across four dimensions: human capital, connectivity, integration of digital technology, and digital public services. Traditionally, Denmark ranked among the top three performers, with its main competition typically coming from other Nordic countries, namely Sweden and Finland [13].

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[1] Denmark has the second most digital public sector globally, 2025, *Ministry of foreign affairs of Denmark*, URL: https://investindk.com/insights/denmark-has-the-second-most-digital-public-sector-globally (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Denmark Tops UN E-Government Survey, 2025, *The Agency for Digital Government*, URL: https://en.digst.dk/news/news-archive/2024/oktober/denmark-tops-un-e-government-survey/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[3] The 2024 IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking (WDCR), 2025, IMD, URL: https://www.imd.org/centers/wcc/world-competitiveness-center/rankings/world-digital-competitiveness-ranking/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

The individuality of Denmark's digital profile is manifested in the successful creation of a model with a single point of access to all government services and the obligation for all citizens to use the digital channel to access public services. Denmark was one of the first in the world to complete the stage of a full transition from providing services through disparate local government websites to a single circuit for citizen engagement within so-called participatory platforms, i.e., internet applications linking citizens and decision-makers [14].

Among the digital solutions that have become hallmarks of Denmark's digital infrastructure is MitID, a digital identification system covering 96.6 % of the Danish population over the age of 15. It enables residents and businesses to authenticate themselves electronically across public and private digital services, sign documents, and access online banking, healthcare, taxation, and other digital platforms.[1]

Denmark's developed electronic identification infrastructure by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the country to become a leader in the speed of implementing passports (or other verification documents) for those vaccinated against coronavirus (COVID-19 Passport), which facilitated safe, free movement of citizens around the world. Furthermore, when announcing the next wave of vaccination registration, the Danish government avoided website crashes and other problems faced by the US, Asia, and Europe. The Danish authorities skillfully organised a virtual waiting room that guaranteed citizens fair and equal access to services. This, in turn, provided Denmark with significant competitive advantages within the framework of so-called vaccine diplomacy.[2] Denmark's 2022 National Strategy for Digitalisation specifically notes the key merit of the country's digital services in their ability to cope with serious crises like COVID-19.[3]

In the fight against the coronavirus, Denmark demonstrated a more advanced level of technological readiness, for example, in comparison with Germany, which implemented mobile tracking applications for quarantine monitoring and epidemiological surveillance at a later stage, partly due to limited prior experience, the absence of a systematic approach, and heightened privacy concerns [15].

Another major initiative, covering 94 % of the population of Denmark, is Digital Post, a core component of the country's cross-governmental digital service infrastructure that enables public authorities to communicate securely with citizens and businesses in digital form. Messages delivered through Digital Post have mandatory legal force in Denmark and include, for example, hospital

[1] Get started with MitID, 2025, *MitID*, URL: https://www.mitid.dk/en-gb/get-started-with-mitid/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] How Denmark became a global leader in digital government, 2025, *Queue-it*, URL: https://queueit.com/blog/government-digital-transformation-denmark/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[3] National Strategy for Digitalisation, 2025, *Ministry of Finance*, URL: https://en.digst.dk/media/mndfou2j/national-strategy-for-digitalisation-together-in-the-digital-development.pdf (accessed 01.06.2025).

communications, information on student grants, updates on housing benefits, daycare placement notifications, and correspondence from the Central Customs and Tax Administration (SKAT).[1]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Digital Post was effectively used by the Danish government to announce updated rules and restrictions, inform citizens about payments, vaccines, and public health policies.[2]

Also noteworthy is the banking solution NemKonto, an account that citizens of Denmark aged over 18 and businesses are required to register with the government. This system significantly reduces administrative costs by standardising recipient account details and centralising the disbursement of public payments, including unemployment benefits, grants, and tax-related payments.

Furthermore, there are many other applications and platforms (including cross-platform) that collectively form Denmark's unique technological profile (e. g., Borger.dk — a unified centre for public services; the Danish Driving Licence App — digital driver's license;[2] the Danish Health Insurance Card App — a digital version of the plastic health insurance card;[4] the Single Digital Gateway Regulation (SDGR) — online access to information, administrative procedures, and assistance services for EU residents and businesses;[5] and others). Most of these services are overseen by the Danish Agency for Digital Government.

A significant boon for business is the Danish Government's support for an open database of potential business partners — this greatly facilitates the interaction mechanism between the private sector [16].

According to the Danish government, the multi-layered digitalisation system, stitching through the entire state administration system, business, and civil society, saves €296 million per year and reduces data processing time by 30 %, rightfully earning it the title of one of the most efficient in the world.[6]

The Danish government's digital approaches with a planning horizon until 2026 are concentrated in Denmark's 2022 National Strategy for Digitalisation, presenting 9 directions: strengthening cyber and information security; providing seamless and user-friendly digital services connecting the public and private sectors; automating digital tools to increase public sector efficiency; stimulating economic growth by supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

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[1] Digital Post, 2025, The Agency for Digital Government, URL: https://en.digst.dk/systems/digital-post/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] How Denmark became a global leader in digital government, 2025, *Queue-it*, URL: https://queueit.com/blog/government-digital-transformation-denmark (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Driving Licence App, 2025, *The Agency for Digital Government*, URL: https://en.digst.dk/systems/driving-licence-app/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[4] Health Insurance Card App, 2025, *The Agency for Digital Government*, URL: https://en.digst.dk/systems/health-insurance-card-app/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[5] Single Digital Gateway Regulation, 2025, *The Agency for Digital Government*, URL: https://en.digst.dk/systems/single-digital-gateway-regulation/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[6] Denmark is at the top in several studies when it comes to digitization, 2025, *eBoks*, URL: https://blog.e-boks.com/denmark-is-at-the-top-in-several-studies-when-it-comes-to-digitization (accessed 01.06.2025).

in their digital transformation; modernizing healthcare services with digital solutions; accelerating the green transition with digital solutions; promoting ethical principles for using digital technologies and data; positioning Denmark at the center of international digitalisation; and equipping citizens with the skills and competencies needed for the digital age.[1]

The final major component of the Strategy, namely the promotion of citizens' digital skills, should be regarded as foundational. The Danish breakthrough was made possible solely by instilling digital competencies in Danes, including improving computer literacy and equalising access to electronic services (in 2020, 71 % of Danes had digital skills, of which almost 50 % had skills above basic [17]), as well as organising regular professional development for public sector employees in using ICT.

In this paradigm, the education system, focused on increasing the number of students enrolled in STEM programmes (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), occupies a special place. It provides Danish employers with personnel possessing the required digital skills. The list of priority training areas was formalised in 2018 by the relevant document — the Danish Technology Pact, which united the efforts of the government, private business, educational and research institutions, and NGOs.

Another important factor is network infrastructure and connection quality. Denmark is a global leader in citizen access to the Internet (about 95 % of households are connected to networks with very high capacity (VHCN)[2]). The country has one of the highest 5G mobile broadband coverage rates in Europe (98 % of settlements) [18]. High-speed internet is a fundamental condition for Copenhagen's annual inclusion in the top 10 smartest cities in the world, according to the Smart City Index.[3] In terms of connectivity quality, Denmark scored 100 out of a possible 100 points according to the Euler Hermes Digitalisation Index (EDI) from 2020 [19].

Artificial intelligence, metaverse, and blockchain technologies

The document "A Strategic Approach to Artificial Intelligence," published by the Danish Ministry of Digital Government in 2025, clearly defines two priority goals: Danish companies must be competitive in the global market, and Denmark's public sector must become a world leader in the use of AI.[4]

[1] National Strategy for Digitalisation, 2025, *Ministry of Finance*, URL: https://en.digst.dk/media/mndfou2j/national-strategy-for-digitalisation-together-in-the-digital-development.pdf (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Denmark Country Commercial Guide, 2025, *Official Website of the International Trade Administration*, URL: https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/denmark-digital-economy (accessed 01.06.2025).

[3] Smart City Index, 2025, *IMD*, URL: https://www.imd.org/smart-city-observatory/home/rankings/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[4] Strategic Approach to Artificial Intelligence, 2025, *The Ministry of Digital Affairs*, URL: https://www.english.digmin.dk/Media/638719220318136690/Stategic%20Approach%20to%20Artificial%20Intelligence.pdf (accessed 01.06.2025).

Analysis of statistical indicators and specific projects demonstrates that Denmark is successfully moving towards achieving these targets. According to the “Digital Development in Denmark 2025” report, 28 % of Danish companies used AI for various purposes in 2024, exactly twice the European average (14 %). According to Eurostat, Denmark tops the first cluster of countries (leaders) based on AI usage percentage values. A trend is noted of a widening gap between AI adoption leaders and countries with low AI adoption, which only strengthens Denmark’s role in the international innovation dimension [20].

Although in most cases this involves products from foreign developers, Denmark is actively pursuing its own projects for technological autonomy and competitiveness in the global economy. For example, in 2024, the Danish Centre for AI Innovation, in collaboration with the Novo Nordisk Foundation and NVIDIA, announced an AI supercomputer named Gefion, opening new possibilities in quantum computing, clean energy, and biotechnology. This is an example of a successful public-private partnership. In practical terms, at the first stage, AI should support Danish pharmaceutical companies (e. g., Novo Nordisk) and ‘green’ projects in accelerating innovation and, consequently, increasing the competitiveness of Danish products on the global market. Later, it is planned to provide Gefion’s advanced capabilities to a wider audience of enterprises and public institutions.[1] This event received significant media support as Denmark entered the elite club of countries participating in developing an intelligent system based on its own territory and for the benefit of its own business. Furthermore, Denmark is a co-owner of the LUMI (Large Unified Modern Infrastructure) supercomputer in Finland [21].

Developing its own supercomputers is part of the Danish programme to ensure digital sovereignty in the face of geopolitical turbulence and the unpredictability of some partners (primarily the US).[2] The formation of national infrastructure reflects the ambition of a ‘small country’ to enter the select community of great powers with a full spectrum of digital sovereignty (currently the US, China, and Russia).

There is great potential for integrating AI into Danish smart city initiatives to enhance sustainability, efficiency, and the quality of life for citizens. As noted earlier, Denmark positions itself as an industry leader: Copenhagen traditionally ranks among the most developed smart cities globally. Against the backdrop of risks such as a shortage of qualified personnel and intensifying international competition for AI resources, the Danish government promotes the principle of joint efforts to create common AI standards, invest in education and training,

[1] Denmark’s first AI supercomputer is now operational, 2025, *Novo Nordisk Foundation*, URL: https://novonordiskfonden.dk/en/news/denmarks-first-ai-supercomputer-is-now-operational/ (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Ministerial Visit to SDU Highlights Digital Sovereignty and Danish Cloud Infrastructure, 2025, *University of Southern Denmark*, URL: https://www.sdu.dk/en/om-sdu/institutter-centre/imada_matematik_og_datalogi/nyt_fra_imada/digitaliseringsminister (accessed 20.12.2025).

and align AI strategies with international partners [22]. A number of Western academic schools call this approach "Smart City Diplomacy," and it seems to be considered an integral part of the broader concept of technology diplomacy. Building international connections between smart cities is another effort by the Danish government to establish itself as a global player in the technology field.

In the area of public service, Denmark continues to implement successive reforms. At present, it is at the stage of piloting and testing experimental initiatives aimed at integrating AI-based chatbots of various formats, including applications for social security benefits and the provision of consultations on government-related matters. There are also projects involving the deployment of service robots to perform tasks within local government authorities. In addition, the public sector employs supervised machine learning and robotic process automation. To accelerate the adoption of artificial intelligence in the public sector, the government, in cooperation with Danish local authorities and regions, established the Digital Taskforce for Artificial Intelligence. Furthermore, Denmark is gradually moving towards the most advanced technological stage of the present era by exploring the integration of the metaverse for organising interactions between citizens and public employees in virtual environments.

These transformational processes indicate an emerging transition of Denmark's public administration system and society from e-government towards the concept of "S-Government" (Smart Government), which implies the use of innovative technologies to better understand citizens' needs and expectations (communities, voters, etc.), accurately assess situations, and respond in a timely and effective manner. The only factor posing a conditional barrier to Denmark's full transition to S-Government is the absence of a national super-application, analogous to the Chinese messenger WeChat or the Russian MAX [23].

The use of AI and VR technologies is also being recorded in individual sectors of Denmark's socio-economic life, with fragmented scientific publications by Danish authors on integration experiences (e. g., in healthcare — a VR project for treating social anxiety disorder, the use of AI in screening examinations, and emergency phone calls to patients [24]).

Beyond the civilian sector, AI technologies are considered promising by the Danish government for the defence and security sector, allowing the country to strengthen its role internationally (including as a NATO member) due to its limited power capabilities. Broadly, the main goal is the significant technological acceleration of the Danish Armed Forces so they remain an important and relevant partner for allies, as outlined in the report "Danish Security and Defence towards 2035". In more detail, the main challenge is the transition from the unsystematic collection of large volumes of raw data using radars and sensors, which the Danish Armed Forces are already actively doing, to the integration of a full-fledged AI system as part of developing a more powerful digital backbone for processing growing volumes of information and sharing it across platforms, units, and domains [25].

Achieving these goals will require significant work on formulating a strategic vision (formulating a Danish strategy for defence AI); more precisely defining AI both operationally and in terms of support functions; testing, training, and evaluating AI performance; and training future defence AI specialists. In the latter case, changes to existing programmes and the development of new ones within Danish military education are needed [25]. Even today, Denmark is experiencing a shortage of technical translators and data science experts to develop comprehensive digital thinking in the industry [26].

The presence of a developed digital infrastructure and high internet penetration, which determines digital literacy and receptiveness to innovation, attracts significant investment (including external — especially from the US) into the Danish metaverse and cryptocurrency market. The industry's volume is expected to reach $2 billion by 2030 (as of 2025, it was $382 million). Danish companies demonstrate particular openness to integrating metaverse technologies with various goals (e. g., creating virtual trading platforms, immersive educational environments, and interactive entertainment platforms).[1] The distinctive face of the Danish metaverse market is shaped by the country's thriving gaming industry, which requires the ability to adapt to constantly changing customer preferences, such as for immersive digital experiences (including AR/VR). Finally, several research centres specialising in the metaverse operate in the country: the University of Southern Denmark's SDU Metaverse Lab and the Technical University of Denmark (DTU).[2]

Denmark's metaverse market is closely linked to the accelerated implementation of blockchain technology, as the latter provides a decentralised infrastructure, security, and transparency for metaverse applications. Furthermore, via blockchain, the Danish government shows a keen interest in potentially building a virtual economy. This seems logical given the successful examples of other small states (e. g., Caribbean nations and Bermuda), gradually taking leadership in developing new digital diplomacy practices in the financial segment.

The Danish government realises that the above projects will not be able to demonstrate efficiency and scale to the level of national digital transformation without adequate access to the latest scientific knowledge and international experience. In this regard, an initiative is currently being developed to create an interdisciplinary centre for research and consultation on the use of AI in society — a single point of access to knowledge. It would bring together leading universities and research centres.

A serious obstacle on this path could be the trend emerging in Denmark in recent years of a sharp decline in the ability to attract and retain digital technology

[1] Metaverse — Denmark. Market Insights, 2025, *Statista*, URL: https://www.statista.com/outlook/amo/metaverse/denmark?currency=USD#revenueGrowth_399245 (accessed 01.06.2025).

[2] Explore the Metaverse in Denmark, 2025, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark*, URL: https://investindk.com/set-up-a-business/metaverse (accessed 01.06.2025).

specialists. In turn, staff shortages play a decisive role in reducing the scale of innovation stimulation, which could negatively affect the competitiveness of Danish companies. For example, in 2023, about 2,400 IT specialists arrived in Denmark, and over 1,850 left the country (i. e., net inflow was only 550 people compared to 1,200 in 2022).[1] Thus, the groundwork made by the Danish government on the digitalisation track in previous years may not be sufficient to maintain innovative excellence and use it as a competitive advantage on the world stage. In the coming years, Denmark faces an urgent need to rethink approaches to shaping its attractiveness for global digital talent from around the world.

Conclusion

Denmark, having rapidly established a robust institutional and infrastructural foundation for state digitalisation, has secured a significant lead that will be challenging for competitors to match. Primarily, this concerns the deployment of basic infrastructure (digital identities, signatures, etc.), general infrastructure (national portals, communication platforms), the introduction of standardisation, and maintaining a high level of internet penetration among the population [27]. The commitment to short cycles for adopting updated digitalisation strategies (every four years) reflects Denmark's intention to maintain its leading global position. This ambition is further evidenced by its gradual transition towards the integration of AI, the metaverse, blockchain, and AR/VR technologies across both the civilian sector and the defence industry. The distinctiveness of the Danish case lies in its long-term, consistent, and systematic state policy of digital transformation, initiated as early as the 1960s.

These competitive advantages, in turn, predetermined Denmark's readiness to take responsibility for shaping global digitalisation standards, technology integration, and ensuring international information security, which today is increasingly encompassed by technology diplomacy. In practical terms, this is manifested in the appointment of a Tech Ambassador, the establishment of permanent offices supporting their activities, and the development of methodology (adjusting conceptual documents, developing an independent technology diplomacy strategy, etc.). Denmark became the first country in the world to define technology and digitalisation as a cross-cutting priority of its foreign and security policy. The Danish government views technologies as a conductor for strengthening international influence in the absence of a power element in foreign policy. In particular, Denmark is making efforts to ensure digital sovereignty, which would open the door for it to enter the elite club of countries possessing a full spectrum of national digital infrastructure.

[1] Denmark Faces Significant Decline in Ability to Attract and Retain Digital Talent, 2025, *Digital Hub Denmark*, URL: https://www.digitalhubdenmark.dk/post/denmark-faces-significant-decline-in-ability-to-attract-and-retain-digital-talent (accessed 20.12.2025).

At the same time, statistical data point to a concerning trend of IT specialist outflow from Denmark, which the government recognises as a potential threat to maintaining its competitive advantages on the international stage in the medium term.

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BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND LATVIA IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES: FREEDOM OF CHOICE OR GEOPOLITICAL IMPERATIVES?

