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## RUSSIAN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY OF THE EARLY 21st CENTURY: STUDYING NEW PROCESSES AND USING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

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### Geopolitics and Political Geography in Russia: Global Context and National Characteristics

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Received December 12, 2021; revised January 15, 2022; accepted January 17, 2022

**Abstract**—Against the backdrop of global trends, the main directions, methodological approaches, and the most striking research results in the field of geopolitics and political geography in 2011–2021 are considered. Political geography is being widely integrated with neighboring scientific fields. Russian political geography and, to a much lesser extent, geopolitics are based on a wide range of concepts known in world literature. Researchers in these areas are promptly responding to current foreign policy and other challenges, including the coronavirus pandemic. Particular attention is paid to geopolitical publications about the pivot of Russian foreign policy to the East and the Greater Eurasia concept. Since the 2010s, the theory of critical geopolitics has become more widespread in Russia, operating not with speculative reasoning, but with large amounts of information analyzed by modern quantitative methods. The flow of studies of state borders and frontiers is growing. In such publications, a large place belongs to the works devoted to the growing gaps in the pace and directions of economic development between former USSR countries. Shifts in the topics of border studies are associated with a deeper study of security issues. Many works reflect the desire to preserve the positive experience of cross-border cooperation between Russian and European partners in a deteriorating environment. Most of Russian publications on regionalization at different spatial levels involve the Baltic Basin. The body of research on territorial conflicts and separatism is growing. Russian geographers and other scholars have made a significant contribution to studying the problems of uncontrolled territories and unrecognized (partially recognized) post-Soviet states. Conflicts around them are considered in relation to their internal differences, complex composition, intricacies of formation and identity of the population, influence on neighboring regions and in historical retrospect.

**Keywords:** geopolitics, political geography, Russia, Greater Eurasia, border studies, separatism, unrecognized states

DOI: 10.1134/S2079970522020046

#### INTRODUCTION

Geopolitics was considered in the USSR until the last years of its existence as a reactionary bourgeois science aimed at justifying the expansion of international imperialism, while political geography remained a peripheral area of human geography, developing almost exclusively using the data on foreign countries. Turbulent political events during the collapse of the Soviet Union—the search by newly independent states for their place on the global political map and identity building, the outbreak of ethno-territorial conflicts and heated discussions on border issues, the first democratic elections and reform projects of state structure and administrative division—caused a spike in attention to geopolitics and political geography. The 1990s were marked by a rapid increase in the number of publications in these fields; their authors were not only, and often not so much geogra-

phers, but political scientists and, in particular, former professors of Marxist–Leninist philosophy and scientific communism.

Today, scientific and public interest in geopolitics and political geography remains high. A Department of Regional Policy and Political Geography has been created at St. Petersburg University, and political and geographical divisions have also appeared in the leading universities of Moscow: MGIMO and National Research University “Higher School of Economics.” Noteworthy works have been published by scholars from other Russian research centers: Orenburg and Irkutsk, Vladivostok and Kaliningrad, Smolensk and Ulan-Ude. An evident trend in the development of geopolitics and political geography has been the blurring of formal boundaries between disciplines, especially between geography, political science, and sociology. Over the past decade, the relation in the

number of studies in individual fields has also changed: interest in electoral geography has fallen, but attention to the study of borders, regionalism, and citizens' representations about the their country and region's place in the world has increased.

It is unfeasible to give a complete picture of the current state of geopolitics and political geography in Russia within one article, so we have opted to briefly review the most popular fields or the topics in which, in our opinion, the most interesting results have been achieved. As with other papers in this special issue, it includes mainly publications from 2011–2021. The objective of this paper is to identify the main features of development of geopolitics and political geography in Russia over the past decade and their relationship with global trends and modern theoretical concepts. The authors begin with geopolitical publications. Particular attention is paid to the “pivot to the East” in Russian foreign policy and the Greater Eurasia concept. We then move on to border studies, an expanding interdisciplinary field where geographers play a prominent role, as well as on regionalization, an important factor in changing and redistributing the functions of borders. The article concludes with an assessment of the contribution of Russian political geography to the study of uncontrolled territories and unrecognized states as an integral element of the modern world geopolitical order.

### GEOPOLITICS: THE BOOM CONTINUES

Geopolitics remains extremely popular in Russia as an interdisciplinary area of scientific or pseudoscientific publications. As in the 1990s (Kolosov and Turovsky, 2000), one can find many attempts at simple explanations for complex political phenomena that refer to the peculiarities of Russia's geographical location or its supposedly permanent and indisputable national interests. Geopolitics is taught in universities and various faculties (Mäkinen, 2008): more than 100 textbooks, teaching aids, and anthologies have been published in Russia, the titles of which include the terms “geopolitics” or “geopolitical.” The global amount of publications on this topic is also increasing, as is the share of publications with the participation of Russian scholars. According to Scopus, in 2017 it reached 10%, which is about four times more than the total share of works by Russian authors indexed by international bibliographic databases. A particularly significant increase in publication activity was noted after 2012, and 2015 became the peak year (Silnichaya and Gumenyuk, 2020). This reflected a deep transformation of the international system and a double crisis: the conflict in the south-east of Ukraine and the actual rupture of Russian-Ukrainian relations, and the sharp deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, sanctions and counter-sanctions. As before, neoclassical publications by political scientists, sociologists, and economists predominate. Geo-

graphical studies in the Russian database “eLibrary,” containing the named terms in the title, keywords and annotations, in 1991–2015 amounted to only 2.5% of the total number of materials (Pototskaya and Silnichaya, 2019).