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This article examines the dynamics of bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Latvia. Drawing upon established theoretical models, it identifies the key factors shaping these interactions and thereby provides a basis for projecting their probable development in the coming years within the evolving global order. Particular attention is devoted to the paradigm of interaction between great powers and small states that are not historically, politically, or geographically connected. The primary objective of this study is to assess the explanatory value of selected theoretical frameworks for analyzing a highly asymmetric and geographically distant bilateral relationship, exemplified by Sino—Latvian relations. The authors conclude that the development of relations between Latvia and China is entirely determined by the current stage of evolution of the international system and its contemporary geopolitical context, which reaffirms the validity of political realism theory.

Keywords:
China's foreign policy, Latvia's foreign policy, small states, political realism

Introduction. The problem of interaction between great powers and small states: theoretical aspects

The theoretical paradigm of interaction between great powers and small states located within the same macro-region has been extensively examined in contemporary scholarship. Within the neorealist framework, this issue is addressed, inter

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alia, in the work of Mihundo and Kalenzo [1], where small states are conceptualised as elements of the systemic balance of power whose behaviour is largely determined by the structure of the international system. A conceptually similar approach is advanced by Clive, Bailes, and Wivel [2], who analyse the role of small states in the formation and functioning of international security regimes. Significant attention to the conceptual dimension of the problem is devoted by Crowards [3], who proposes various criteria for defining the notion of a 'small state' and emphasises the contingent and context-dependent nature of this category. In Hey [4], the analytical focus shifts toward the factors shaping the foreign policy of small states, including domestic institutional constraints and external systemic pressures. The relationship between small states and great powers as a specific form of asymmetric interaction is examined in detail by Neumann [5], whereas Vital [6] concentrates on the broader issue of inequality among states within the international system. The modelling of small states' foreign policy is presented in East [7]. In Russian scholarship, a substantial contribution to the analysis of the role of small states in international relations has been made by Novikova [8], as well as by Zverev and Mezhevich [9], who address terminological and classificatory issues using the Baltic states as empirical cases. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that existing models of interaction between small states and great powers are heavily dependent on both the underlying theoretical paradigm and the interpretation of the very concept of the *small state*, which complicates their direct application to specific regional contexts and leaves room for further empirical investigation.

Modern scholars define the category of small states in different ways. The lower threshold separating microstates is usually estimated at 0.5—1.5 million inhabitants, while the upper boundary distinguishing small from medium-sized states by population varies between 5 and 30 million. The territorial criterion is equally ambiguous, with the United Nations classification setting the limit at approximately 100,000 square kilometres. In general terms, taking into account both quantitative and qualitative indicators, small states are characterised by a limited population, restricted human capital, and small territorial size [10, p. 346].

Broadly speaking, three major theoretical approaches can be identified in analysing the interaction between small states and great powers:

A. The Neoliberal approach emphasises the "reluctance of small states to resort to coercive means, their preference for multilateral mechanisms of conflict resolution, and their appeal to legal and institutional frameworks" [11, p. 256]. However, the postulated natural inclination of small states toward preserving the status quo and peacefully settling disputes appears highly questionable in the case of Latvia. At the present stage, Eastern European small states appear to exert influence on the policies of larger European powers in ways that contribute to heightened international tensions.

B. The Neorealist Approach, as formulated by Kenneth Waltz, posits that "the structural properties of the international system are largely independent of the efforts of small and medium-sized states, being the outcome of interactions among great powers" [10, p. 347]. These great powers thus constitute the system, or the environment, within which all states are compelled to operate. Consequently, the foreign policy of small states is determined less by internal factors and more by external conditions beyond their control. "This approach, known as a capacity-based investigation, argues that it is precisely the lack of capacity that shapes the foreign policy of small states and thereby diminishes their significance in the international system" [12, p. 27]. Moreover, some scholars suggest that "small states may only choose between the role of lambs—weak entities whose sole aim is survival—and that of jackals, seeking the patronage of stronger powers in hopes of gaining additional advantages" [12, p. 27].

C. Constructivism explains the behaviour of small states through the concept of soft power. Some scholars even introduce the notion of *virtual enlargement* as a means of transforming the positive moral connotations associated with smallness into strategies of effective mediation and the promotion of their political and economic systems to attract investment. A common feature of this approach is the rejection of the idea that small states are inherently deficient [12, p. 29], and an emphasis instead on their additional opportunities arising from the successful implementation of discursive strategies.

Much less attention in international relations research has been devoted to interactions between great powers and small states that share neither historical, political, nor geographical proximity. The present study aims to assess the applicability of the aforementioned theoretical models to the analysis of asymmetric and geographically distant bilateral relationships, using China—Latvia relations as a case study.

The relevance of any theoretical model can be confirmed or refuted only based on available empirical evidence. The empirical foundation of this study consists of open-access statistical data, which are presented by the authors in tabular and graphical form for the sake of clarity. The study employs qualitative, theory-guided document analysis of official foreign policy texts, with particular attention to foreign policy strategies such as "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions", "The National Security Concept of Latvia (2023)", as well as bilateral agreements between the People's Republic of China and Latvia concluded between 2000 and 2025 (with due consideration given to the specific features and conventions of diplomatic language). The analysis focuses on policy priorities, security narratives, and patterns of strategic reasoning articulated in official documents. The methodological framework of the study is grounded in a systems approach to the analysis of international relations. In addition, comparative-historical analysis is applied to identify key trends in interactions between the People's Republic of China and Latvia.

Thus, this article explores the dynamics of bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Latvia. Using established theoretical models, it aims to identify the main factors influencing these relations and, accordingly, to suggest a plausible forecast for their development in the coming years within the broader context of the changing global order.

History of Sino — Latvian relations

A substantial body of scholarship conceptualises the Baltic region as an arena of great-power politics. China's influence on the Baltic states has been examined by Sluka, Korobkov, and Ivanov [13], as well as by Guzenkova and Karpov [14], who situate the region within Beijing's broader strategic approach to Europe. French policy in the Baltic region is analysed by Chikhachev [15], while German strategy, together with its institutional and military-political dimensions, is examined in detail by Trunov [16]. The economic dimension of China's presence in the region is addressed by Shamakov, Mezhevich, and Guo Shohun [17], as well as by Varnavsky [18], who emphasize investment activity and trade-economic ties. A broader geopolitical perspective, within which the Baltic region is interpreted as a space of intensifying confrontation between Russia and the West, is presented by Khudoley [19], Mezhevich and Sazanovich [20], and Zverev [21]. Finally, Latvia's and other Baltic states' participation in NATO and the EU as a key determinant of their foreign policy orientation is analysed by Lanko and Dolzhenkova [22], Vivotnenko [23], and Pospelova [24]. At the same time, in most of the aforementioned works, the Baltic states, including Latvia, are treated primarily as objects of great-power politics or institutional integration, whereas their own strategies of adaptation to external competition and their capacity to leverage such competition in pursuit of national interests remain only fragmentarily examined.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Latvia share a relatively long and productive history of bilateral relations. China was among the first countries to recognise the restoration of Latvia's independence on 7 September 1991. Diplomatic relations were officially established shortly thereafter, on 12 September 1991.[1] The relationship between China and the Baltic states has been the subject of scholarly attention in China, the Baltic region, and Russia. However, Sino-Latvian relations have not always been free of tension. As noted by scholars Vinogradov and Danilyuk, "this primarily concerns the actions of the Latvian leadership, which in 1992 even proceeded to open a consulate of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in Riga. This was interpreted by the PRC as a violation of the One-China principle, resulting in the withdrawal of the Chinese

[1] Latvijas Republikas un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas divpusējās attiecības [Bilateral relations between the Republic of Latvia and the People's Republic of China], URL: https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-republikas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-divpusejas-attiecibas?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2F (accessed 01.06.2025).

ambassador and the de facto closure of the PRC embassy in Riga. Normal diplomatic relations were restored only in 1994, following Latvia's reaffirmation of its recognition of the One-China principle [25, p. 60]."

Other scholars examining the evolution of China—Latvia relations identify three key phases. The first phase (1991—2002) was characterised by the initial establishment of China—Baltic relations. The second phase, during the presidency of Hu Jintao, saw Latvia actively expanding cooperation with China, particularly in the fields of culture and education. The third phase, beginning in 2013, has prioritised cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative [26, p. 35].

Konstantin Khudoley identifies three dimensions of China's strategy in the region: "China operates in this region through three channels: its strategic partnership with Russia, the '16 + 1' format, and the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative." [27]. As noted by Tsvyk, cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, located along the transport routes of both the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, has in recent years become one of the top priorities of China's foreign policy in Europe [28, p. 109]. Other significant contributions by Russian scholars include studies by Mezhevich [29], Vinogradov and Golubkin [30], and Yakovlev [31].

Chinese research on this topic remains relatively limited. Yuan Shenglong notes that "Latvia's unique geographical advantages, stable economic environment, and strong willingness to cooperate have made it a partner of our country in the joint development of the 'Silk Road Economic Belt', in advancing infrastructure and transport-logistics connectivity with Eastern Europe, and in expanding bilateral cooperation" [32]. Mu Chonghuai and Song Dianjiao likewise emphasise Latvia's advantageous geographic position, describing it as a key transit and transportation hub linking Western Europe, Northern Europe, and Russia [33]. Other notable contributions include Suan An's work on Sino-Latvian cooperation [34] and Zhao Sha's analytical report on bilateral trade turnover with Latvia [35].

Authors in Western, English-language scholarship tend to approach Chinese initiatives with a degree of scepticism, calling for a more nuanced assessment of the risks they entail. For instance, Sarkar analyses China's prospects in the Baltic states, highlighting Latvia's increasing economic dependence on China between 2016 and 2021, as well as the country's efforts to mitigate this reliance [36]. In another study, a group of Baltic authors examine not only the expansion of economic ties but also the political risks associated with alignment with Chinese initiatives [37]. Andrijauskas likewise considers China a strategic threat to the Baltic states [38]. Scott argues that economic dependence on China has the potential to generate tensions not only among the Baltic states but also within the European Union as a whole [39]. Nonetheless, most

experts agree that the Baltic region is of strategic interest to China primarily as a transit hub, contingent upon the continuation of active trade between Russia and Europe.

Although the academic literature on this topic remains limited, there is an ongoing and intense debate regarding the present and future of relations between the People's Republic of China and Latvia. First, many existing studies exhibit a degree of political bias, particularly those produced within Western scholarly traditions. Second, much of the research overlooks the use of economic indicators as empirical tools for hypothesis testing. Third, a substantial portion of the literature has become outdated, given the profound changes in the global political landscape since early 2022.

As a result, academic discourse continues to reflect divergent views on the prospects for China's relations with the Baltic states, particularly Latvia, within the broader context of escalating tensions between Russia and the West. At the same time, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive analyses of Sino-Latvian relations. Addressing this issue may therefore provide a valuable case study for understanding China—Eastern Europe relations under evolving geopolitical conditions.

The political dimension of PRC—Latvia relations in the contemporary period (2014—2024)

First and foremost, it is necessary to examine the legal and regulatory framework governing bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Latvia. To date, the two countries have concluded 20 cooperation agreements across various fields, 15 of which remain in force. One of the earliest agreements in the modern period is the "Agreement on Cultural and Educational Cooperation", signed in 1996, which provides for cultural and educational exchanges, the organisation of sporting events, and the establishment of mechanisms for sustained interaction between governmental bodies.[1] As further evidence of the broad scope of cooperation between the two countries, one can also mention agreements from the early 21st century, such as "Agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes on Income and Capital",[2] "Treaty between the Republic of Latvia

[1] Latvijas Republikas valdības un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas valdības kultūras un izglītības sadarbības līgums [Cultural and educational cooperation agreement between the government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the people's Republic of China], URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/lv/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/415-latvijas-republikas-valdibas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-valdibas-kulturas-un-izglitibas-sadarbibas-ligums (accessed 03.06.2025).

[2] Agreement for the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to taxes on income and on capital, URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/417-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-for-the-avoidance (accessed 03.06.2025).

and the People's Republic of China on Mutual Judicial Assistance in Criminal Matters",[1] "Agreement on the Promotion and Protection of Investments"[2] and "Agreement on Maritime Transport".[3]

However, it is important to highlight cooperation in the economic sphere within the framework of bilateral interactions, rather than through international institutions. The "Agreement on Economic Cooperation" between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China, signed on April 15, 2004, defined the main economic priorities, which included industry and mining; agriculture, including agro-industry; science and technology; energy; communications; transport; tourism; and environmental protection.[4]

In the past decade, relatively few agreements have been concluded. Most of them have focused on promoting cultural, educational, and scientific ties between the two countries. In particular, the parties agreed: (1) to exchange visits by writers and artists; (2) to organise performing tours by artistic troupes; and (3) to hold cultural and art exhibitions.[5] In another agreement signed in 2018, the two countries agreed to engage in scientific and technological cooperation[6], which reflects a closer level of mutual trust and coordination. Thus, over the past

[1] Treaty between the Republic of Latvia and the People's Republic of China on Mutual Judicial Assistance in Criminal Matters, URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/410-treaty-between-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-mutual-judicial-assistance-in-criminal-matters (accessed 03.06.2025).

[2] Agreement on the promotion and protection of investments, URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/408-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-the-promotion (accessed 03.06.2025).

[3] Agreement on maritime transport, URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/406-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-maritime-transport (accessed 03.06.2025).

[4] Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China, URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/403-agreement-on-economic-cooperation-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of (accessed 03.06.2025).

[5] Agreement between the government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on cooperation in the field of culture, URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/1741-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-republic-of-china-on-the-cooperation-in-the-field (accessed 04.06.2025).

[6] Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the field of Science and Technology, URL: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/1784-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-cooperation-in-the (accessed 04.06.2025).

decades, relations between China and Latvia have expanded not only in practice but also through the development of a corresponding legal and institutional framework.

An important aspect of Sino-Latvian relations is the organisation of meetings and official visits between representatives of the two countries. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, cooperation extends beyond the economic and trade spheres to encompass areas such as foreign affairs, sports, transport infrastructure, tourism, and healthcare. Notably, an interparliamentary group on cooperation with China operates within the Latvian Saeima (Parliament).[1]

Table 1

Recent visits of Latvian officials to China (since 2017)

Date	Events
13 November 2024	Visit of State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andris Vīļumssons to Beijing; bilateral political consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Latvia and China
4—8 November 2019	Visit of Minister of Economics Ralfs Nemiro to China; participation in the opening of the 2nd China International Import Expo in Shanghai, and a visit to the city of Wuhan
17—21 October 2019	Visit of Minister of Defence Artis Pabriks to China; participation in a forum in Shanghai, and the opening of the International Military Sports Games
15—20 September 2018	Working visit of President Raimonds Vējonis to China; participation in the “Summer Davos” summit in Tianjin, organised by the World Economic Forum, and meetings with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang
23—31 August 2018	Visit of a group of Saeima deputies cooperating with the Chinese Parliament, as part of a joint visit of Baltic parliamentarians to China
7 July 2018	Bilateral meeting between Latvian Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis and Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang in Sofia, Bulgaria, during the 7th summit of the ‘16+1’ countries
16—22 June 2018	Visit of Minister of Transport Uldis Augulis to China (Haikou, Hangzhou, Beijing, Shenzhen)
8—12 January 2018	Visit of Speaker of the Saeima Ināra Mūrniece to China as part of a joint visit of the parliamentary speakers of the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) countries, including meetings with President Xi Jinping and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress Zhang Dejiang

[1] Latvijas Republika Saeima [Saeima Of The Republic Of Latvia], URL: https://titania.saeima.lv/Personal/Deputati/Saeima14_DepWeb_Public.nsf/structureview?readform&type=DG1&lang=LV&count=1000 (accessed 04.06.2025).

The end of Table 1

Date	Events
27 November 2017	Bilateral meeting between Latvian Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis and Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang in Budapest, Hungary, during the 6th summit of the '16+1' countries

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[1]

Table 2

Recent visits of Chinese officials to Latvia (since 2016)

Date	Events
16 December 2019	Visit of the Chinese Minister of Culture and Tourism to Latvia within the framework of the high-level '17+1' Tourism Conference
4—7 July 2018	Visit to Riga by Zhang Qingli, Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
7—8 September 2017	Visit to Riga by Ma Biao, Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
23—26 July 2017	Visit to Riga by Ma Xiaowei, Vice Minister of the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China
12—14 April 2017	Official visit to Riga by Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China.
4—6 November 2016	Bilateral official visit of Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council of China, to Latvia on November 4, 2016, and participation in the 5th summit of the heads of government of Central and Eastern European countries and China ('16+1') held in Riga on November 5, 2016
13—14 October 2016	Visit of Liu Haixing, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China and Secretary-General of the '16+1' Secretariat, to Riga; participation in the meeting of national coordinators of the '16+1' format, as well as political consultations with State Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andris Pildegovičs
28—30 May 2016	Working visit of Ji Bingxuan, Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress of China, to the Saeima in Riga

[1] Latvijas Republikas un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas divpusējās attiecības [Bilateral relations between the Republic of Latvia and the people's Republic of China], URL: https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-republikas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-divpusejas-attiecibas?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2F (accessed 04.06.2025).

The end of Table 2

Date	Events
16—17 May 2016	Participation of Dai Dongchang, Vice Minister of Transport of China, in the first meeting of Transport Ministers of the '16+1' countries held in Riga.
17—20 February 2016	Visit to Riga by Ning Jizhe, Vice Chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of China.

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[1]

Sino-Latvian relations demonstrate a positive dynamic across various sectors and are characterised by a long history and significant potential for further development. However, despite China's stated willingness to cooperate on the basis of equality with any country and its adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, bilateral relations are also marked by notable tensions. These are largely rooted in the Latvian government's distrust of the mutual political and economic benefits of cooperation. Several examples may be cited in support of this argument. Moreover, the Russia—Ukraine conflict, which began in 2022, may have served as a trigger for the deterioration of relations between China and Latvia amid the growing tensions between the West and the East.

It is particularly noteworthy that in 2023, the Latvian Parliament adopted a key foreign policy document — the National Security Concept — in which China is mentioned 16 times.[2] Latvia identifies China as a primary threat at the tactical, strategic, and systemic levels. According to this document, "China's interests thus often conflict with the Western position based on universal values and the global security architecture."[3] Latvia thus positions itself as part of the Western world, framing it as its responsibility to counter what it perceives as a Chinese challenge at the level of values, particularly in opposition to alternative models of global order. Moreover, from the perspective of the Latvian government, China — despite its formally balanced foreign policy approach — is viewed as a military and strategic partner of Russia, which contributes to its classification as an unfriendly state vis-à-vis Latvia: "Joint Russian-Chinese military exercises are part of the strategic partnership and rapprochement between the two coun-

[1] Latvijas Republikas un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas divpusējās attiecības [Bilateral relations between the Republic of Latvia and the people's Republic of China], URL: https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-republikas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-divpusejas-attiecibas?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2F (accessed 04.06.2025).

[2] Par Nacionālās drošības koncepcijas apstiprināšanu [National Security Concepts], URL: https://www.vestnesis.lv/op/2023/189.1 (accessed 04.06.2025).

[3] Ibid.

tries, which is directed against Western countries and involves joint positioning with Russia, including on global security issues"[1]; "the number of cyber-attacks originating from Chinese territory is increasing in Latvia".[2] It is also noteworthy that Latvia has proposed and implemented practical measures for overseeing Chinese investments in its national economy: "It is essential to continue working in the public and private sectors to reduce strategic dependencies and vulnerabilities, including by carefully assessing Chinese investments in all sectors of the economy".[3]

An analysis of Latvia's new National Security Concept, in which China is identified as the main geopolitical threat, helps to clarify the reasons behind the cooling of relations between the two countries. In 2023, another incident occurred that further escalated the already tense bilateral relationship. Chinese ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, stated in an interview with French news channel LCI: "According to international law, these former Soviet states do not have a valid status because there is no international agreement granting them the status of sovereign states".[4] Statements by official representatives that raise issues of national sovereignty serve as direct evidence of a visible deterioration in bilateral relations. Moreover, in 2024, the situation further deteriorated when a group of Latvian parliamentarians who had visited China were accused of corruption, as the visit had been funded by the host country.[5]

Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and Latvia unfolds both bilaterally and within broader multilateral frameworks, including the "China +" format and various international forums. This regional mode of engagement is not novel in Chinese foreign policy; a comparable precedent is the China—Africa cooperation model. The most dynamic expansion of such arrangements occurred in the 2010s. In retrospect, the first half of the 2010s represented a particularly productive phase in European—Chinese relations. During this period, the European Union sought new drivers of growth, aiming to diversify its external partnerships in the aftermath of the economic crisis, while the PRC pursued access to new markets capable of absorbing its accumulated capital and labour

[1] Par Nacionālās drošības koncepcijas apstiprināšanu [National Security Concepts], URL: https://www.vestnesis.lv/op/2023/189.1 (accessed 04.06.2025).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Chinese Ambassador to France Sparks Controversy Over Unresolved Sovereignty of Former Soviet States; Ukraine and Baltic Three Express Dissatisfaction, *Hong Kong 01,* 23.04.2023, URL: https://www.hk01.com/article/890690?utm_source=01articlecopy&utm_medium=referral (accessed 06.06.2025).

[5] Skandal s Podnebesnoi: Latviya vpala v antikitaiskii psikhoz [Scandal with the Middle Kingdom: Latvia has fallen into anti-Chinese psychosis], 09.02.2024, *RuBaltic.ru*, URL: https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/20240208-skandal-s-podnebesnoy-latviya-vpala-v-antikitayskiy-psikhoz/ (accessed 06.06.2025).

force.[1] This format helped to stimulate economic cooperation between European countries and China without imposing any political conditions. Interestingly, a report by the European Parliament on the activities of the '16+1' group concludes that there is a positive correlation between the level of Euroscepticism in an EU member state and the extent of its cooperation with China.[2] For the European Union, the possibility of direct engagement between member states and the PRC represents a strengthening of their economic and political autonomy, which may ultimately have negative implications for the cohesion of the Union as a whole.

Latvia joined this framework in 2016 with the Riga Declaration of the '16+1' Summit, aimed to promote the development of ports, roads, railways, and logistical hubs under the Adriatic—Baltic—Black Sea Seaport Cooperation initiative.[2] This served the interests of both parties, as it facilitated trade between the European Union and China while also attracting Chinese investment into the infrastructure of the Baltic states. In the action plan adopted following the same Riga summit, the participants agreed to: "welcome Latvia in establishing the China-CEEC Secretariat on Logistics Cooperation in Riga."[4] Thus, Latvia assumed an important role as a coordinator for the implementation of logistics projects between China and the countries of Eastern Europe.

This active initial phase of cooperation between the PRC and Latvia within the '16+1' format generated a certain degree of optimism. However, by late 2022, both Estonia and Latvia announced their withdrawal from this cooperation format, citing concerns over excessive Chinese influence on their respective economies.[5] Lithuania had previously withdrawn from the "17+1" format (renamed following Greece's accession to the group in 2019) in 2021. Several factors may explain this decision, as reflected in statements by officials of the Republic of Latvia. As noted by a representative of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Latvia will continue to pursue constructive and pragmatic relations with China, both bilaterally and within the framework of EU—China cooperation, based on mutual benefit, respect for international law, human

[1] China and Europe: What Was It? The Rise and Crumbling of the '16+1' Format, *Russian international affairs council*, URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/china-and-europe-what-was-it-the-rise-and-crumbling-of-the-16-1-format/ (accessed 11.06.2025).

[2] China, the 16+1 format and the EU 2018, *Think Tank European Parliament*, URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2018)625173 (accessed 06.06.2025).

[2] Riga Declaration, 2016, URL: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474160.htm (accessed 06.06.2025).

[4] Riga Guidelines, 2016, URL: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474162.htm (accessed 06.06.2025).

[5] Estonia, Latvia withdrawing from China's 16+1 cooperation format, 11.08.2022, *ERR News*, URL: https://news.err.ee/1608682231/estonia-latvia-withdrawing-from-china-s-16-1-cooperation-format (accessed 11.06.2025).

rights, and the rules-based international order.[1] This formulation is significant in that it highlights the role of the EU as Latvia's external political representative, indicating the country's willingness to delegate part of its sovereignty to a supranational level. According to researcher Melnikova: "In terms of turnover, the performance of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia was also quite modest, which means that they could afford to earn political points by leaving the format without risking economic losses [40]."

Latvia's current foreign policy priority is likely to position itself as an integral part of the European community, driven by concerns over the so-called "Russian threat." Moreover, the present geopolitical climate—shaped by issues of European security—compels smaller states to seek support from Western European allies. A more rigid stance toward China aligns more closely with the positions of the EU and U.S. leadership than a balanced approach based on national interests. It is therefore not surprising that the three Baltic states were the ones to demonstratively terminate direct cooperation with the PRC within the 17+1 format, signalling their loyalty to the EU's central authority in the hope of gaining additional influence among Western partners.

The economic aspect of PRC—Latvia relations in the last decade (2014—2024)

This study proposes to evaluate the economic relations between China and Latvia using several key indicators. First, it examines the trade balance between the two countries over the past ten years. Second, it compares the export and import volumes of Chinese companies with those of Latvia's other major trading partners. Third, it analyses data on China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Latvia during the same period. This approach enables an assessment of the significance of the Chinese economic presence in Latvia, as well as the extent of the country's dependence on Chinese investment.

Overall, China holds a significant, though not dominant, position in Latvia's economy. According to the 2023 edition of the Atlas of Economic Complexity, China accounted for only 1.14% of Latvia's total exports. In terms of imports, however, the share was noticeably higher, amounting to 3.82%.[2] For comparison, even with Russia, defined by Latvia as an unfriendly state, these shares amounted to 6.50% in exports and 2.53% in imports. In terms of total imports over the past ten years, China ranks only seventh. Over the same period, China does not even appear among Latvia's top ten export destinations. More detailed quantitative data are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

[1] [1] Estonia, Latvia withdrawing from China's 16+1 cooperation format, 11.08.2022, *ERR News*, URL: https://news.err.ee/1608682231/estonia-latvia-withdrawing-from-china-s-16-1-cooperation-format (accessed 11.06.2025).

[2] Atlas of economic complexity, URL: https://atlas.hks.harvard.edu/explore/geomap?-exporter=group-1&importer=country-428 (accessed 12.06.2025).

Table 3

Latvia's top import partners (2014—2024)

Country	Import value (EUR)
Lithuania	4 480 310 867
Germany	2 527 940 649
Poland	2 436 161 431
Estonia	1 871 962 673
Finland	1 211 708 663
Netherlands	1 039 559 366
China	831 064 174
Italy	757 004 981
Sweden	711 635 956
Belgium	457 200 527

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Trade.[1]

Table 4

Latvia's top export partners (2014—2024)

Country	Export value (EUR)
Lithuania	3 392 611 508
Estonia	2 200 447 308
Germany	1 219 448 672
Sweden	1 040 722 439
Russia	1 037 863 379
Great Britain	995 337 286
Poland	858 472 532
Denmark	801 905 338
Netherlands	621 212 567
Finland	556 703 866

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Trade.[2]

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of trade turnover between China and Latvia, as well as a comparison of export and import volumes over the past ten years. The graph clearly shows that the share of Chinese imports significantly exceeds that of exports throughout the observation period. While Latvia's export levels to

[1] Latvijas tirdzniecība pēc valsts [Latvian trade by country], URL: https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/countries/import/2014-2025-2024 (accessed 06.06.2025).
[2] Latvijas tirdzniecība pēc valsts [Latvian trade by country], URL: https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/countries/import/2014-2025-2024 (accessed 06.06.2025).

China have remained relatively stable over the past decade, the share of imports from China has steadily increased since 2016, the year Latvia joined the '16+1' format. The main export commodities from Latvia include timber and mineral products, whereas the principal import items from China consist of machinery, mechanical appliances, and electrical equipment. Thus, China effectively exchanges high-tech goods for raw materials.

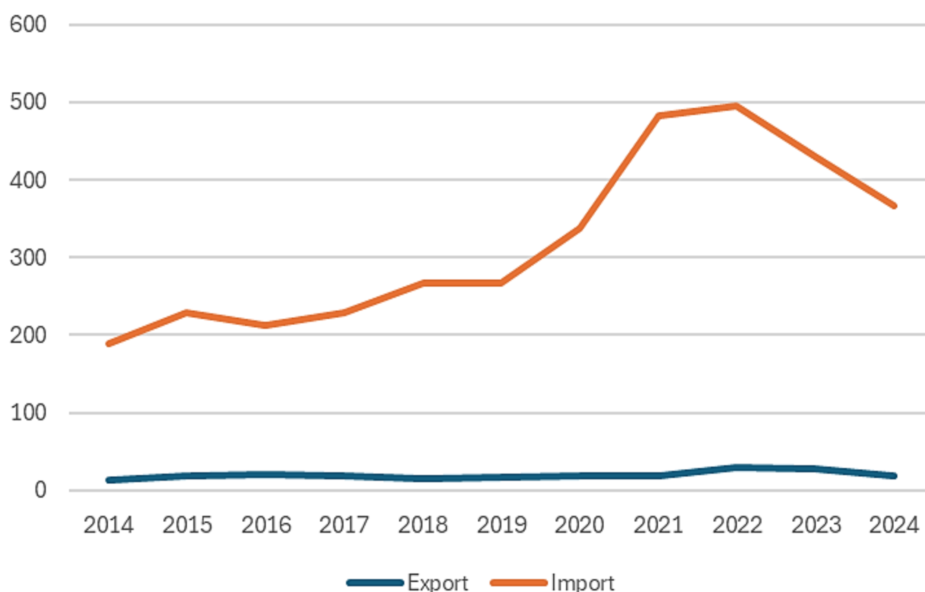

Fig. 1. Latvia's trade with China (2014—2024) (million US dollars)

Figure compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Trade.[1]

Finally, an important indicator of China's economic presence in Latvia is the level of foreign direct investment (FDI). As shown in Figure 2, the discourse among Latvian political elites concerning excessive Chinese economic influence appears to be greatly exaggerated. In fact, neighbouring countries play a much larger role and thus exert greater political and economic influence on Latvia. Specifically, even in 2021 — China's most successful year in terms of investment — Chinese FDI in Latvia amounted to only 104 million euros, which is 13 times less than German investment and 18 times less than Russian investment. In this context, the views of several scholars who regard the notion of a "Chinese threat"

[1] Latvijas ārējā tirdzniecība pēc valsts [Latvia's foreign trade by country], URL: https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/countries-selected/import/2024/TOTAL-XVI/CN (accessed 06.06.2025).

as a form of political witch-hunting seem justified. The data suggest that even at the peak of bilateral economic engagement, China held only a secondary position in Latvia's economy.

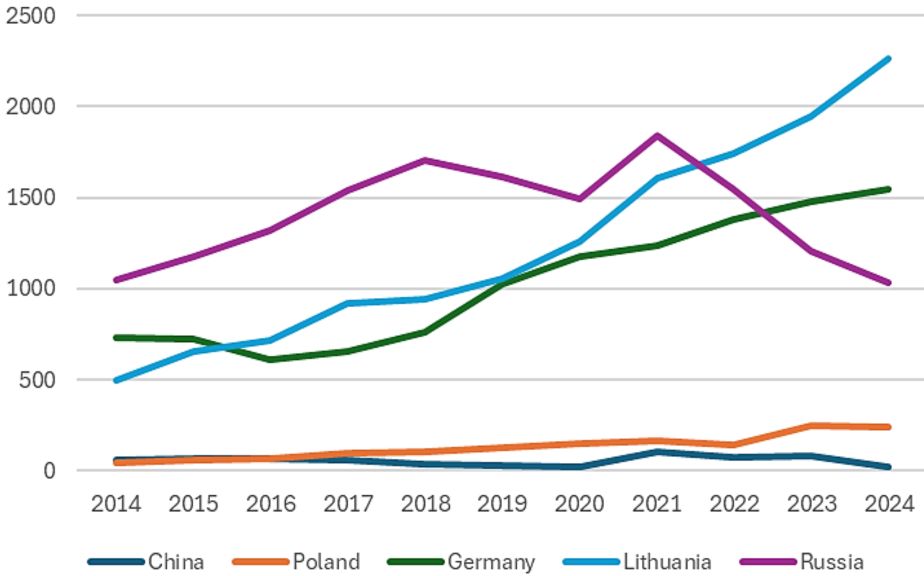

Fig. 2. List of countries investing in Latvia from 2014 to 2024 (million EUR)

Compiled on the basis of data from the official website of the Bank of Latvia.[1]

Conclusion

The case of China—Latvia relations, when examined through a neorealist lens, constitutes a near-ideal example of "distant" interaction between a great power and a small state lacking deep historical, political, or geographical interconnectedness. In such interactions, outcomes are shaped less by the autonomous rational choices of the actors than by structural geopolitical imperatives generated by the external international environment.

The principle of the sovereign equality of states undoubtedly underpins contemporary international law and formally structures bilateral relations. However, theoretical frameworks developed within neoliberalism and constructivism to explain interactions between small states and great powers appear to be most applicable to a unipolar international system characterised by global governance mechanisms centred on a single locus of decision-making.

Political neorealism, by contrast, posits the existence of a factual inequality among states, which differ not only in population size, territorial scope, and economic and military capabilities, but also in their roles within international institu-

[1] Statistikas Datubaze [Statistical database], URL: https://statdb.bank.lv/lb/Data/128/f81072350e77ab0172acdbe4a2af7e42-html (accessed 07.06.2025).

tions and global politics. States of vastly unequal power coexist and interact with one another, even when separated by thousands of kilometres. Relations between the People's Republic of China and Latvia represent a clear empirical example of such interaction. The principal historical and geographical link between these two countries is their shared neighbour, Russia. This factor, together with relations within the quadrilateral framework of China—Russia—EU—United States, plays a key role in shaping the system of transcontinental Eurasian interaction, within which Latvia is involved regardless of its own interests.

What, then, are the interests of China and Latvia in developing bilateral cooperation? China is interested in expanding mutually beneficial economic and political cooperation with the European Union, particularly against the background of its strategic rivalry with the United States. Latvia is a member of the EU; however, it does not possess significant political influence over the formulation of coordinated foreign policy decisions within the Union. Moreover, unlike, for example, Hungary, Latvia, in the current geopolitical context, relying on the backing of stronger allies, has positioned itself as a state actively contributing to the escalation of confrontation between the West and the East. This posture has increasingly complicated China's use of Latvia as a convenient transit territory for the movement of Chinese goods through Russia to the EU.

Such transit was of considerable importance for China, which, in one of its key foreign policy documents — "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions"— identifies as a common objective the development of harmonious relations with "all countries, both leading global powers and small states alike, on the principles of equality and mutual respect." This vision is accompanied by efforts to develop a diversified 'continental—oceanic' transport and logistics system that emphasises the primacy of land-based geoeconomic interactions [41, p. 41]. However, since Latvia is by no means the only potential corridor linking the Asia-Pacific region with Western Europe, the intensification of geopolitical tensions among great powers has predictably led to a decline in Latvia's significance within China's foreign policy.

As for Latvia's interests, its clear economic incentives in expanding trade with China and attracting Chinese investment cannot be pursued in ways that contradict the broader policies of the major European powers that play a leading role within the EU. Moreover, given Latvia's position as a vocal proponent of comprehensive confrontation between Western countries and Russia, China is perceived domestically as a latent partner of Russia.

Within a realist framework, Latvia's behaviour appears logically consistent. As a small state pursuing its interests in Europe and relying on economic, political, and military support from the European Union and NATO, Latvia tends to

assume the role of a secondary actor, aligning itself with proximate great powers that are geographically close, culturally and civilizationally affiliated, and guided by similar economic principles in organising their economic systems.

Under the current stage of intensified confrontation among great powers, China and Latvia exist in parallel, occupying different positions within the global political system. While China continues to exert indirect influence on Latvia through trade flows, EU—China cooperation, and other channels, Latvia exerts no reciprocal influence on China. It is therefore likely that the future configuration of EU—China relations will be determined outside Riga, and that any potential resumption of Chinese transit to Europe via Latvia will depend primarily on Russia's policies and its relations with the EU. Prospects for the dynamic development of China—Latvia relations exist only within a unified European space—that is, in the event of a restoration of pragmatic, mutually beneficial relations between Latvia and Russia in particular, and between Russia and the EU more broadly.