Despite the abundance of publications Russian geopolitics still appears to be a vague subject area. In world science there has not yet been a consensus, too, either in defining its content, or in approaches and methods. An alternative to neoclassical geopolitics since the early 1990s has been critical geopolitics, which operates not with speculative reasoning, but large amounts of information analyzed using modern quantitative methods. In critical geopolitics, it was possible to “remove” the contradiction between the use of geopolitical ideas to justify political decisions (geopolitics as an ideology and political practice) and the study of spatial factors influencing foreign policy or political activity in general. The authors of the concept of critical geopolitics proposed considering it as a discourse that reflects the interests of various social strata and political forces. Later, its scope was broadened with studying the role of geopolitical symbols, images, and ideas contained not only in the discourse of political leaders, but also in media reports, advertising, cartoons, movies and caricatures.

In Russia, critical geopolitics was little known until the early 2010s. One of the first to use its methods were the scholars of the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who developed ideas about the integration of individual geopolitical images into the geopolitical picture of the world formed in the collective consciousness of social groups and individuals. It includes representations about the country's place in the world, its foreign policy orientation, “natural” and desirable allies, major political players, national security threats, historical mission and shared past with neighboring countries, as well as advantages and disadvantages of certain foreign policy strategies. The geopolitical picture of the world is a product of national history and culture, the result of the synthesis of views professed by various strata of the political elite, academic experts, creative intellectuals, and public opinion in general (Kolosov, 2011).

The methodology used by the authors is aimed at an analysis of the relationship between the “high” geopolitics developed by political leaders and experts (academic scientists, well-known journalists, etc.), and “low” geopolitics, i.e., the geopolitical picture of the world in the minds of citizens. The tool for studying high geopolitics is qualitative and quantitative analyses of discourse. Low geopolitics is studied with sociological methods: mass surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews.

The staff of the Institute published, including with foreign coauthors, a number of works devoted to Russian political discourse in relation to the attack of American cities by terrorists and an attempt at rap-

prochement with the West, comparisons of discourses of various political forces with the opinions of ordinary citizens in different areas, identified through mass surveys, representations of the population about the foreign world and their origin, etc. (O’Loughlin et al., 2004a, 2004b). Based on the materials of the project of the Fifth European Framework Program “Vision of Europe in the world” (EuroBroadMap) and surveys among about 10 thousand students in 18 countries according to a single methodology, the dependence of representations about the world on social stratification, spatial mobility of respondents and their families, and their knowledge of foreign languages was studied. The resulting geopolitical vision of the world was compared with the global “space of flows”—the geographical distribution of foreign trade, foreign direct investments, migrations, international flights, arms supplies, political relations, expressed in solidarity voting in the UN, etc. In other words, the aim was to find out to what extent the “visibility” and image of a country depend on its “actual” place in the world, the intensity and nature of its external contacts. The initial hypothesis also assumed that the vision of the world depends on the physical and cultural distance between countries (similarity of language and religion).

The study showed that in Russia, as in other countries, the respondents are most familiar with the world’s major powers, neighboring countries and “newsmakers”—the regions of international conflicts regularly covered by the media. The countries of Africa and significant parts of Asia and Latin America were rarely mentioned. The most known and attractive for Russian students were Western European countries, which were associated primarily with a high living standard, tourism, and consumption of goods and services, but also with a rich cultural heritage and democratic regimes. In most of the countries where the survey was conducted, Russia itself was well known, but mostly in attractive.

Political discourse in Russia and other countries—official (interviews and statements of political leaders), media (media materials) and expert (academic publications)—was compared with the results of specially conducted and/or available public opinion polls. A study of Russian official discourse and publications in a number of newspapers over several years showed in particular the ambiguity and divergence in interpreting the concept of the “Russian world.” Simultaneous mass surveys carried out at the end of 2014 in the regions of southeastern Ukraine and in all post-Soviet unrecognized republics revealed large territorial differences in the self-identification of respondents with the “Russian world,” their high correlation with Russian or Ukrainian identity (for the first time in the post-Soviet years; such a dependence has not been observed before) and orientation towards Russian or Ukrainian TV channels. Statistical modeling helped to create a portrait of a typical supporter of the Russian

world, i.e., the interdependence of sociodemographic characteristics, ways of socialization, and trust in political leaders and electoral behavior (O’Loughlin et al., 2016).