Consequently, doubts arise as to the claim that "a number of realist approaches, especially those concerning the role and position of medium and small states, have become morally outdated and fail to accurately reflect current realities" [10, p. 347]. The trajectory of China—Latvia relations is largely determined by the current configuration of the international system and its prevailing geopolitical context, which underscores the continued explanatory power of political realism. Latvia lacks the resources required for fully autonomous foreign policy decision-making; accordingly, the international system is better understood not as a horizontal, egalitarian network but as a vertical, hierarchical structure. Moreover, contemporary geopolitical conditions increasingly resemble the confrontational dynamics characteristic of the Cold War era. As noted by Kaledin and Elatskov, "the modern bipolar geopolitical community, the confrontational Baltic geopolitical region, de facto consists of participants with differing geopolitical trajectories, dividing the region into two geopolitical subregions: the Baltic—Euro-Atlantic and the Baltic—Eurasian" [42, p. 154]. The previously promising and actively developing ties between China and Latvia, observed over the past decade, have now been reduced to mere diplomatic representation, with minimal capacity for planning or implementing long-term, mutually beneficial projects.

Latvia has never been a key economic partner for China, just as China has never occupied such a position for Latvia. Nevertheless, cooperation across various fields could have yielded tangible benefits for both sides. By foregoing potential economic gains in favour of alignment with the positions of its principal partners within the EU and NATO, Latvia effectively relinquishes a measure of its policy autonomy in exchange for prospective security guarantees. At the same time, given the continuation of diplomatic consultations and the ongoing development of cultural ties, the future of bilateral relations may still be approached with cautious optimism, as China remains open to dialogue with all states.

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONS

ROTWLY

ASSESSMENT OF ENERGY EFFICIENCY OF RUSSIAN REGIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC DECARBONISATION AND SUSTAINABLE TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

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In modern conditions, boosting the energy efficiency of regional economies by reducing energy consumption by businesses and households stands as an imperative for their greening. Russia's legal regulations establish concrete deadlines for reaching sustainable development targets. Against this backdrop, the study aims to evaluate the current energy efficiency status of Russian regions, thereby identifying prospects (by 2030) for achieving decarbonization and sustainable development goals in their economies. The author's methodology, spanning multiple stages, centres on calculating growth rates for relevant energy efficiency indicators over 2016—2022, followed by their extrapolation to 2030. The findings indicate that few Russian regions can meet the established targets by the deadline. The reasons behind this projected shortfall are as diverse as the regions themselves. However, data analysis reveals a common trend: insufficient growth rates in reducing industrial energy intensity, energy consumption by economic entities, and atmospheric pollutant emissions across most Russian regions. This, in turn, underscores the need for regional authorities — accounting for each subject's unique developmental specifics and features — to implement active regional policies whose tools align seamlessly with all sustainable development components. The practical value of this research lies in its preliminary energy efficiency estimates for regions, which not only spotlight emerging 'energy' issues but also enable authorities to adopt congruent, timely decisions based on their identification, fulfilling the immanent sustainability tasks set by national leadership.

Keywords:
greening of the economy, energy consumption, energy intensity, energy losses, emissions into the atmosphere, industries

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Introduction

By Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation[1] of 21 September 2019, Russia adopted the Paris Agreement on climate change at the national level.[2] This decree defines a framework for environmental sustainability, emphasises the importance of promoting non-carbon benefits, and calls for the development of rational models of consumption and production. In the Message of the President of the Russian Federation to the Federal Assembly (dated February 29, 2024),[3] the Head of State, within the framework of implementing the environmental and climate agenda, emphasised the need to reduce harmful emissions and pollutants by half by 2030. Relevant regulatory documents were adopted,[4] aimed at decarbonisation of the Russian economy and its sustainable development.

During Russian Energy Week on 26 April 2024, the President of Russia, speaking at the plenary session, noted the record growth in energy consumption in the country, which exceeded even the figures recorded during the time of the Soviet Union, and linked this growth to the expansion of the Russian economy.

Indeed, during the existence of the Soviet Union, the rapid growth of the Soviet economy was largely driven by increasing energy consumption across all sectors. For example, from 1960 to 1970, electricity consumption increased 2.52 times (from 292.3 to 735.7 billion kWh); from 1970 to 1980, it grew by 1.73 times; and from 1980 to 1990, by 1.33 times (from 1,274.8 to 1,689.9 billion kWh). Over the same periods, gross social product increased by 2 and 1.68 times, respectively, while from 1980 to 1990 it grew by 1.5 times (from 1,078.5 to 1,631.6 billion roubles). In addition, by 1982, the Soviet Union ranked first

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[1] On the Adoption of the Paris Agreement, Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation № 1228 of 21 September 2019, 2019, *Garant*, URL: https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/72661694/?ysclid=m1mamth6qa446143873#review (accessed 15.10.2024).

[2] Paris Agreement, 2018, *UN*, URL: https://www.un.org/ru/climatechange/paris-agreement (accessed 15.10.2024).

[3] The President's Message to the Federal Assembly, 2024, *the President of Russia*, URL: http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/73585 (accessed 15.10.2024).

[4] On approval of the Strategy for Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation with Low Greenhouse Gas Emissions until 2050, Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation dated October 29, 2021 № 3052-r, 2021, *Garant*, URL: https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/402894476/?ysclid=m1mcwbelh6949807444 (accessed 15.10.2024) ; On approval of the Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated October 26, 2023 № 812, 2023, *Garant*, URL: https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/407782529/?ysclid=m1mcybsnaf714206529 (accessed 15.10.2024) ; On approval of the Comprehensive State program of the Russian Federation "Energy Saving and Energy Efficiency Improvement", Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation dated September 9, 2023 № 1473, 2023, *Garant*, URL: https://base.garant.ru/407632842/?ysclid=m1md1oum22851285733 (accessed 15.10.2024) and others.

in the world in steel and pig iron production, oil and iron ore extraction, timber, cement, coke, mineral fertilisers, and the production of mainline diesel and electric locomotives.[1]

The achievements of previous decades shaped a typical development model of the Soviet economy, in which economic growth was accompanied by a significant increase in energy consumption. This kind of “inheritance” is still evident in the contemporary Russian economy. For example, a comparison of the growth rates of Russia’s gross domestic product (GDP) (at constant comparable prices) with the growth rates of energy consumption demonstrates a close relationship: in 2018, the figures were 102.8 % and 101.74 %, respectively; in 2019, 102.2 % and 100.18 %; in 2020, 97.3 % and 97.74 %; in 2021, 105.6 % and 104.65 %; and in 2022, 97.9 % and 101.60 %.[2] In other words, it can be argued that significant changes towards the formation of rational production models and a substantial reduction in energy consumption have not yet occurred. At the same time, Western scholars have demonstrated the possibility of achieving economic growth not through an extensive increase in the extraction of non-renewable resources, but through the development of a low-carbon economy model [1; 2].

At the same time, it should be noted that the adopted national regulatory legal acts, which strengthen the current trend towards greening the domestic economy, are largely neglected due to the non-necessity of their implementation, and this, in turn, leads to the reproduction of the previous model of the “brown” economy, when the country’s economic growth is ensured by even greater consumption of energy resources, forming an outdated model with unstable development, while, according to current documents, it is necessary, on the contrary, to reduce energy consumption, to increase energy efficiency and the level of decarbonisation of the economy, to strive to achieve the designated goals in the field of sustainable development.

The term *decarbonisation of the economy* has not yet received a strict scientific definition, and it basically refers to the process of transition to a low-carbon economy associated with the reduction (complete elimination) of carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere [3—5]. This process fits into the concept of sustainable development, on the basis of which the world community has developed 17 interrelated goals for the sustainable development of territories.[3]

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[1] *National Economy of the USSR in 1990*, 1991, Goskomstat of the USSR, Statistical Yearbook, Moscow, Finance and Statistics, 752 p. ; *National Economy of the USSR in 1982*, 1983, CSU of the USSR, Stat. Yearbook, Moscow, Finance and Statistics, 1983, 574 p.

[2] *Russian Statistical Yearbook 2023*, 2023, Rosstat. Statistical collection, Moscow, 701 p. ; *Industrial Production in Russia 2023*, 2023, Rosstat, Statistical collection, Moscow, 259 p.

[3] Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, 2025, *United Nations Conference on Trade and Development*, URL: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ares70d1_ru.pdf (accessed 15.10.2024).

Russia, having aligned itself with the international community in this regard, has developed its own targets, among which, in this context, the following can be highlighted: task 7.3 (“To double the global energy efficiency index by 2030”), which implies reducing the energy intensity of the Russian economy; task 9.4 (“To modernize infrastructure and re-equip industrial enterprises by 2030”), which assumes a reduction in carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions into the atmosphere per unit of added value.

Official documents adopted by Russia oblige the country to adhere to the “green” agenda [6; 7] and to fulfil its commitments in this area. In this regard, it seems necessary to analyse the preliminary results achieved so far and to assess the prospects for the timely attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals by Russian regions by 2030.

Literature review

When describing the role of the state and its policy in ensuring sustainable and low-carbon economic development at the national level, a number of scholars identify one of the most significant challenges for Russia — the problem of regional differentiation. To promote the formation of a “green economy,” academic economists propose taking into account the specific features of regional decarbonisation processes, as well as the particular ways in which macro-regulatory measures are perceived by “spatially distributed centres of economic activity and the population” [8; 9].

A similar view is shared by the authors of studies [10—12], in which emphasis is placed on the typologisation of regional systems and the formation of regional clusters as a basis for sustainable economic development. Other studies adopt not a territorial but a sectoral approach: in particular, they examine the consequences of decarbonisation for the energy sector, non-ferrous metallurgy, and the oil refining industries of the Russian economy. They also identify the priorities of sustainable economic development in Russia, taking into account the “rational use of natural resources, environmental safety, and adaptation to climate change” [13—17].

In addition, there are scientific publications that evaluate the activities of enterprises and organisations [18—20], various complexes and sectors of the economy [21], and determine the impact of decarbonisation trends on sustainable development [22; 23]. However, there are not enough “assessment” works that reveal the current state of sustainable development of regional economies and determine the prospects for territorial and sectoral activities at the regional level. For example, in the article [24], only after-the-fact monitoring of target indicators with annual dynamics (2020—2021) is carried out. A similar approach is applied in the article [25], where the authors focus on the analysis of natural resources and assessment of the current state of the environment at the meso-level and at the same time do not assess the potential for sustainable development

of the region in the foreseeable future. In another study [26], the prospects for the region's sustainable development are assessed on the basis of a retrospective analysis using 25 indicators. However, this approach does not allow for an accurate determination of the degree of influence exerted by individual factors on the ongoing changes and, to a large extent, "blurs" the results, making the estimates overly general. Similarly, article [27] employs a system of indicators for the environmental ranking of regions consisting of 18 variable indicators, which also tends to average the results obtained.

It should be noted that many authors rely on aggregated data [28—29]; however, as demonstrated above, such smoothing primarily makes it possible to identify only general trends in economic development. Moreover, the use of different units of measurement often complicates the analysis of large datasets and does not provide sufficiently precise estimates. In this regard, it seems necessary to supplement the assessment of decarbonisation and sustainable development of regional economies with a comparative analysis based on a specific and selective set of indicators. This approach makes it possible to compare not absolute values or heterogeneous units of measurement in an interregional context, but rather the growth rates of the main indicators reflecting progress towards the goals and objectives set by the Russian leadership.

Materials and methods

Improving the competitiveness and energy efficiency of the economy, among other things, fundamentally involves reducing energy costs. According to Russia's electricity balance for 2022, electricity consumption by industry (sections B + C + D + E) accounts for approximately 52 %, household consumption for about 16 %, and losses in the power grid for around 9 %. Thus, industry, households, and grid losses together account for nearly 77 % of total electricity consumption. This circumstance predetermined the selection of two main indicators for analysis: (1) energy intensity (electricity intensity) of regional industries and (2) electricity consumption by the population, taking into account energy losses in the grid.

Several methodological remarks should be made regarding the selected indicators. First, due to the lack of data on the consumption of all energy resources at the regional level in the national statistical database of Rosstat, the analysis is based on available data on electricity consumption across the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. Second, according to the federal statistical work plan, the energy intensity of the Russian economy is calculated only in relation to gross domestic product; thus, no regional calculation is provided by Rosstat (at least, the necessary data are not available in open sources). In this study, this limitation is addressed by calculating the "energy intensity (electricity intensity) of regional industries" as the ratio of electricity consumed by industry (sections B + C + D + E — mining, manufacturing, etc.) to gross regional product

(million kWh per 10,000 roubles per year at constant 2016 prices). Third, within the national set of Sustainable Development Goal indicators, Rosstat defines the indicator ‘electricity consumption per capita’, which measures the electricity consumption of an individual resident in a region but does not reflect the total electricity consumption of the regional population as a whole. Such an aggregate measure is necessary for assessing the energy consumption of Russian regions within their administrative-territorial boundaries. For this reason, the second indicator is used in the present study (see indicator 2).

The choice of the third indicator, emissions of pollutants into atmospheric air from stationary sources per unit of added value, is also justified, as it fully corresponds to Target 9.4 (see Introduction) and is directly related to Target Indicator 13.2.2, total annual greenhouse gas emissions, included in the national set of Sustainable Development Goal indicators for Russia. The calculation method for the third indicator is similar to that of the first: the numerator is emissions of pollutants into atmospheric air from stationary sources, while the denominator is gross value added (Section B: Mining and Section C: Manufacturing) (thousand tonnes per 100,000 roubles at constant 2016 prices).

The study pursues the following objectives:

— to calculate the values of the selected indicators for the regions of Russia;

— to determine the growth rates of these indicators across the regions of Russia;

— to identify the target values of the selected indicators for each region;

— to estimate the forecast values of the selected indicators for the regions of Russia;

— to compare the target and forecast values of the selected indicators;

— to develop conclusions and practical recommendations based on the results obtained.

The research methodology proceeds in several stages.

At the first stage, statistical data for 2016 and 2022 were collected. The year 2016 was selected as the baseline year because the relevant Resolution was adopted only in 2015,[1] making the analysis of an earlier period impractical. The year 2022 was chosen as the reporting year, as more recent comparable data were not available in official domestic statistics at the time of writing. At the second stage, the values of the first and third indicators for 2016 and 2022 were calculated. At the third stage, growth rates for the reporting year relative to the baseline year were calculated for all 85 constituent entities of the Russian Federation across the three indicators. At the fourth stage, the target values for 2030 were determined for all regions by dividing the 2016 values of the first and third indicators by two. This approach follows the requirement to achieve Targets 7.3 and 9.4, namely,

[1] Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, 2025, *United Nations Conference on Trade and Development*, URL: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ares70d1_ru.pdf (accessed 15.10.2024).

"by 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency," which in practical terms implies halving both energy intensity and atmospheric emissions. The second indicator constitutes an exception: here, the target value was defined as a 10 % reduction in energy consumption by 2030. This threshold reflects the average level of excessive energy consumption in Russia over a number of years, which, ideally, should be reduced to zero. At the fifth stage, the forecast values of the targets were estimated by multiplying the calculated regional (individual) growth rates by two. The coefficient of "2" was chosen deliberately, since 2022 represents the midpoint of the 2016—2029 interval, effectively dividing this period into two equal parts. This makes it possible to extrapolate the growth rates observed during 2016—2022 to the subsequent period up to 2029, assuming that the existing rates of change remain stable; hence, the use of the coefficient "2." At the same time, it should be noted that this extrapolation method does not account for the influence of external and internal factors such as economic, political, and technological changes, structural transformations in the economy, or major institutional reforms. These factors are treated as constant in order to assess the achievability of the targets in a "pure" form under the assumption of continued growth at the same rate. At the final stage, the results were summarised, conclusions were drawn, and recommendations were formulated on the basis of the data obtained.

Results

The highest energy intensity (electricity intensity) of industries (sections B + C + D + E) in both 2016 and 2022 was observed in the following constituent entities, which ranked among the ten most energy-intensive regions: the Murmansk, Kemerovo, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk, and Vologda regions, as well as the Republics of Khakassia and Karelia. The Smolensk and Kursk regions and Zabaykalsky Krai, which were among the ten most energy-intensive regions in 2016, had dropped out of this anti-ranking by 2022 and were replaced by the Lipetsk region, Krasnoyarsk Krai, and the Jewish Autonomous region.

The least energy-intensive regions of Russia, which in both 2016 and 2022 showed the lowest industrial electricity consumption per unit of added value, included the Sakhalin and Kaliningrad regions, the Yamalo-Nenets and Nenets Autonomous Okrugs, the Republics of Sakha (Yakutia) and Dagestan, as well as St. Petersburg and Moscow. In 2022, the Altai Republic and the Astrakhan region entered the top ten least energy-intensive regions, while the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug and Kamchatka dropped out of the ranking.

The calculations show that 37 out of 85 regions of the Russian Federation have positive growth rates in energy intensity, whereas achieving the established target requires not only a downward trend but also a twofold reduction in energy intensity by 2030. This suggests that these regions are unlikely to meet the target

within the specified timeframe. Of the remaining 48 regions characterised by negative dynamics, a subset of seven is likely to attain the target value by 2030, according to forecast estimates (Table 1).

Table 1

Energy intensity (electrical capacity) of industries in regions of the Russian Federation, million kWh per 10,000 roubles

Subject of the Russian Federation	2016	2022	2022 compared to 2016	By 2030	
	Reported value	Reported value	Growth rate, %	Target value	Forecast
Trans-Baikal Territory	0,4741	0,2348	– 50,47	0,2370	0,1163
Moscow	0,0711	0,0447	– 37,23	0,0356	0,0280
Republic of Buryatia	0,3914	0,2602	– 33,51	0,1957	0,1730
Republic of Dagestan	0,0965	0,0642	– 33,49	0,0483	0,0427
Ivanovo region	0,2784	0,1900	– 31,78	0,1392	0,1296
Republic of North Ossetia	0,3008	0,2142	– 28,79	0,1504	0,1525
Altai Republic	0,1413	0,1023	– 27,56	0,0706	0,0741

Compiled and calculated on the basis of Rosstat data.[1]

An analysis of the energy intensity of industrial sectors across the constituent entities of the Russian Federation shows that the vast majority of regions (91.76 %) are unlikely to achieve the target values by 2030 due to insufficient progress in reducing energy intensity, even in those regions that demonstrate negative growth rates (41 regions).

According to the second indicator, the highest electricity consumption levels in both 2016 and 2022 were found in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Moscow region, Samara region, Sverdlovsk region, Irkutsk region, Krasnodar Krai, and Krasnoyarsk Krai. The lowest levels were observed in the Jewish Autonomous Okrug, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Republics of Tyva, Altai, Ingushetia, and Kalmykia, the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, and the Magadan region. This distribution is largely explained by population size: regions with larger populations tend to demonstrate higher energy consumption, and vice versa. At the same time, Russia recorded a 6.99 % increase in electricity consumption over the period analysed. Of the country's 85 regions, only 26 showed negative growth rates in energy consumption. Among these, 12 regions are unlikely to meet their 2030 targets, given that their rate of reduction remains extremely low (Table 2).

[1] *Russian Statistical Yearbook. 2023*, 2023, Rosstat, Statistical Collection, Moscow, 701 p. ; *Industrial production in Russia. 2023*, 2023, Rosstat, Statistical Collection, Moscow, 259 p. ; *Regions of Russia. Socio-economic indicators. 2023*, 2023, Statistical collection / Rosstat, Moscow, 2023. 1126 s.

Table 2

Electricity consumption by the population (including grid energy losses) in regions of the Russian Federation, million kWh

Subject of the Russian Federation	2016	2022	2022 compared to 2016	By 2030	
	Reported value	Reported value	Growth rate, %	Target value	Forecast
Vladimir region	2172,1	2121,4	–2,33	1954,89	2071,88
Kostroma region	1072,9	1030,4	–3,96	965,61	989,58
Smolensk region	1583	1545,8	–2,35	1424,70	1509,47
Kaliningrad region	1990	1955,5	–1,73	1791,00	1921,60
Saint-Petersburg	8443	8345,7	–1,15	7598,70	8249,52
Sevastopol	853,5	826,4	–3,18	768,15	800,16
Saratov region	3894,4	3773,1	–3,11	3504,96	3655,58
Ulyanovsk region	1777,7	1763	–0,83	1599,93	1748,42
Sverdlovsk region	9235,8	9092	–1,56	8312,22	8950,44
Republic of Tyva	480,1	474,4	–1,19	432,09	468,77
Krasnoyarsk Krai	7134,3	6799,9	–4,69	6420,87	6481,17
The Trans-Baikal Territory	1792	1737,3	–3,05	1612,80	1684,27

Compiled and calculated on the basis of Rosstat data.[1]

As can be seen from Table 2, a formal reduction in regional household energy consumption by only 1–4% over several years does not imply the automatic achievement of the established targets. Moreover, such a marginal decline to some extent obscures the real problem of improving energy efficiency at both the national and regional levels. Although statistical reporting may formally indicate negative dynamics, desirable in principle, the actual rate of reduction is clearly insufficient. As a result, only 14 regions are likely to meet the 2030 target based on this indicator: Vologda, Kemerovo, Kaluga, Nizhny Novgorod, Magadan and Astrakhan regions; Perm and Altai krais; Nenets and Khanty-Mansi autonomous okrugs; the republics of North Ossetia–Alania, Komi and Khakassia; and Moscow.

With regard to the third indicator, a similar pattern is observed as for the previous two, with largely the same regions exhibiting relative stability in both 2016 and 2022. The highest levels of atmospheric pollution were recorded in the Jewish Autonomous region, Vologda, Amur and Kemerovo regions, and Krasnoyarsk and Primorsky Krais. By 2022, the Chechen Republic, Zabaykalsky Krai, and the Republics of Altai and Buryatia were no longer among the ten most environmentally burdened regions, while Kamchatka Krai, Irkutsk region, and the Republics of Karelia and Kalmykia had joined them.

[1] *Russian Statistical Yearbook. 2023*, 2023, Statistical Collection, Rosstat, Moscow, 701 p. ; *Industrial production in Russia. 2023*, 2023, Statistical Collection, Rosstat, Moscow, 259 p. ; *Regions of Russia. Socio-economic indicators. 2023*, 2023, Rosstat, Moscow, 1126

Among the leading "clean" regions in 2016 were Kaliningrad, Sakhalin, Ulyanovsk, Moscow, and Kaluga regions; Moscow; Saint Petersburg; and the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic. By 2022, however, some of these regions had lost their positions, while the Vladimir region, the Republic of Ingushetia, the Nizhny Novgorod region, and the Republic of Dagestan entered the top ten.

Fifty of Russia's 85 regions recorded negative growth rates. However, calculations show that not all of them will be able to reach the 2030 targets. Only 20 regions — if their rates of decline continue — are likely to meet the targets (Table 3).

Table 3

Emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere from stationary sources, per unit of added value, thousand tons per 100,000 roubles

Subject of the Russian Federation	2016	2022	2022 compared to 2016	By 2030	
	Reported value	Reported Value	Growth rate, %	Target value	Forecast
The Chechen Republic	0,3080	0,0711	–76,93	0,1540	0,0164
Republic of Dagestan	0,0462	0,0142	–69,23	0,0231	0,0044
Murmansk region	0,2171	0,0903	–58,43	0,1086	0,0375
The Jewish Autonomous region	0,5403	0,2251	–58,34	0,2702	0,0938
Moscow region	0,0339	0,0157	–53,88	0,0170	0,0072
Republic of Tyva	0,1819	0,0845	–53,53	0,0909	0,0393
Astrakhan region	0,1144	0,0539	–52,86	0,0572	0,0254
Tula region	0,0667	0,0375	–43,77	0,0334	0,0211
The Trans-Baikal Territory	0,2620	0,1524	–41,82	0,1310	0,0887
Ivanovo region	0,0897	0,0523	–41,68	0,0448	0,0305
Penza region	0,0622	0,0370	–40,45	0,0311	0,0221
Arkhangelsk region without the autonomous region	0,1434	0,0855	–40,36	0,0717	0,0510
Tomsk region	0,1717	0,1076	–37,34	0,0858	0,0674
Rostov region	0,0635	0,0399	–37,23	0,0318	0,0250
Chelyabinsk region	0,1259	0,0803	–36,24	0,0629	0,0512
Komi Republic	0,2223	0,1421	–36,07	0,1111	0,0908
Republic of Buryatia	0,2664	0,1706	–35,96	0,1332	0,1092
Kirov region	0,1152	0,0745	–35,35	0,0576	0,0481
Smolensk region	0,0934	0,0652	–30,18	0,0467	0,0455
Karachay-Cherkess Republic	0,1500	0,1049	–30,06	0,0750	0,0734

Compiled and calculated on the basis of Rosstat data.[1]

[1] *Russian Statistical Yearbook. 2023,* 2023, Rosstat, Statistical Collection, Moscow, 701 p. ; *Industrial production in Russia. 2023*, 2023, Statistical collection, Rosstat, Moscow, 259 p. ; *Regions of Russia. Socio-economic indicators. 2023*, 2023, Statistical collection of Rosstat, Moscow, 2023, 1126 p.

The conclusion that can be drawn from Table 3 does not differ substantially from the previous findings: to achieve the targets within the required timeframe (by 2030), the rate of reduction in pollutant emissions into the atmosphere for the 30 constituent entities of the Russian Federation demonstrating negative dynamics must be significantly higher and should amount to at least 7 % annually. As for the remaining 35 regions with positive growth rates — where the dynamics should unequivocally be negative — greater attention from the authorities and the adoption of appropriate policy measures are required.

The aggregated quantitative results for all three indicators considered, taking into account the analysed dynamics and the likelihood of achieving the targets in the field of economic decarbonisation and sustainable regional development by 2030, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Assessment of the energy efficiency of Russian regions (by number by regions)

Target / growth rate	Positive	Negative and insufficient	Negative but sufficient
Energy intensity (electrical intensity) of the region's industries	37	41	7
Population electricity consumption (including grid losses)	59	12	14
Emissions of pollutants into the atmospheric air	35	30	20

Compiled and calculated on the basis of Rosstat data.[1]

As can be seen from Table 4, only 7 regions are capable of meeting the requirement of halving energy consumption (electricity consumption) in industry. At the same time, 6 of these 7 regions also participate in achieving other targets. For example, Zabaykalsky Krai, the Republic of Dagestan, Ivanovo region, and the Republic of Buryatia are capable of halving their emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere, while the Republic of North Ossetia—Alania and Moscow are able to reduce household energy consumption (electricity consumption) to the required level.

[1] *Russian Statistical Yearbook. 2023, 2023*, Statistical Collection, Rosstat, Moscow, 701 p. ; *Industrial production in Russia. 2023*, 2023, Statistical Collection, Rosstat, Moscow, 259 p. ; *Regions of Russia. Socio-economic indicators. 2023*, 2023, Statistical collection, Rosstat, Moscow, 1126 p.

Discussion

The results of the study show that the majority of Russian regions have not yet demonstrated the capacity to achieve the established targets for a variety of reasons, which are as diverse as the regions themselves. Some of these factors can be illustrated by the example of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation included in the North-Western Federal District.

Reducing energy intensity (electricity intensity) in industrial sectors is theoretically possible in at least two ways: first, through the introduction of less energy-intensive but equally productive equipment into the production process; and second, through an increase in output while maintaining low levels of energy consumption. In practical terms, improving regional energy efficiency is therefore a dual task, and the role of the state in this process is crucial.

It is evident that the creation of favourable conditions for investment in fixed assets by regional authorities can and should contribute to the modernisation or replacement of production facilities, the introduction of energy-saving technologies, and the reduction of negative environmental impacts. At the same time, regional authorities possess a sufficiently broad range of instruments to achieve more substantial results, from administrative and restrictive measures to fiscal and incentive-based mechanisms. These include setting limits on energy consumption by economic entities, granting tax benefits and preferences to enterprises that modernise or upgrade their fixed assets, and providing investment subsidies to organisations that develop and implement the best available technologies aimed at minimising environmental damage.

However, given the specific features and development patterns of individual regions, such measures should not be applied universally. Instead, they should be differentiated and targeted. For example, according to the sectoral structure of gross value added in 2022, the dominant sector in the Komi Republic (47.7 %), Arkhangelsk region (37.2 %), and Nenets Autonomous Okrug (84.7 %) was mining (Section B), whereas in the Leningrad (30.0 %), Murmansk (33.1 %), Novgorod (40.3 %), and Vologda (51.6 %) regions, the leading sector was manufacturing (Section C). Consequently, government regulatory measures aimed at improving energy efficiency should be concentrated in the most energy-intensive industries and regions, with policy interventions designed in a more precise and targeted manner.

Improving regional energy efficiency by reducing the values of the second indicator, energy consumption (electricity consumption) by the population, taking into account energy losses in the grid, also requires differentiated measures on the part of regional authorities. Explaining increases or decreases in regional energy consumption solely by population size is not always sufficiently justified.

For example, according to the electricity balance for 2022, in the Kaliningrad region (30.51 %) and Pskov region (32.62 %), the share of electricity consumption

attributed to the category of “urban and rural population” is approximately the same, while the population of the Kaliningrad region (1,027.7 thousand people) is almost twice as large as that of Pskov region (613.4 thousand people). At the same time, the growth rates differ significantly: in the Kaliningrad region, the rate is negative (–1.73 %), whereas in Pskov it is positive (+17 %). This clearly indicates that regional energy-saving policy measures should also differ, ranging from supporting the emerging trend towards lower energy consumption in the Kaliningrad region to tariff restrictions and measures aimed at limiting excessive energy consumption in the Pskov region.

A similar comparison can be made with Saint Petersburg, which demonstrates a growth rate close to that of the Kaliningrad region (–1.15 %). However, the policy approach to improving energy efficiency in this case should be different. For example, the share of urban and rural population accounts for only 18.5 % of total electricity consumption in the region, while energy losses in the grid are 12.30 %. This proportion differs substantially from that observed in the two regions discussed above, both in terms of the internal ratio between these indicators and in relation to territorial size. The area of the Kaliningrad region is 10.5 times larger than that of Saint Petersburg, and the area of the Pskov region is 38.5 times larger, while grid losses in these regions are only about 1.8 times lower (10.55 % and 10.33 %, respectively).

Consequently, reducing energy consumption in Saint Petersburg depends to a large extent on state regulatory measures implemented by regional authorities, which should be aimed primarily at reducing electricity losses in the power grid.

An unusual pattern emerges when analysing the third indicator, emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere from stationary sources per unit of added value. The Komi Republic (–0.36 %) and Arkhangelsk region (–0.40 %), despite demonstrating only marginal negative growth rates of less than 1 %, nevertheless appear capable of achieving the target values by 2030. At the same time, the Leningrad region (–6.89 %), Vologda region (–13.83 %), and Saint Petersburg (–27.27 %), which show significantly higher negative growth rates, are unlikely to ensure the timely achievement of the target for this indicator.

The relatively favourable results of the Komi Republic and Arkhangelsk region may be associated with a decline in manufacturing output, as indicated by official statistics: in 2022, the GRP and GVA volume index decreased to 96.4 % and 92.4 %, respectively. This circumstance does not imply that achieving environmental targets necessarily requires a reduction in economic performance. However, it clearly indicates that, as in the previous cases, regional socio-environmental and economic policy must be coordinated across all components of sustainable development. State regulatory measures should therefore be designed to achieve higher environmental results without compromising the attainment of broader economic and social objectives.

Conclusion

The conducted study on assessing the energy efficiency of Russia's regions in the context of economic decarbonisation and territorial sustainable development makes it possible to draw the following important conclusions.

First, most regions of the country continue to adhere to an outdated model of the "brown" economy and retain the legacy of the Soviet economic system, under which economic growth was achieved through higher energy consumption at the expense of significant environmental damage. Contemporary policy documents and regulatory frameworks require a different approach grounded in the principles of energy saving and energy efficiency. Therefore, the further sustainable development of regional economies should be accompanied by the adoption of more modern, productive equipment and energy-saving technologies that minimise negative environmental impacts.

Second, to achieve the established targets by 2030, it is necessary to accelerate the rate of reduction in the energy intensity of industrial sectors and household energy consumption, taking into account losses in the grid and emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere. Regional authorities possess a sufficient set of regulatory instruments and policy tools to address these issues. However, their application should be selective and locally adapted, aimed precisely at specific energy-related problems and ultimately leading to more substantial positive results within the required timeframe.

Third, the specific features and development patterns of individual regions determine the need for differentiated, and in some cases unique, mechanisms for building management systems aimed at improving regional energy efficiency. This requires the coordination and harmonisation of various regional policies, including economic, environmental, and social measures.

Fourth, strengthening the responsibility of regional authorities, together with stricter oversight and higher expectations from federal authorities, may contribute to more effective and progressive results in the transition towards the sustainable development of regional economies.

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INEQUALITY AND SPATIAL EFFECTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIGITAL ECONOMY ACROSS RUSSIAN REGIONS

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The relevance of the study stems from the growing digital inequality among Russian regions amid the rapid development of the digital economy. Disparities in digitalization levels perpetuate existing interregional gaps and create risks of concentrating human and technological potential in a limited number of regions. The aim is to identify and quantify the dynamics and spatial structure of digital inequality in Russian regions (2011—2023), differentiating it into primary (infrastructural — internet access) and secondary (human capital and competency-based — ICT employment) levels. The methodology combines cartographic methods of quantile classification, the Gini index, kernel density estimation (KDE), and Moran's index to verify neighborhood effects. The results indicate divergent dynamics: a steady reduction in the infrastructural gap in internet access is accompanied by an increasing concentration of human capital in ICT. Significant spatial autocorrelation is confirmed, manifested in the formation of stable clusters of leading and lagging regions. Conclusions. The key challenge for regional development is shifting towards overcoming the secondary divide, necessitating a transition from universal infrastructure policies to targeted measures that stimulate the diffusion of digital competencies and the development of human capital in peripheral regions.

Keywords:
digital inequality, regional development, mobile internet, fixed internet, neighbourhood effects

Introduction

The relevance of the problem of interregional digital inequality manifests itself in several aspects. First, it acts as a significant barrier to the country's technological development. Studies have identified a relationship between the level of

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digitalisation and socio-demographic characteristics. The share of Internet users varies by type of settlement [1], while the spread of mobile Internet is associated with per capita income [2], and access to networks depends on the age, income, and educational attainment of residents [3]. Digital inequality is not reducible to differences in access to technology; it reproduces and deepens existing socio-economic disparities [4].

Second, the empirical verification of the "neighbourhood effect" in digitalisation processes is a priority task of regional policy. Although theoretically spatial proximity can accelerate the diffusion of technologies [5], these processes, given the high spatial differentiation of Russia [6], have been studied only fragmentarily and require systematic monitoring [7].

Third, empirical evidence indicates a relationship between digital development and household income. Digitalisation has heterogeneous effects on income distribution across regions [2]. For instance, in China, the digital economy has been found to have a non-linear (inverted U-shaped) effect on income inequality [8].

The aim of the study is to identify and quantitatively assess the dynamics and spatial structure of digital inequality across regions of the Russian Federation, distinguishing between primary (infrastructural) inequality, defined as access to mobile and fixed Internet, and secondary (human capital and competence-based) inequality, reflected in employment in the ICT sector.

Research objectives were defined as follows: (1) to assess the dynamics of regional inequality in terms of access to mobile and fixed Internet (2011—2023) using the Gini index and Lorenz curves; (2) to analyze changes in the concentration of ICT employment across regions using the Gini index and kernel density estimation (KDE); (3) to identify spatial clusters of regions for each of the three indicators (mobile Internet, fixed Internet, ICT employment) by calculating global and local Moran's indices; (4) to test for the presence and direction of neighbourhood effects for each level of the digital divide.

Observed trends reveal a contradiction: technological logic and state policy are oriented toward infrastructure equalisation, whereas studies consistently show a strong link between digitalisation and socio-economic stratification, as well as heterogeneity in spatial effects. This suggests that the dynamics of the infrastructure and human capital divides may be asynchronous, and that the influence of neighbourhood effects may differ across various dimensions of digital development. Hence, the following research hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Infrastructural digital inequality (the primary divide) among Russian regions is decreasing, as evidenced by a declining Gini index for mobile and fixed Internet penetration rates.

H2: Human capital and competence-based digital inequality (the secondary divide) is increasing, which is expressed in a rising Gini index for the share of ICT-employed individuals and the formation of a multimodal distribution according to the KDE method.

H3: For all three digitalisation indicators, there is positive spatial autocorrelation, confirmed by statistically significant Moran's index values.

H4: Neighbourhood effects manifest differently: for infrastructural indicators, they contribute to convergence, whereas for ICT employment, they reinforce polarisation, producing clusters of leading and lagging regions.

The research problem is to identify and explain the mechanisms driving the reproduction of spatial digital inequality despite a formal reduction in the infrastructural divide, as reflected in the emergence of stable hierarchical clusters of leading and lagging regions and the growing concentration of human capital and competence-based potential in a limited number of territories.