In subsequent studies in political geography, much attention was paid to tools used by states and individual political forces to convince citizens of the validity of a certain geopolitical vision of the world and foreign policy strategy based on it (Kolosov et al., 2018). This task is becoming more difficult due to the rise of individualism and the spread of the Internet and social networks. At the same time, control over telecommunications and, in particular, the main TV channels has made it easier for the authorities to manipulate public opinion. The socialization of schoolchildren, including the content of history and geography textbooks, plays an important role in shaping the geopolitical vision of the world. The official discourse and content of several generations of school textbooks in Ukraine (Vendina et al., 2014a) and Estonia (Vendina et al., 2014b) were compared. This analysis led to the conclusion that the model of strengthening Ukrainian identity through sharp opposition to Russia undermined, rather than supported, Ukrainian statehood. It was manifested in the events of February 2014.

Since the 2010s, the theory of critical geopolitics has become more widespread, in particular, thanks to the works of I. Okunev and other MGIMO scholars. They examined the relationship between official Moldovan political discourse and everyday discourse of minorities—the Gagauz and Bulgarians—using the idea that collective identities can be based on the images of “others” as constitutive markers, in this case, Russia (Okunev, 2016). L. Zhirnova (2021) highlighted the role of Russia as a significant “Other” in cartoons published in Latvian newspapers, and N. Radina (2021) conducted a semantic analysis of a vast array of publications in Russian newspapers, in 2019 and early 2020 with the keyword “coronavirus.” She showed how the impending pandemic served as an excuse both to demonize China and condemn American hegemonism and D. Trump. A series of works by K. Aksenov et al. considers the “ideologization” of the urban space of CIS countries. The emergence of new states in the post-Soviet space was accompanied by the nationalization of urban toponyms, the transition from their single “matrix,” which formed a common Soviet identity, to the regional diversification of approaches to changing toponyms (Aksenov, 2020; Aksenov and Andreev, 2021; Aksenov and Yaralyan, 2012).

Analyzing the world literature on geopolitics, including critical geopolitics, St. Petersburg geographer A. Elatskov proffered a broad theoretical concept, presented in a large series of articles (2012, 2013) and then a monograph (2017). He considers a geopolitical relation (GR) the key object of geopolitics—combination of geographical and political relations in

different proportions, the synthesis of which gives it a new quality. In the geographical component of GR, Elatskov singles out formal-spatial (positional) and content-related elements. An example is different kinds of cross-border movements that have a certain territorial pattern, geographical (e.g., as part of value added chains) and at the same time political meaning (e.g., the impact of migration on the domestic political situation in a country and areas of the largest inflow of migrants). Elatskov understands geopolitics as the organization of geopolitical relations between different actors and, at the same time, a field of knowledge and thought aimed at identifying and transforming these relations. He subdivides “geopolitical thought” into three levels. The ordinary level is predominantly an unsystematic, emotionally colored set of stereotypes, myths, and psychological complexes, called “low geopolitics” in critical geopolitics. Practical geopolitical thought is dominated by an applied component related to the everyday level and using ready-made concepts. Finally, the top level is conceptual geopolitics involving research, ideas, and generalizations (“high geopolitics”). Elatskov divides geopolitical knowledge into several geospatial types according to the method of analysis, theoretical and ideological directions, etc., including contextual, reflecting the balance of external and internal conditions of GR. In his opinion, critical geopolitics, which claims to be impartial, cannot remain politically neutral, and through its optics geography appears not as a reality, but an image of it. The author proposes calling the synthesis of modernized classical and critical geopolitics “postclassical.” I. Okunev (2014) arrived at similar opinion.

Achievements in the theory of geopolitics and political geography include a review of their state-of-the-art at St. Petersburg University over nearly three centuries (Kaledin et al., 2019). A. Fartyshchev, geographer based in Irkutsk, used game theory for the first time to formalize the category of “geopolitical location.” Based on the Soviet–Russian concept of geographical position, he distinguished passive (a set of factors contributing to protection against expansion), active (factors contributing to the expansion and broadening of the country’s influence) and geoeconomic (factors contributing to economic development) geopolitical position. Fartyshchev focused on assessing the geoeconomic position of Siberia, the uniqueness of which is largely determined by its “ultra-continentality” in terms of L. Bezrukov. Similarly to papers of many political scientists who developed synthetic indicators of a country’s power, Fartyshchev used in his reasoning the concept of geopolitical power. In his opinion, the geopolitical position of a territory in general is determined by the ratio of its geopolitical power to the aggregated geopolitical power of the other (neighboring) territories, adjusted for the degree of influence of each of them on the territory in question and the political relations with it.

Fartyshchev proposed a set of specific variables for assessing these indicators, including political relations on a friendliness–hostility scale (2017, 2019).