Theoretical foundations of the study

Digital inequality refers to the gap in opportunities to access, use, and derive benefits from digital technologies, driven by differences in digital and social context, skills, and patterns of Internet use [9]. It encompasses not only access to infrastructure (broadband and mobile Internet [10]), but also the level of digital competencies, as well as the accessibility of content and services.

Four factors influence the effectiveness of digitalisation [9]: (1) technical means (quality of devices, software, Internet speed [11]); (2) autonomy of use (access at the right time and place, freedom of use); (3) social support networks (assistance from experienced users); (4) experience (level of digital literacy).

The neighbourhood effect (spatial effect) is a phenomenon of mutual influence of digitalisation levels among geographically proximate territories through the spillover of tacit knowledge, innovations, or policy measures, generating externalities for regional competitiveness.

Below, we review selected academic studies on digital inequality and neighbourhood effects (Table 1).

Table 1

Selected studies on digital inequality and the identification of neighbourhood effects

Key findings	Author(s), year
Spatial analysis revealed clustering of digital inequality in the EU; the neighbourhood effect influences competitiveness, necessitating appropriate interregional policy	Tislenko M., 2024 [12]
The digital economy increases income and helps reduce inequality through industrialisation and inclusive initiatives	Shen C. et al., 2025 [13]
The digital economy generates spatial spillovers, which are amplified by Moore's and Metcalfe's laws	Zhao & Zhang, 2020 [14]
The widening gap in wages and income in developed countries is largely driven by technological changes	Card & DiNardo, 2002 [15]

The end of Table 1

Key findings	Author(s), year
Digital inequality is driven by education, income, place of residence, and social status, reinforcing social barriers. Overcoming it requires infrastructural, educational, and inclusive measures	Heeks, 2022 [4]
Digital inequality limits access to institutions; digital inclusion and literacy development are crucial for full economic participation	Sharma et al., 2018 [16]

Three levels of digital inequality are distinguished [1]: (1) access inequality — differences in Internet connectivity [17; 18] and technology diffusion, where industrial innovation is highly correlated with the level of digitalisation [19]; (2) skills inequality — differences in competencies [20] and the quality of human potential, where, given high levels of access, it is precisely the number of specialists and the purposes of technology use that determine inequality; (3) opportunity inequality — the gap in the application of digital technologies in everyday life and firm-level activities [4].

To address regional disparities, it is important to account for the specific characteristics of the primary and secondary digital divides. The primary divide refers to inequality in physical access to ICTs (computers, Internet, mobile communications). It exists both between countries and within them — between urban and rural residents, as well as among groups differing in income, education [21], and age. Traditional studies (e. g., by the International Telecommunication Union) have focused on this level, measuring the penetration of broadband access and mobile communications.[1]

As basic access has spread, it has become evident that having a connection does not guarantee equal opportunities. Alongside the primary divide, the concept of the secondary digital divide (DiMaggio, Hargittai) emerged, focusing on the quality of access and skills in technology use. This divide manifests itself in differences in competencies: some use the internet for work, education and civic engagement, whilst others use it in a more limited way, for entertainment and communication. Inequality in skills persists even when physical access is universal [22]. The secondary divide, linked to human and social capital, exacerbates social inequality in the knowledge economy. As the OECD emphasises, digital literacy is becoming a key factor of stratification, and overcoming it requires not so much infrastructural investments as educational programmes and inclusive content.

[1] e. g., Measuring digital development Facts and Figures 2025, 2025, *ITU. Telecommunication Development Sector*, URL: https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2025/ (accessed 03.02.2026) ; Global Connectivity Report 2025, 2025, *ITU. Development Sector*, URL: https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/D-IND-ICT_MDD.GCR-2025-4/ (accessed 03.02.2026).

Focusing on the first two levels is methodologically justified, as official statistics allow for the identification of structural preconditions of inequality. The reduction of the primary divide and the widening of the secondary divide indicate a likely future exacerbation of the opportunity divide (the third level), which sets the agenda for subsequent qualitative research.

Neighbourhood effects do not always resolve inequality problems. Contrary to expectations, digital networks tend to transform and reproduce geographical differences, creating isolated communities. Successful projects are not replicated universally, which requires authorities to implement measures that stimulate interterritorial linkages for information justice.

This study introduces a terminological distinction. Digital inequality refers to a multidimensional state, a system of disparities between regions, statistically measured as a distribution (e. g., Gini index). The digital divide refers to a specific manifestation of this inequality between groups (e. g., leaders and outsiders), the 'distance' between poles. Inequality is the general characteristic of distribution, whereas the divide is its structural consequence. An increase in inequality (a rise in the Gini index) deepens the divide. The analysis of 'inequality' (using Gini indices, Moran's indices, KDE) serves as the basis for conclusions regarding the dynamics of the infrastructural and human capital 'divides'.

Research Methodology

The methodological framework comprises several approaches.

1. Cartographic methods with quantile clustering visualize regional differences in access to digital technologies and employment. Partitioning into equal groups reveals the mobility or persistence of inequality classes, enabling comparative analysis of shifts in digital development.

2. The Gini index and Lorenz curve measure inequality in communication accessibility and the share of ICT-employed individuals. This instrument has been used to assess digital infrastructure in federal districts [23] and at the international level, revealing the concentration of technologies in developed regions [4].

3. Kernel density estimation (KDE) [24; 25] analyses the distribution of regions across digitalization indicators. A smooth KDE curve better reflects the shape of the distribution (normal, bimodal, skewed) than a histogram; multiple peaks indicate clustering, while dispersion points to a gap between leaders and outsiders [26].

4. Spatial autocorrelation (Moran's index) identifies neighbourhood effects. The index evaluates the relationship between values in neighboring regions, capturing clustering (positive autocorrelation) or dissimilarity (negative autocorrelation). Values range from −1 (dispersion) to +1 (complete clustering); values close to 0 indicate random distribution. Lavrikova and Suvorova, using a sample of regions, demonstrated the influence of geographical location on the concentration of population and industry [27]; other studies confirm the importance of spatial effects for development strategies [28; 29].

Spatial autocorrelation (Moran's index) is a statistical property that captures the clustering of similar values. The neighbourhood effect is the presumed mechanism (diffusion of technologies, knowledge, resources, or policies). Significant autocorrelation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for spillover effects: clustering may be driven by common external factors (policy, economic structure, historical characteristics). This study establishes the fact of persistent spatial clustering, thereby providing a foundation for investigating the specific mechanisms involved.

The objects of the study are the regions of Russia for which the necessary statistical data for the period 2011—2023 are available.[1] The source of data is the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat). This ensures representativeness and a unified data collection methodology. To ensure the comparability of the data series for 2011—2023, the following measures were taken: (1) the indicators for the number of mobile and fixed broadband subscribers (per 100 people) were compiled by Rosstat using a consistent methodology throughout the entire period, ensuring full comparability of the series; (2) for the ICT employment indicator, a transition from OKVED-2001 to OKVED2-2014 occurred during the analysed period. Therefore, the official recalculated Rosstat series for the aggregated category of "ICT activities" were used, which made it possible to minimise the discontinuity associated with the change in classification. Consequently, the dynamics of the indicator reflect actual changes in the employment structure.

All calculations and maps were performed by the authors using unified data series. The source data are available in statistical yearbooks and on the Rosstat website.

Research Results

Geography of Digitalisation and Spatial Distribution

Mobile broadband consumption is one of the indicators of digitalisation. An increase in this indicator reflects the accessibility of services, the bridging of the digital divide, improvements in service quality (speed, stability, price), and digital inclusiveness (use of the Internet in healthcare, education, and the public sector). This indicator should not trend toward 100 %; rather, the target is access for all who need it and are ready to use it. Today, penetration in Russia has reached a high level, but a significant interregional gap persists (Fig. 1). The development of infrastructure in lagging regions is an important task for ensuring equal access to digital services.

[1] To ensure data comparability, a balanced panel of regions within the 2023 boundaries was constructed. Data for the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol are available only from 2014 onward; therefore, these entities were excluded from calculations of the Gini index and KDE for the years 2011—2013. The contiguity matrix for Moran's index was constructed for 85 regions, but Crimea and Sevastopol were not included in the calculations prior to 2014 due to missing data.

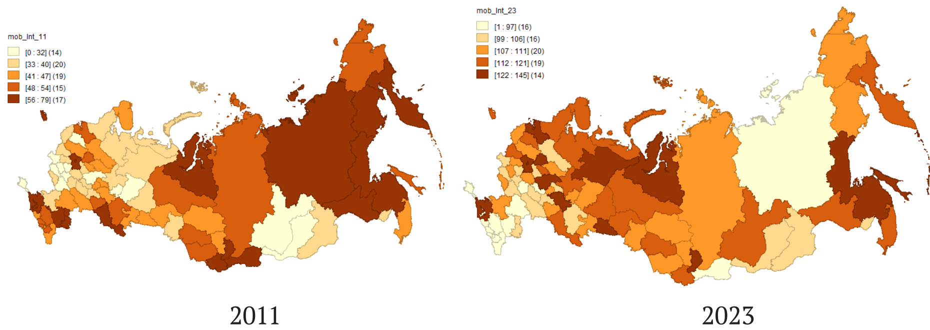

Fig. 1. Cartogram of Russian regions by number of active mobile broadband Internet subscribers, people per 100 inhabitants, in 2011 and 2023, by quantiles[1]

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the GeoDA software package. Regional boundaries correspond to 2023. Values in parentheses indicate the number of regions within the range.

Over the period analysed, all regions experienced significant growth in mobile Internet penetration. Whereas in 2011 the values for most regions ranged from 30 to 60 subscribers per 100 people, by 2023 the indicator had exceeded 100 almost everywhere, indicating the widespread diffusion of the technology. The highest values are observed in Saint Petersburg and Leningrad regions (145.4), Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (143), and Moscow and Moscow region (142.5).

The high indicator in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug can be explained by a combination of factors: a developed oil and gas industry provides high incomes and effective demand; a 'point-based' settlement pattern (administrative centers and shift camps) makes network deployment economically feasible; for the population in the Far North, mobile Internet serves as the primary channel of communication with the outside world; and the business segment is represented by large fuel and energy corporations with stable demand for data transmission. Thus, economic prosperity, compact urbanisation, and socially conditioned demand outweigh the infrastructural challenges of remote territories.

High indicators are also characteristic of Tatarstan (126.9), Khabarovsk Krai (139.6), and the Kaliningrad region (117.9). In terms of average annual growth rates, Irkutsk region (16.88 %), Nizhny Novgorod region (15.56 %), and Perm Krai (13.92 %) are the leaders. Since 2017, growth has accelerated due to the expansion of 4G networks and affordable pricing plans; in 2020—2021, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an additional impulse. In 2022—2023, growth rates slowed, which may indicate market saturation.

Another indicator of digitalisation is fixed Internet, measured as the number of active broadband access subscribers (per 100 people) (Fig. 2).

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[1] To verify the obtained results regarding the distribution of regions by the indicator, an additional robustness check of the findings was conducted. Constructing cartograms using the equal intervals method instead of quantiles did not alter the overall geographical pattern.

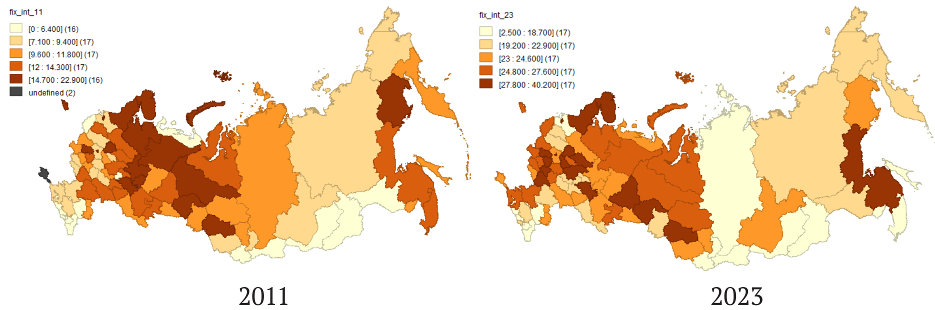


Fig. 2. Cartogram of Russian regions by number of active fixed broadband Internet subscribers, people per 100 inhabitants, in 2011 and 2023, by quantiles

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the GeoDA software package. Regional boundaries correspond to 2023. Values in parentheses indicate the number of regions within the range.

Analysis of fixed broadband access demonstrates steady growth in most regions: average values increased from 10—15 subscribers per 100 people in 2011 to 20—30 by 2023. The highest growth rates are observed in regions with initially low levels of connectivity: the Republic of Crimea (from 0.5 in 2014 to 23.1 in 2023), Nenets Autonomous Okrug (from 2.8 in 2016 to 24.0 in 2023), and the Chechen Republic (from 0.1 in 2011—2013 to 6.6 in 2023).

The highest values are recorded in Karelia (40.2), Murmansk region (36.0), Moscow (35.8), and Novosibirsk region (35.1); the lowest are found in Ingushetia (2.5), Adygea (7.9), and Tyva (9.9). This indicates the persistence of significant digital inequality driven by economic, infrastructural, and geographical factors.

In Moscow and Saint Petersburg, where the indicator was initially above average, growth rates are lower (Moscow: 22.9—35.8; Saint Petersburg: 19.0—28.5), which may be explained by market saturation and a shift of users toward mobile Internet.

In certain regions, a decline in the indicator was observed: Krasnoyarsk Krai (16.9—15.9) and the Komi Republic (30.2—25.7). This is attributable to a demand shift in favour of mobile technologies, population decline, and migration outflows (in the Komi Republic).

In remote regions (the Far East, the North Caucasus), growth rates are below the national average due to infrastructural challenges. However, isolated cases (Chukotka Autonomous Okrug: 7.6—21.5) demonstrate sharp increases resulting from the implementation of targeted programmes.[1]

[1] Overcoming infrastructural constraints was declared a key task for the development of Chukotka Autonomous Okrug starting in 2013 within the state programme "Information Society" (Decree of the Government of Chukotka Autonomous Okrug No. 402 of October 21, 2013, available at: https://docs.cntd.ru/document/460193813 (accessed 06.02.2026)) and the Regional Digital Transformation Strategy (approved August 7, 2021) (available at: https://digital.gov.ru/uploaded/files/690338-690403.pdf (accessed 06.02.2026)). The overarching goal is to create a sustainable infrastructure for high-speed data transmission accessible to all organizations and households in the okrug. Specific tasks include ensuring Internet access with the provision of one-time free traffic (1 GB) and reducing the cost of access to the average level for the Far Eastern Federal District.

ICT employment (the share of the employed in the ICT sector, Fig. 3) is a key indicator of a region's technological development and competitiveness. This indicator reflects the population's involvement in high-tech industries, the quality of human capital, the development of digital infrastructure, and the capacity to adapt to the challenges of the digital age. An increase in the share of ICT-employed individuals is associated with higher labour productivity and a reduction in digital inequality by ensuring access to modern communication and data processing tools for both businesses and the population.

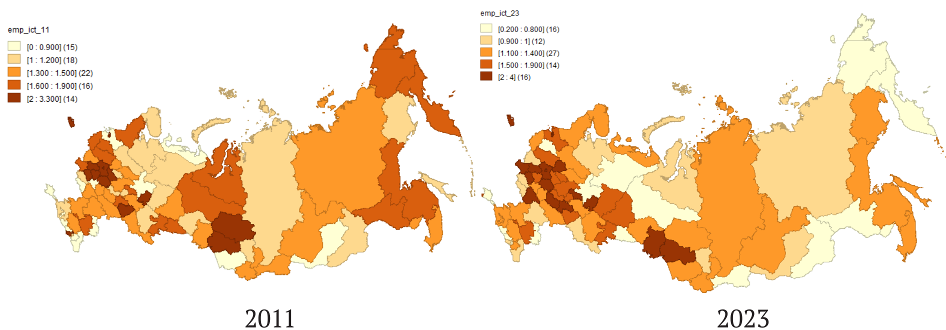


Fig. 3. Cartogram of Russian regions by ICT employment, %, in 2011 and 2023, by quantiles

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the GeoDA software package. Regional boundaries correspond to 2023. Values in parentheses indicate the number of regions within the range.

Analysis of ICT employment reveals persistent trends and regional characteristics. The highest values are observed in major technology hubs: Moscow (4.0 % in 2023), Saint Petersburg (3.2 %), and the Moscow region (2.7 %), confirming the concentration of human capital and infrastructure in cities with a developed scientific and educational environment. A high share of ICT employment is also recorded in the Kaluga region (3.8 %), Novosibirsk region (3.0 %), and the Udmurt Republic (3.3 %).

In resource-oriented regions (Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug — 0.4 %, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug — 0.9 %), the indicator is low due to weak employment diversification. Low values are characteristic of several regions in the North Caucasus (Chechen Republic — 1.1 %, Republic of Ingushetia — 0.7 %) and the Far East (Amur region — 0.3 %, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug — 0.2 %), where the development of the ICT sector is at an early stage.

The analysis confirms significant interregional differentiation in digitalisation, associated with the level of economic development, the presence of competence centres, and state support.

Regional inequality in digitalisation Levels

Digital inequality among Russian regions can be assessed using the Gini index and visualised with the Lorenz curve. The Lorenz curve (Fig. 4) shows that less inequality is observed in the distribution of mobile Internet, and this inequality decreases over time.

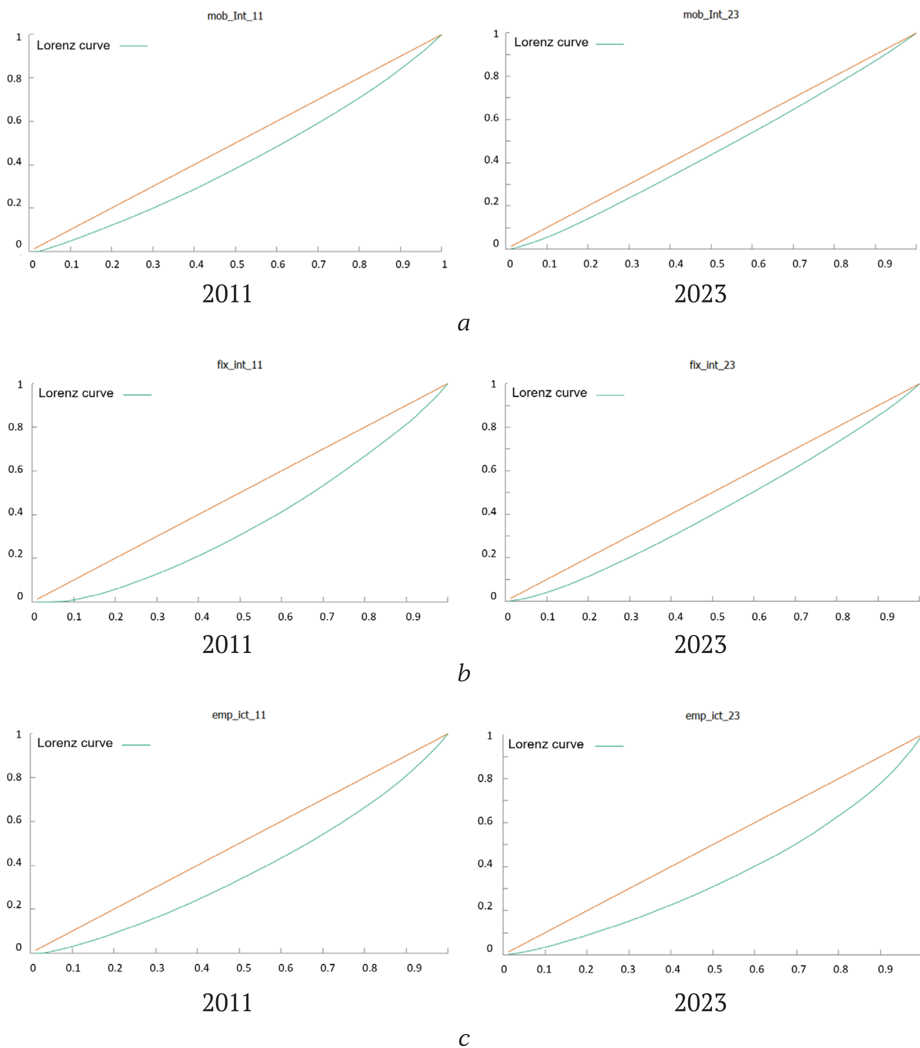


Fig. 4. Lorenz curve for digitalisation indicators across Russian regions in 2011 and 2023: (a) number of active mobile broadband Internet subscribers; (b) number of active fixed broadband Internet subscribers; (c) ICT employment

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the Gretl software package.

The highest and increasing inequality is recorded for the share of ICT employment, which indicates a secondary digital divide: the benefits of digitalisation

are captured by regions that develop human capital. The dynamics of primary (Internet access) and secondary (ICT employment) inequality are reflected in the Gini index (Table 2 and Fig. 5).[1]

Table 2

Dynamics of the Gini index for digitalisation indicators in Russian regions, 2011—2023

Year	Mobile Internet	Fixed Internet	ICT Employment
2011	0.171	0.277	0.243
2012	0.164	0.260	0.232
2013	0.170	0.257	0.241
2014	0.153	0.243	0.231
2015	0.142	0.228	0.224
2016	0.139	0.217	0.219
2017	0.110	0.203	0.215
2018	0.110	0.182	0.242
2019	0.104	0.175	0.235
2020	0.100	0.170	0.239
2021	0.102	0.164	0.239
2022	0.098	0.161	0.261
2023	0.100	0.153	0.279

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the Gretl software package.

The data in Table 1 record a steady decline in regional inequality in Internet access since 2011. The most significant reduction is observed for the mobile Internet gap (Gini index decreasing from 0.171 to 0.100). For fixed Internet, the decline is more gradual (from 0.277 to 0.153), starting from an initially higher level of inequality.

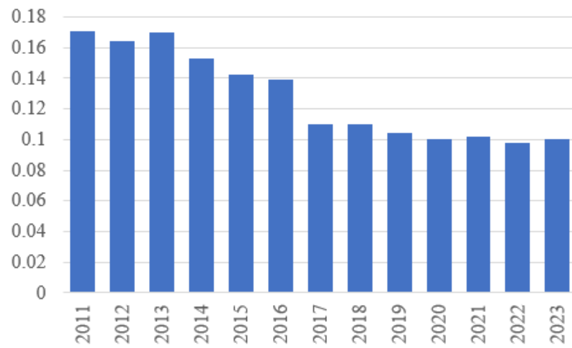
The dynamics of inequality in ICT employment are multidirectional: after a decline until 2017, the index began to rise, reaching its maximum value in 2023 (0.279) and exceeding the 2011 level. This indicates an increasing concentration of human capital potential in a limited number of regions and the emergence of a secondary digital divide.

It is important to distinguish between relative and absolute inequality, as well as to account for access quality. The decline in the Gini index for infrastructural indicators reflects a reduction in relative disparities, but does not automatically imply a decrease in absolute gaps[2]. Critically significant is the gap in access

[1] To verify the robustness of the findings, the Theil index was additionally calculated. The dynamics of both indices exhibit qualitatively identical trends: a decline for infrastructural indicators and an increase for ICT employment. This confirms that the conclusion regarding the divergence of the primary and secondary divides does not depend on the choice of index. Calculations were performed in Gretl.

[2] For example, if the number of subscribers in a leading region increases from 140 to 145, while in a lagging region it increases from 40 to 80, relative inequality (according to the Gini index) will decrease, but the absolute gap will remain substantial (65 people per 100 people).

quality (speed, stability, price), which is not directly measured by penetration statistics. The decline in the index may be partially driven by a saturation effect in leading regions, while lagging regions increase connectivity based on lower-quality infrastructure. Assessing the overcoming of the primary divide requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account not only quantitative but also qualitative parameters.



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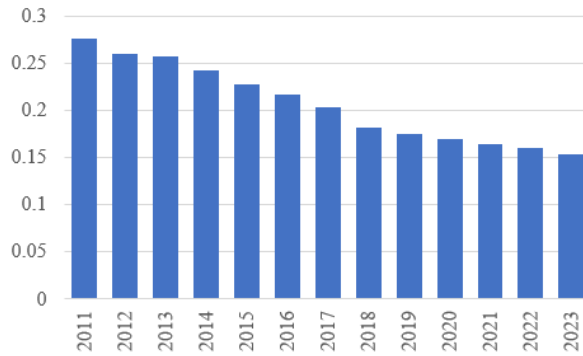

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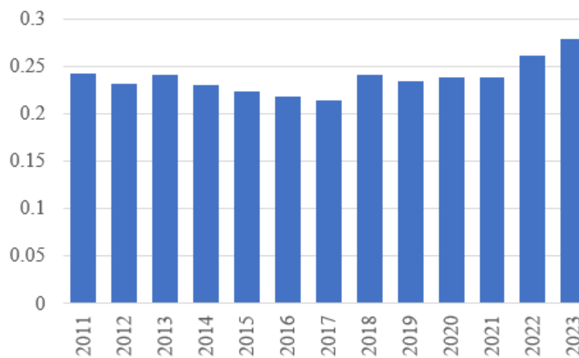

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Fig. 5. Dynamics of the Gini index for mobile Internet penetration, fixed Internet penetration, and ICT employment in Russian regions, 2011—2023, by indicator: (a) mobile Internet; (b) fixed Internet; (c) ICT employment

Kernel density estimation

The secondary digital divide is most clearly manifested in the territorial distribution of ICT specialists. Kernel density estimation (KDE) analysis of the share of ICT employment reveals a trend of heterogeneous development of the digital sector across Russian regions (Fig. 6).

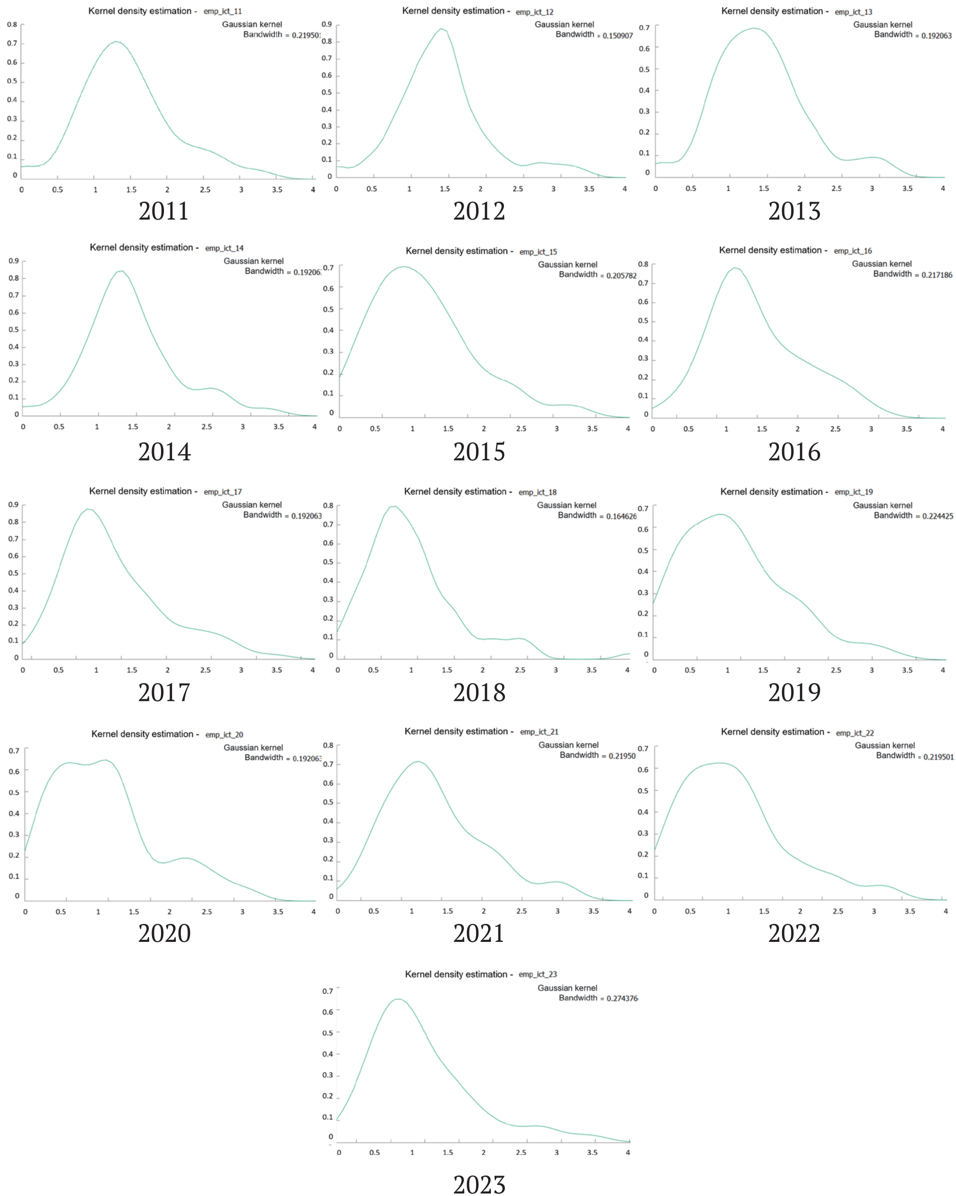


Fig. 6. Kernel density estimation for the share of ICT employment across Russian regions, 2011—2023

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the Gretl software package.

Kernel density estimation revealed heterogeneity in the distribution of ICT employment. In certain years (2011, 2016), the distribution was close to normal. The longest periods (2012—2013, 2015, 2017—2019, 2021—2023) were characterised by two clusters (with high and medium shares). In 2014 and 2020, three peaks were observed. Fluctuations in the number of peaks reflect the dynamics of ICT employment concentration under the influence of economic, political, and technological factors. Overall, digital inequality persists: some regions become centres for the development of high-tech sectors, while others lag behind.

The sharp increase in the Gini index and persistent spatial clustering in the share of ICT employment indicate a strengthening of the secondary digital divide, driven by a combination of factors:

1. Agglomeration effects and demand concentration — large centres form a self-sustaining ecosystem; demand for specialists attracts talent and stimulates their training.

2. Uneven distribution of the scientific and educational complex — leading technical universities and research centers are historically concentrated in a few regions, creating a structural advantage.

3. Migration of skilled personnel — high wages, career prospects, and a high-quality environment in leading regions cause an outflow of graduates and specialists from the periphery, exacerbating the human capital deficit.

4. Location of headquarters — key functions of IT companies and their statistical reporting are concentrated in metropolitan agglomerations, which formally inflate ICT employment indicators in these regions without always reflecting the actual diffusion of competencies.

Spatial effects

Spatial effects were analysed for all three dimensions: mobile and fixed Internet (primary divide) and ICT employment (secondary divide). A binary spatial weights matrix (contiguity based on shared borders, queen contiguity rule) with row standardisation was used. Cartograms of the local Moran's index are presented in Figures 7—9.

Throughout the entire period, persistent clustering of regions by mobile Internet penetration level is observed. Regions with high values (HH) — Moscow, Saint Petersburg, oil and gas producing okrugs, and territories of the Far East — form clusters of digital leaders. Fluctuations in the number of clusters do not negate the persistence of spatial disparities.

Mixed-type clusters (HL, LH) are rare, indicating a weak influence of local breakthroughs. An exception occurred in 2020—2023, when isolated HL cases (Krasnodar Krai) emerged amidst less developed neighbours, likely due to targeted investments.

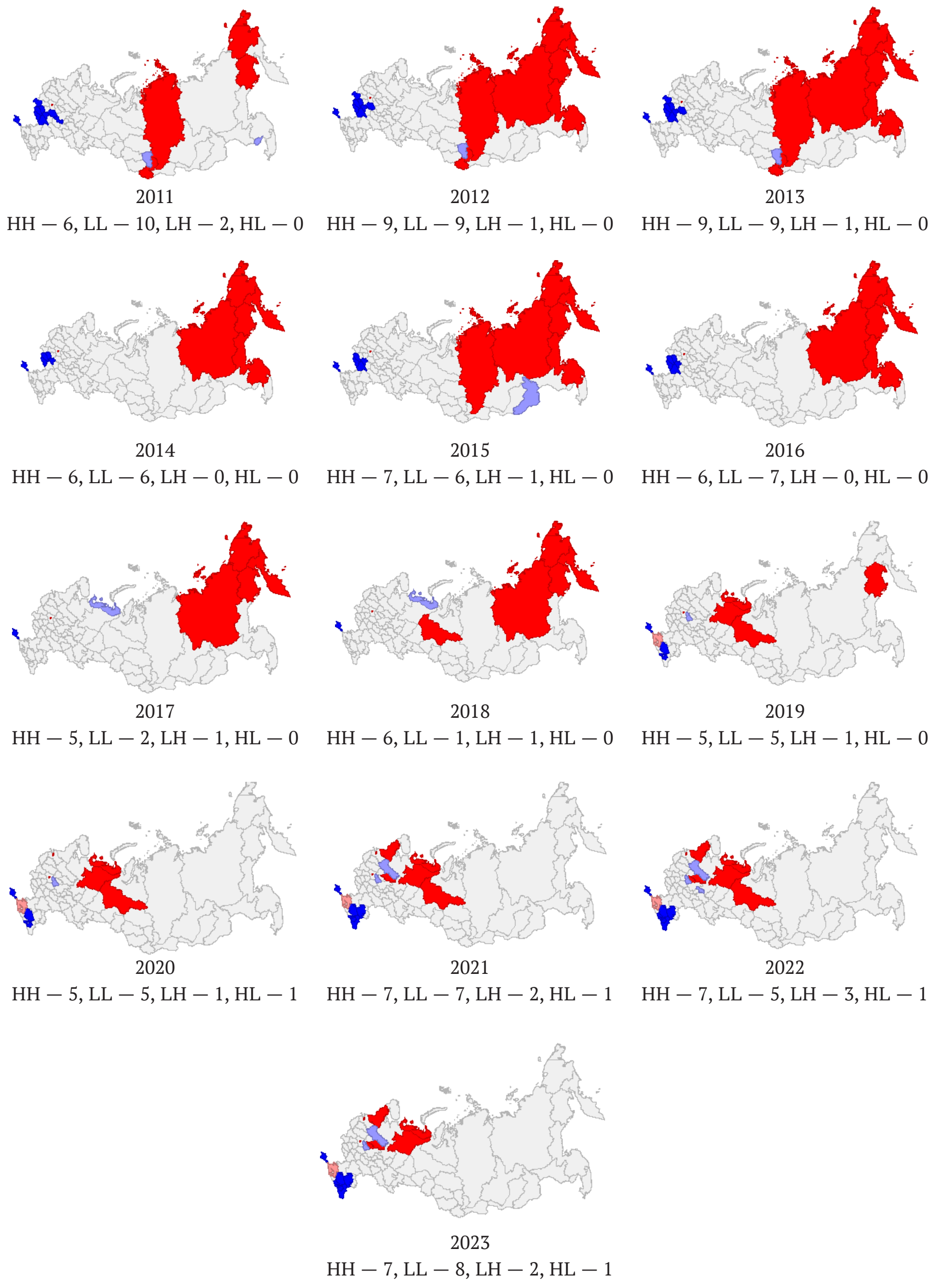


Fig. 7. Cartograms of the univariate local Moran's index for the number of active mobile broadband Internet subscribers, people per 100 inhabitants, across Russian regions, 2011—2023.

Note: HH (red) — high values surrounded by high values; LL (blue) — low values surrounded by low values; LH (light blue) — low values surrounded by high values; HL (pink) — high values surrounded by low values. For colored regions, p-value = 0.001 — 0.05; grey regions are statistically insignificant.

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the GeoDA software package.