### PIVOT TO THE EAST AND THE GREATER EURASIA CONCEPT

One of the most important topics of geopolitical publications in recent years has been the “pivot to the east,” which refers to the need to diversify the country’s external sources of development and strategic interaction with China and Asia-Pacific countries. The pivot to the east was accelerated by the geopolitical crisis provoked by the events in Ukraine and sharply aggravating relations between Russia and the West. The presumption was to use relations with China to modernize the economy, attract new direct investments, accelerate structural changes in the economies of the Far East and Eastern Siberia, and halt the depopulation of these regions.

In the late 2010s, the discussion about Greater Eurasia, closely related to the pivot to the east intensified. Political scientists, including leaders and high-ranking experts of the influential Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, have played the main role, but geographers have also actively joined this debate, since this topic of Greater Eurasia has not only an external, geopolitical, but also an internal dimension.

The essence of this concept is the formation of new economic, political and cultural space “from Vladivostok (or Shanghai) to Lisbon”—“a space of free trade, development, peace and security, conditions for the sovereign development of all its member countries, cultures and civilizations” (Karaganov, 2019, pp. 9, 12). The theory of Greater Eurasia is outwardly similar to the concept of Eurasianism, one of the main elements of Russia’s geopolitical tradition. However, Eurasianism arose as a reaction to contradictions between the Russian Empire and European powers pitting the East against the West. Its ideological basis was the idea of Russia as a special cultural and historical community, different from both Asia and Europe, but equal to it, coinciding more or less exactly with the borders of the Russian Empire (Laruelle, 2008).

Greater Eurasia is not only much larger than Eurasia–Russia, but it also has a different architecture. It is based not so much on adjacency but on network interaction, with a multipolar and multiscale structure created by regional integration processes at different levels. Therefore, one of the main geopolitical arguments is Russia’s possibility to maintain its position as an independent great power in conditions of a multipolar Eurasia, despite its economic growth rates lagging behind the United States, China, and India, a decrease in population, and, accordingly, a drop in “weight” in the world. The pivot to the east corresponds to the fundamental orientation of post-Soviet Russia towards the creation of a multipolar geopoliti-

cal order and prevention of hegemony of any individual country or group of countries (Suslov and Pyatachkova, 2019). Another important geopolitical argument is avoidance of the alternative of turning Russia into a junior partner either of the collective West or Beijing. In the Greater Europe that never evolved, Russia would have remained a marginal periphery, an eternally lagging pupil in the school of European values, forced to follow norms established without its participation. In addition, with the stark and increasing asymmetry in the Russia and its great eastern neighbor potential, Moscow is interested in balancing China's power in a system of diverse network relations and institutions.

In the opinion of the supporters of Greater Eurasia, there are the prerequisites for its formation, which Russia cannot ignore. These include actual stagnation of the EU economy, the crisis of European integration, and the obvious shift of the gravity center of the world economy to Asia. At the core of the Greater Eurasia concept are the priority of economic interactions, separation of the economy from the burden of geopolitics, overcoming the differences inherited from the Cold War and preventing the emergence of new ones, and resolving disagreements and frictions between the participants (Toward ..., 2018, p. 29).

The pivot to the east and Greater Eurasia concept are also justified by internal Russian reasons: the need to accelerate and eliminate distortions in the development of Siberia and the Far East and use their rich natural resources more efficiently (Kotlyakov and Shuper, 2019). These problems are directly linked to the discussion about the “continental and resource curses” of Russia, and Siberia in particular; i.e., the fatal low efficiency of economy because of vast distances and high transport expenses (Bezrukov, 2008), and international specialization on the export of fuel and raw materials (Kryukov and Seliverstov, 2022).

However, the Greater Eurasia concept has triggered a cautious or openly skeptical attitude among some Russian authors. They argue that, despite real common interests, the states of Europe and Asia, primarily China and India, are involved in conflicts among themselves, have different political regimes and orientations, and profess fundamentally different views on state sovereignty and the nature of international relations (Kortunov, 2019). Critics emphasize that small and medium-sized countries are wary of using the Greater Eurasia concept by China, Russia, and other major powers in their struggle for political influence. They note the lack of an adequate political infrastructure as a common forum for the Eurasian states, especially in the field of security (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization cannot satisfy such ambitions).

Other authors argue that hopes for a sharp increase in Chinese investment in the manufacturing industry, an increase in the share of high-value-added goods in

Russian exports to China, and the implementation of large infrastructure projects in Russia did not materialize. Chinese partners are interested in access to Russian raw materials, but not in investing in high-tech industry. The growth of Russian–Chinese trade turnover is hampered by noneconomic obstacles (KolosoV and Zotova, 2021b). Although the share of EU countries in Russian foreign trade has been declining, changes in its distribution across countries since 2014 showing no a decisive pivot to the East. China confidently took first place among Russia's trading partners, ahead of Germany, but the EU as a whole still accounts for most of trade (43% in 2019). In Chinese foreign trade, Russia occupies a very modest place accounting for 2.9% of imports and 1.3% of exports (2019)—far less than the turnover with the US or major EU countries. The emerging Greater Eurasia promises the Russian Federation not only new geostrategic opportunities, but also fundamental risks. The growing specialization of Asian Russia in the export of energy, minerals, and timber to China and Asian countries exacerbates its lag behind partners, stimulates the concentration of the population and economy in few foci, and contributes to the involvement of the eastern regions in foreign economic relations to the detriment of the domestic (Druzhinin, 2020).

#### BORDER STUDIES: CHALLENGES OF RUSSIA'S MULTINEIGHBOR POSITION

The global upheavals in recent years have highlighted with renewed vigor the importance of state borders in the life of society. The coronavirus pandemic has led to the closing and sharp asymmetry in the functions of many interstate borders. A series of migration crises in Europe and other parts of the world have given impetus to securitization policies that have increased use of the latest technologies in border security and combating illegal migration, as well as accelerating the construction of physical barriers along borders. In Russia, which borders 16 countries (including Abkhazia and South Ossetia, recognized by Moscow), additional factors that have increased attention to borders in the 2010s were the creation of the EAEU, the annexation of Crimea, the civil war in the Donbass, international sanctions and countersanctions, aggravation of relations with neighboring EU countries and, at the same time, intensification of cooperation with China. Border studies, just like abroad, have become a rapidly developing interdisciplinary field of knowledge, remaining one of the classic areas of political geography.

The central concept in modern border studies has been understanding of borders as a complex social category created as a result of bordering—constant reproduction of distinctions by various social and political actors in the course of their activities (Brambilla and Jones, 2020; Konrad, 2015; Paasi, 2021; Paasi and

Prokkola, 2008; Scott 2021). In this way, a border is at the same time a self-developing legal institution, a material phenomenon (crossing points and other infrastructure), a dividing line and the adjacent space it affects, a social practice, a symbol, and a set of social concepts.

The topics of border studies by Russian authors are in general similar to their European colleagues. For EU countries and Russia, the problem of redistributing functions between borders is very important (*debordering* and *rebordering*). As is known, in the EU, many functions of state borders have been transferred to the external borders, while internal borders have become more open. In the post-Soviet space, conversely, the borders between the former republics of the USSR have become state borders. The zero-sum game in relations between Russia and the West in the struggle for influence in former USSR countries determined the redistribution of barrier and contact functions of borders: they increasingly depended on the involvement of post-Soviet states in integration processes under the auspices of the Russian Federation.

There are also two obvious differences in the directions of border studies in Russia and European countries. First, there are much fewer studies on the relationship between borders and migration in Russia. Although Russia is the third largest world destination for international migrants after the US and the EU, this problem is less acute due to the openness of borders, especially between EAEU countries. Second, in Russia, on the contrary, there are relatively more publications about the “material” functions of borders—their role in the formation of cross-border socioeconomic and cultural contrasts, regulation of cross-border flows, and the impact of interactions between neighboring countries on border regions.

This topic is the most important both in terms of the number of studies and geographical coverage. In the West, attention to studying *cross-border contrasts* peaked in the 1980s–2000s, when similar studies were carried out on the border between the “old” EU members and former socialist countries seeking to join it (Stryjakiewicz, 1998), between the United States and Mexico (Martinez, 1994). Borders are a powerful tool for reproducing spatial inequality. In Russia, special interest in the analysis of border gradients was caused by the growing asymmetry in the rates and directions of economic development of the former Soviet republics, the differences between their economic and political and legal space increasing in the course of state building (Kolosov and Morachevskaya, 2020). An analysis of contrasts focused in particular on settlement systems and the territorial structure of the economy of border regions makes it possible to assess the prospects for cross-border cooperation. Economic peripherality and the largest gradients in the level of economic development between Russian regions and

their neighbors are most noticeable on the old borders inherited from the USSR in the European part of Russia (Zotova et al., 2018a) and reflect its relative lagging behind the EU countries. A significant gap in socioeconomic indicators, as a rule, reduces interest in cooperation and increases the risk of unequal relations, when the stronger party receives the greatest benefits. An example is economic relations between border regions of Russia and China. At the same time, cross-border differences between adjacent territories can also serve a significant resource for them, allowing them to expand the domestic market thanks to customers from neighboring countries, to better meet the demand for goods and services, improve the culture of production, etc. (Zotova et al., 2018b).

As many Russian authors have shown, in the post-Soviet borderlands, there is increasing contrast in the level of development both between the border areas of neighboring countries and within each the border zone. The priority of state building in the post-Soviet states leads to an increase in the peripherality of territories far from urban centers along new borders, which interferes with the negative influence of the border. It becomes a significant obstacle to interaction between EAEU countries (Morachevskaya, 2010; Rossiiskoe ..., 2018). The depression of most municipal districts along the Russian–Belarusian border is also associated with the hyperconcentration of economic activity in metropolitan agglomerations, which creates deep contrasts (Yas’kova, 2021).