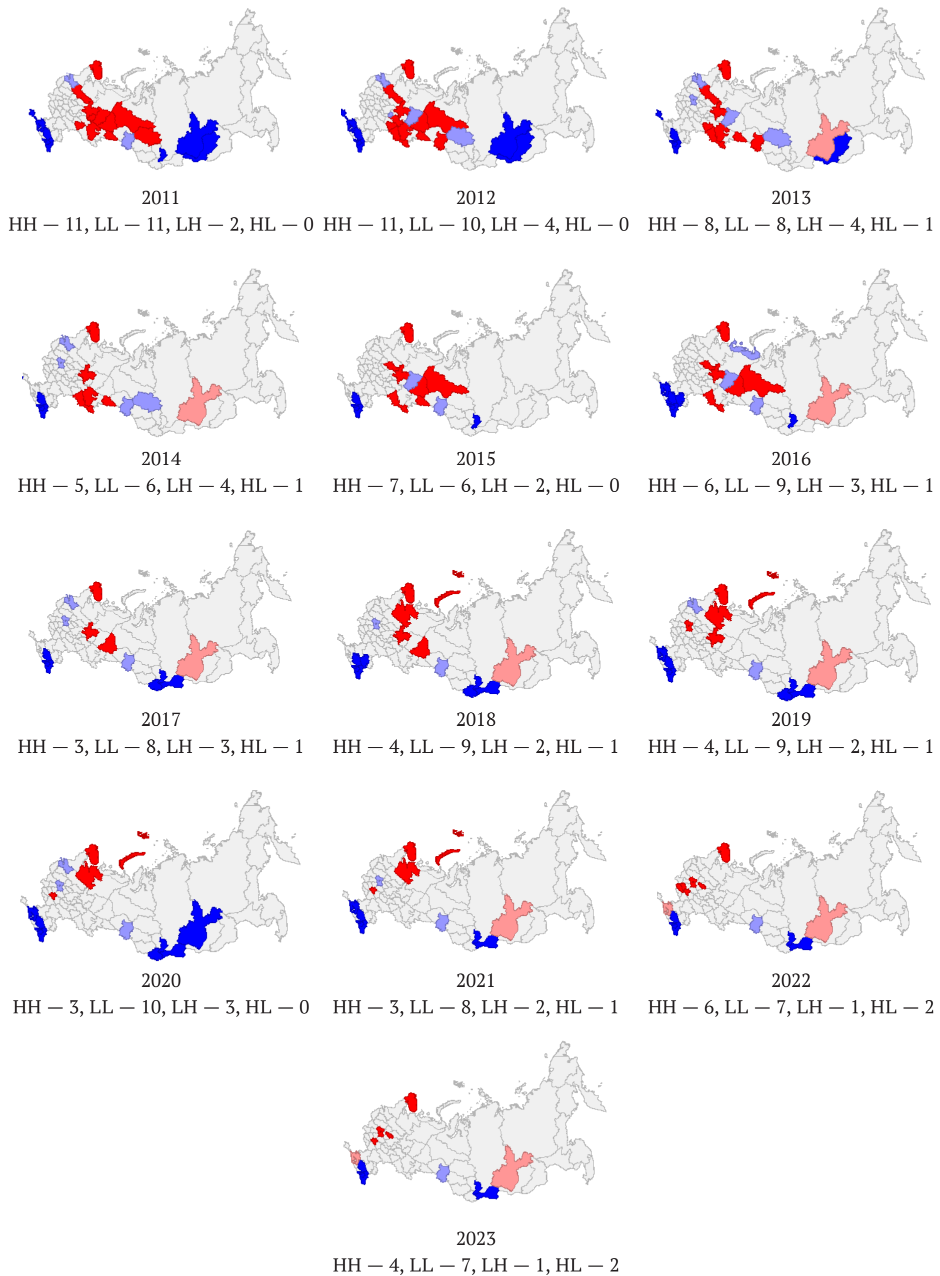


Fig. 8. Cartograms of the univariate local Moran's index for the number of active fixed broadband Internet subscribers, people per 100 inhabitants, across Russian regions, 2011—2023

Note: HH (red) — high values surrounded by high values; LL (blue) — low values surrounded by low values; LH (light blue) — low values surrounded by high values; HL (pink) — high values surrounded by low values. For colored regions, p-value = 0.001 — 0.05; grey regions are statistically insignificant.

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the GeoDA software package.

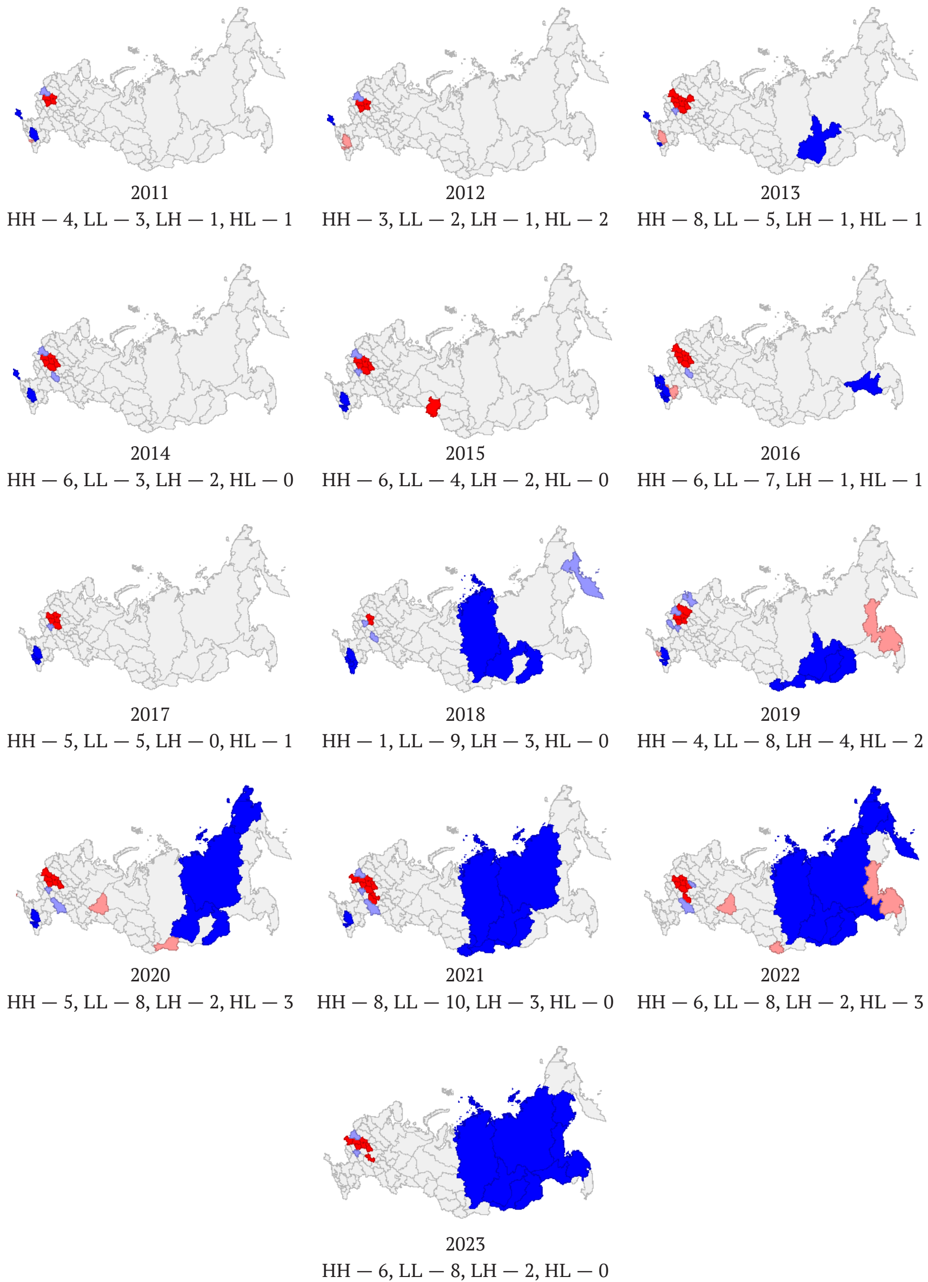


Fig. 9. Cartograms of the univariate local Moran's index for ICT employment, %, across Russian regions, 2011—2023

Note: HH (red) — high values surrounded by high values; LL (blue) — low values surrounded by low values; LH (light blue) — low values surrounded by high values; HL (pink) — high values surrounded by low values. For colored regions, p-value = 0.001—0.05; grey regions are statistically insignificant.

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the GeoDA software package.

After 2017, the number of LL clusters decreased (from 6—10 to 5—8), which may be associated with the implementation of the "Digital Economy" programme and the expansion of coverage. However, complete equalisation has not occurred.

Moran's index throughout the entire period is positive and statistically significant (Table 2), confirming spatial dependence. The diffusion of mobile Internet follows a wave-like pattern: technology gradually diffuses from centres to the periphery, but with delays and the formation of 'blind spots'.

The distribution of clusters for fixed Internet is more diverse. Until 2016, regions formed 'belts' of high values, either spreading influence or contrasting with neighbours. The dynamics of Moran's index (Table 2) confirm persistent spatial autocorrelation.

In 2011—2014, the index declined (from 0.383 to 0.283), indicating a weakening of clustering and selective convergence. In 2015—2018, the increase to a peak of 0.407 reflected greater differentiation and the focal nature of technology diffusion. Since 2019, the index has stabilised, remaining above the initial period level, which points to the structural stability of spatial dependence.

The high level of the secondary digital divide in ICT employment is also captured by Moran's index (Fig. 9).

Clusters with a high share of ICT employment are few in number and are concentrated primarily around Moscow. At the same time, a zone of low values, reflecting a negative trend, is emerging in Siberia and the Far East. Overall, spatial clustering in ICT employment remains persistent.

The dynamics of Moran's index (Table 3 and Fig. 10) are wave-like. After an increase in 2011—2014 (peak of 0.332 in 2013), a sharp decline followed to a minimum of 0.139 in 2015—2018, which may indicate a temporary diffusion of ICT personnel to the periphery. However, since 2019, the index has been steadily increasing, reaching 0.316 in 2023 — a level close to the values of 2013—2014. This indicates a return to and intensification of spatial polarisation: ICT employment is once again concentrating in a limited number of leading regions, deepening interregional differentiation.

Table 3

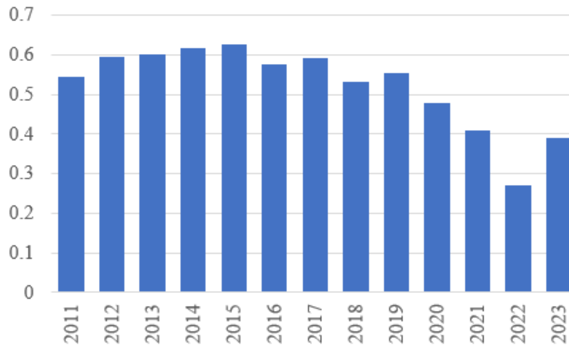
Dynamics of Moran's index for digitalisation indicators in Russian regions, 2011—2023

Year	Mobile Internet	Fixed Internet	ICT Employment
2011	0.543	0.383	0.255
2012	0.595	0.39	0.248
2013	0.601	0.344	0.332
2014	0.618	0.283	0.313
2015	0.626	0.315	0.139
2016	0.576	0.369	0.191
2017	0.592	0.342	0.195
2018	0.531	0.407	0.139
2019	0.555	0.38	0.2
2020	0.479	0.363	0.272

The end of Table 1

Year	Mobile Internet	Fixed Internet	ICT Employment
2021	0.408	0.393	0.285
2022	0.269	0.382	0.293
2023	0.3884	0.349	0.316

Compiled based on Rosstat data using the Gretl software package.



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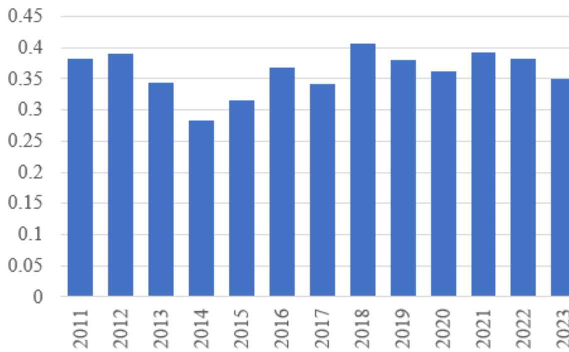

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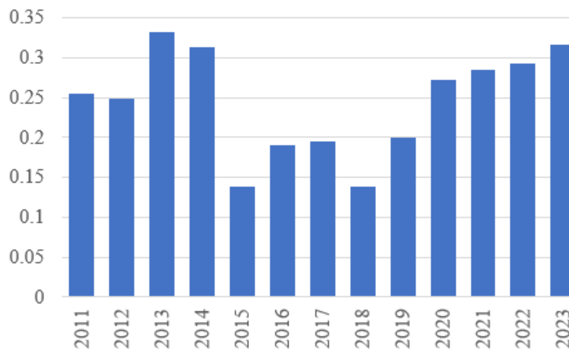

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Fig. 10. Dynamics of Moran's index for mobile Internet penetration, fixed Internet penetration, and ICT employment in Russian regions, 2011—2023, by indicator: (a) mobile Internet; (b) fixed Internet; (c) ICT employment

Discussion of results

The study has revealed a significant increase in the accessibility of mobile and fixed Internet in Russia; however, pronounced regional asymmetry persists. The highest growth rates are observed in regions with initially low penetration levels, whereas in more developed regions the dynamics are slowing down, which may indicate market saturation. Further reduction of digital inequality requires targeted support measures, particularly in regions with underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure.

Significant interregional differences in the development of the ICT sector have been identified, driven by economic potential, the presence of scientific and educational centres, and government support measures. Reducing these gaps requires targeted policies that stimulate demand for ICT services and the development of digital skills among the population.

Moran's index demonstrates persistent spatial autocorrelation but does not allow for unambiguous identification of causal mechanisms: whether clustering is a consequence of government policy, neighbourhood effects, or common historical and economic preconditions remains an open question for further research.

The identified polarisation in the ICT human capital sphere calls into question the effectiveness of existing spatial equalisation measures and requires a revision of approaches to stimulating knowledge diffusion. The key policy implication is a shift from uniform approaches to targeted instruments tailored to the specific characteristics of different types of clusters.

For leading regions (HH type), the priority is not to maintain their lead but to transform into national "generators" of digital competencies. It is advisable to establish federal competence centres on this basis, with obligations to provide internships, retraining, and methodological support to lagging regions. Regional authorities can incentivise ICT companies to create distributed teams and branches in partner regions through tax benefits tied to job creation outside metropolitan agglomerations. A key mecha nism is co-financing academic and professional mobility programmes to facilitate the flow of personnel and knowledge.

For lagging clusters (LL type), the central task is integration into the digital space. Financial support for local enterprises is necessary, provided that technologists from leading regions are mandatorily involved. Authorities should develop targeted housing and educational programmes ('digital mortgages', support for IT repatriates) to attract and retain ICT specialists. An important mechanism is the establishment of digital departments at anchor universities in partnership with leading universities from the leading clusters.

For mixed clusters (HL, LH) and territories with medium development levels that are at risk of falling behind, the priority is to leverage spatial interaction for a 'catch-up' effect. Joint interregional projects in priority sectors (logistics, tourism, agriculture) and the creation of interregional ICT clusters with federal support are advisable, whereby 'growth poles' stimulate demand and competencies in neighbouring regions.

At the federal level, a shift from infrastructure grants to a system of 'smart' contracts that link funding to the achievement of human capital and cooperation indicators is advisable. Regional digital transformation strategies should include a section on interregional cooperation. Business associations can act as operators of distributed employment and mentoring programmes. Thus, overcoming digital inequality requires differentiated solutions and a shift in focus from infrastructure to managing the diffusion of knowledge and human capital.

The identified trajectories of digitalisation in Russia — a reduction of the infrastructural divide alongside the strengthening of the secondary divide and its spatial clustering — reflect general patterns observed in countries with pronounced territorial differentiation. Studies on the EU and OECD countries show that as basic infrastructure becomes saturated, the key challenge becomes inequality in skills [12; 22]; the phenomenon of the 'digital ladder' has been described across different contexts.

Persistent spatial autocorrelation and the clustering of leaders and outsiders have direct analogues in other countries and regions (Silicon Valley, Shenzhen—Guangzhou, metropolitan areas of Europe). The concentration of high-tech personnel in limited agglomerations is a key driver of growth and a source of new territorial inequality in the knowledge era. The specificity of Russia lies not in the fact of clustering per se, but in its extreme degree and its rigid linkage to a hierarchy (a powerful centre, resource enclaves, and an extensive periphery).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates a divergence in the digitalisation trajectories of Russian regions. Against the backdrop of a gradual reduction in relative inequality in access to basic digital infrastructure (the primary divide), significant absolute gaps and challenges related to connection quality persist. The key threat to balanced development is the rapid increase in the secondary digital divide, which has a cumulative nature and is fueled by agglomeration effects, labour migration, and the uneven distribution of scientific and educational potential. Persistent spatial clustering indicates that market mechanisms and geographical proximity do not lead to automatic equalisation; on the contrary, they reproduce the "center—periphery" hierarchy. This necessitates a shift from universal infrastructure programmes to targeted regional policies aimed at developing human capital, stimulating innovative activity, and creating growth poles for the digital economy outside the established metropolitan agglomerations.

Returning to the hypotheses formulated in the introduction, the following can be stated. Hypothesis H1, concerning the reduction of infrastructural digital inequality, is confirmed: the dynamics of the Gini index for mobile (from 0.171 to 0.100) and fixed (from 0.277 to 0.153) Internet demonstrate a steady decline. Hypothesis H2, concerning the strengthening of human capital and competence-based inequality, also found empirical confirmation: the Gini index for ICT employment increased from 0.243 to 0.279, and kernel density estimation (KDE)

revealed a tendency toward the formation of a multimodal distribution. Hypothesis H3, concerning the presence of positive spatial autocorrelation, is confirmed for all three indicators, as evidenced by statistically significant Moran's index values throughout the entire study period. Hypothesis H4, concerning the divergent nature of neighbourhood effects, is partially confirmed. For infrastructural indicators, convergence is observed (a decline in the Gini index), but for ICT employment, the hypothesis of polarisation is confirmed — the increase in Moran's index in recent years (from 0.139 in 2018 to 0.316 in 2023) and the persistent presence of LL and HH clusters indicate the reproduction of the spatial gap between leaders and outsiders.

A sustained positive spatial autocorrelation was identified for all indicators, manifested in a statistically significant global Moran's index and the formation of stable spatial clusters of the 'high—high' (leaders) and 'low—low' (outsiders) types. This clustering indicates that a region's digitalisation level is closely related to the level of its neighbours; however, the nature of this relationship requires further investigation. Thus, the key challenge for balanced regional development is not so much ensuring basic access to infrastructure, but rather overcoming the growing human capital and competence-based inequality, which requires comprehensive measures aimed at developing human potential and stimulating innovative activity in all constituent entities of the Russian Federation.

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