An important aspect of studying post-Soviet borderlands is analysis of demographic and migration processes, the ethnocultural situation, the settlement pattern on both sides of the state border (Popkova, 2011), as well as their role in the formation of cross-border regions and the development of cross-border cooperation (Gerasimenko, 2011; Karpenko, 2019; Novikov, 2015).

The development potential of border areas was assessed via analysis of foreign economic relations. Their effectiveness was estimated by multifactor modeling in terms of the ratio and composition of exports and imports and intersectoral balance (Bilchak, 2011). The indicators of transport and border infrastructure were also considered as a factor in interactions between states. A borderland was zoned according to the level of its infrastructural development (Rygnyzov and Batomunkuev, 2016).

Studies by a number of geographers have assessed the influence of different types of borders (natural, economic, administrative, state) on the agricultural specialization of border areas. Whereas the role of administrative boundaries has sharply decreased due to the development of market relations, the influence of natural and state boundaries remains significant (Baburin et al., 2019).

The French geographer M. Foucher called borders a “factory of identities.” The relationship between

borders, territory, and identity is the core not only of border studies, but whole political geography. Research on this topic—the symbolic function of borders constitutes the second main direction of border studies in Russia. Their objective is to analyze social representations about the optimal configuration of a state border based on citizen's views on the criteria that separate “us” from “them,” and the regime and functions of borders. Many authors considered the role of borders in national identity, political discourse, historical narratives, as well as the symbolic landscape of borders, etc. Such studies are often based on sociological data and study of socialization of different generations, i.e., on the paradigm of critical geopolitics (Amilhat Szary, 2020; Paasi, 1996; Scott, 2021; Vendina and Gritsenko, 2017).

In the post-Soviet space, state and administrative boundaries are often seen as boundaries between identities in the geographical space. The delimitation between the republics and territorial autonomies of the former USSR was based precisely on this principle: the more the formal border coincided with the border of identities, the more it was interpreted as fair. Meanwhile, in many areas of a mixed settlement pattern of different ethnic groups, such correspondence cannot be achieved. Studies by D. Newman and other Western authors well demonstrate that the problem of primacy of identity or boundaries is the chicken and egg question.

This phenomenon is shown in studies of relict (historical) borders that have lost the most important functions of dividing lines between states, but have remained significant political, economic, and cultural barriers. Past belonging to other historical, cultural, and political regions has a significant impact on the social practices and identity of their inhabitants and on various activities; it manifests itself in the cultural landscape and can be used to mobilize public opinion, e.g. for the purposes of secession. These are called phantom boundaries. Their significance is well analyzed in (Janczak, 2015; von Hirschhausen et al., 2019; etc.). In Russia, typical phantom borders are those of territories joined to the former Soviet Union (RSFSR) before World War II and as its result, as well as former frontiers and linear defense systems which have existed in the 16th–19th centuries in Russia's South and East. The visibility of phantom borders is also determined by the depth of the wealth gap between the territories they separate, political differences between countries, memory politics, and other factors (Kolosov, 2017).

Russian researchers have often studied the mutual influence of formal borders and identities with case studies of the borders between Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltics (Krylov and Gritsenko, 2015; Vendina et al., 2014b, 2021)—territories that for a long time existed within the borders matching the current Russian Federation and with a mixed ethnic composition, now included in different economic and political

unions and security systems. These factors have led to the formation of complex, mixed, or transitional models of identity. A case study of Pskov oblast was focused on the role of the media and regular cross-border contacts in the formation of models of good neighborly or oppositional identity (Manakov, 2010).

In the world literature, studies of the impact of borders on identity, social concepts, and daily life of society usually focus on the adaptation of local communities to different types of borders, their role in shaping the differences between people and social systems, and the specific border culture; they are associated with the uniqueness of border crossing practices, ambivalence of identities, and tolerance for otherness (Anzaldúa, 1999). Similar processes were considered in the Russian borderland with Poland and Finland (before the COVID-19 pandemic). In these areas, everyday cross-border contacts expanded people's life plans, gave them the opportunity to accumulate and put into practice the experience of acting in a different social environment, contributed to the growth in interest and trust of citizens in neighboring countries in each other, and, as a result, the formation of the identity of a “cross-border resident” who feels comfortable on both sides of the border (Brednikova, 2008; Zotova et al., 2018a). At the same time, in the Russian–Ukrainian and Russian–Estonian borderlands, citizens perceive that, instead of a conditional line on the map, it has become an important border felt in everyday life. According to O. Martinez's typology (1994), the border has turned from integration to “coexisting,” and then alienating, and the borderland from a largely unified territory into border strips (Zotova and Gritsenko, 2021).

Borders simultaneously reflect local, interstate, and global consequences of economic and political processes and identity battles. They are an extremely dynamic social institution: their functions and regimes are constantly changing depending on bilateral relations between neighboring countries, the global political situation, global and regional economic conditions, and exchange rates and world prices. Therefore, the third leading direction in Russian border studies is now study of the dynamics of borders under the impact of the dialectical combination of globalization and regionalization processes (fragmentation of the political space).

Foreign studies of this type examine the contradictions between growing international and cross-border interactions, the objective need for highly permeable borders, on the one hand, and the interests of national and regional security, on the other. Back in the early 2010s, researchers noted trends towards “enclosing” of state territory from the negative and unforeseen consequences of globalization, including the erection of thousands of kilometers of physical barriers along borders, based on the desire to more fully control commodity, financial, and sometimes information

flows, to protect the national economic space from excessive competition (Ghorra-Gobin, 2012; Jones, 2012; Rosière and Jones, 2012; Vallet, 2019). These processes became especially acute with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the inconsistency of the ideas of the 1990s about the gradual increase in contact functions of borders at the expense of barriers finally became apparent (Böhm, 2021; Chaulagain et al., 2021; Rothmüller, 2021).

New work has shown that the pandemic has partially refuted the concept of weakening of the state as a result of globalization processes (Golunov, 2021; Golunov and Smirnova, 2021). The most obvious geopolitical consequence of the pandemic was further fragmentation of the political and socioeconomic space, the instrument of which was not only state, but also internal administrative borders. Border closures occurred asynchronously and asymmetrically, were not coordinated even between EU countries, and affected the mobility and daily interests of more than 90% of the world's population (Gossling et al., 2020). As a result, the pandemic contributed to further division of the world into "us" and "them." Invisible borders of regions with different levels of morbidity have divided territories with different levels of urbanization, age structures, incomes, and mobility of the population, and ultimately, different cultural characteristics and lifestyles (Kolosoov et al., 2021).

At the intersection of political and physical geography and other sciences are studies of sustainable development and management of cross-border natural systems—international river basins, mountain ridges, inland seas, protected natural areas, etc. Their economic use gives rise to contradictions between the countries in which these objects are located. However, well-thought-out institutional mechanisms make it possible to smooth out disagreements and contribute to stabilization of the cross-border natural systems even in the face of tense interstate relations (Seliverstova, 2009). Although the necessary level of coordination has not been achieved in any of the main cross-border basins of the Russian Federation, a positive experience of interaction has been accumulated in some areas (Frolova, Samokhin, 2018). Works by the joint Russian–Azerbaijani commission for the distribution of water resources of the Samur River, development of a comprehensive program of Russian–Kazakh cooperation to preserve the ecosystem of Ural River (Chibilev, 2018; Sokolov et al., 2020), and joint (until 2014) efforts of Ukrainian and Russian specialists in the use and protection of the Seversky Donets River demonstrate that effective and coordinated management of a cross-border natural object can be successful (Demin and Shatalova, 2015).

New areas of border studies emerging in Russia are associated with assessment of the role of borders in international tourism. Border problems are reflected in "high" and popular culture—literature, cinema,

painting, architecture. In publications by Russian authors, the development of tourism is considered as one of the important areas of cross-border cooperation (Sebentsov and Zotova, 2018) in relation with the dynamics of the functions and regimes of borders, the cross-border price gradient, and the attractiveness of borders for tourists (Katrovsky et al., 2017). An important contribution to the development of this direction has been made by A. Alexandrova and co-authors, who consider borders as a mean for regulating international tourist flows and, at the same time, a factor in the development of tourism in border areas. Much attention is given to the transformation of borders from a barrier hindering international tourist exchange into a resource giving an important competitive advantage to border areas (Aleksandrova and Shupugina, 2020; Aleksandrova and Stupina, 2014).

#### REGIONALIZATION AT DIFFERENT SPATIAL LEVELS

An important factor in the redistribution of functions between political boundaries of different levels was the formation of international regions of different levels (regionalization) as a response to the challenges of international competition, which requires the expansion of markets, cross-border cooperation and new approaches to territorial organization of the economy (Fedorov and Korneevets, 2010; Korneevets, 2010).

Modern approaches to regionalization are based on the combination of constructivist and functional understanding of this process. In other words, cross-border regions can be formed both "from below," on the basis of an increasingly dense network of production, marketing, migration, and other interactions, sociocultural commonality, and increased interdependence between territories, and "from above," by the efforts of interested states, business and public organizations. The principles of "new regionalism" developed in Europe provide the most flexible approach to regionalization. It is based on depoliticization, multi-level governance, a combination of different models, optional reliance on existing norms, a multilateral nature, that is, the use of not only economic, but also social, cultural, and environmental factors of cooperation, the participation of regions and municipalities of countries with different state structures and legal systems, and the ability to agree upon only those issues on which a compromise has been reached, without trying to immediately solve the most difficult problems (Fawcett, 1995; Kolosoov and Sebentsov, 2019).

Analysis of regionalization has acquired high importance for Russian political geographers, including the fact that at the interstate level, the Russian Federation is involved in the activities of many regional organizations, and at the substate level, in the formation of cross-border regions, primarily on borders with the EU (Kolosoov and Sebentsov, 2019). The



central place in research on this topic belongs to the studies devoted to cross-border regionalization in the Baltic Sea basin, authored mainly by Kaliningrad scholars (Fedorov and Korneevets, 2010; Korneevets, 2010). These studies were supplemented and often carried out with the participation of European authors (Palmowski and Fedorov 2020; Sagan et al., 2018). The course and results of regionalization were assessed based on analysis of the intensity and structure of relations between various actors: foreign trade, investment, and agreements between various partners (Korneevets, 2010; Fedorov et al., 2013). The specifics and implementation of EU projects aimed at supporting cross-border cooperation and integration processes on external borders have been studied, e.g. the prospects for creating cross-border region Gdansk/Sopot/Gdynia–Kaliningrad–Klaipeda (Palmowski and Fedorov, 2019).

Despite some successes in cooperation with European partners, some Russian authors have emphasized that Russia's interests have not always been taken into account. Interactions across different platforms, e.g., the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Northern Dimension Initiative, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), the Union of Baltic Cities (BCU), the Baltic Development Forum (BDF), Euroregion "Baltic," etc., have faced a lack of necessary funding and limited opportunities for the Russian side to influence decision-making (Bolotnikova and Mezhevich, 2012). Overbureaucratization and, since 2014, blocking of cooperation channels at the interstate level by the Baltic countries and other partners, prevented implementation of many promising initiatives at the regional and local levels (Euroregions, "twin cities") and rapprochement of the Baltic strategies of the Russian Federation and the EU during the Russian presidency in the CBSS in 2012–2013 (Sergunin, 2013). The assessment of the Northern Dimension initiative as one of the model areas of cross-border cooperation in federal and regional discourse revealed a certain discrepancy between the expectations and results of cooperation, including the lack of unified mechanisms for financing and administering the program (KolosoV and Sebentsov, 2019).

ENPI's cross-border cooperation programs have been the real mechanism for interaction between Russia and the EU at the regional and local level, making it possible to attract investments and promote the development of the economy and social infrastructure of border regions. Analysis of the projects in different areas (Gritsenko et al., 2013; Kropinova, 2013; Kuznetsova and Gapanovich, 2012) showed that in the regions bordering the EU (Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Pskov oblasts, the Republic of Karelia), an institutional model of cooperation was gradually constructed, which led to the formation of real network partnerships, both intersectoral and in individual sectors of activity (environmental protection, tourism,

etc.) (Sebentsov and Zotova, 2018). The establishment of simplified (virtually visa free) regime for local border traffic (LBT) was considered an effective tool for intensification of cross-border cooperation in the Russian–Polish, Russian–Latvian and Russian–Norwegian border areas (Gumenyuk et al., 2019; Sagan et al., 2018). The LBT regime had a positive effect on contacts between countries and contributed to an increase in cross-border mobility and the socioeconomic development of border areas.

Since 2016–2018, the topics of publications on cross-border cooperation between Russia and the EU have changed significantly. When it became obvious that no improvement in relations should be expected in the near future, a significant number of studies appeared on the security agenda—economic, political, military, and societal (Fedorov, 2020; Mezhevich and Zverev, 2018; Sergunin, 2021; Volovoy and Batorshina, 2017). Researchers focused on the place of the Baltic region in the modern strategies of its member states. Current processes were examined in terms of Karl Deutsch's concept of security community and Barry Buzan's regional security complex. Important topics were increased risks of local conflicts and political instability, ensuring military security and militarization of the region, including analysis of the military spending of the Baltic countries, which in 2015–2016 alone increased by 45%—almost 6% of budget incomes (Mezhevich and Zverev, 2018). An important area of confrontation between Russia and the West, including in the Baltic Sea region, was the economy. As a result, due to the curtailment of economic ties with Russia, the GDPs of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania decreased in 2015–2016 by 8–12% (Mezhevich, 2016). As a result of sanctions and countersanctions, Russia's trade with countries of the Baltic Sea region has significantly decreased.

Studies of societal security in accordance with the concepts of the Copenhagen School of International Studies have shown that despite the existing contradictions, the Baltic region managed to develop a common approach to understanding the threats and challenges to public security, including uneven regional development, social and gender inequality, unemployment, poverty, intolerance, religious and political extremism, climate change, natural and man-made disasters, epidemics, cybercrime, international terrorism, etc. (Sergunin, 2021). Russia was involved in the development of the Baltic 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy, which gave grounds for cautious optimism in assessing the prospects for cooperation.

Relations in the spheres of culture, education, and science were hardly affected at all, and interactions within the framework of cross-border cooperation programs were also preserved (Kondratieva, 2021; Mironyuk and Zhengota, 2017). This confirms the thesis that, thanks to implementation of joint programs since the early 2000s, a network of contacts has

been created at the regional and local levels, which played a key role in strengthening trust between parties, based on rational choice, sociocultural community, and personal relations (Kolosov and Sebentsov, 2019).

### SEPARATISM, TERRITORIAL CONFLICTS, AND PROBLEMS OF UNRECOGNIZED STATES

The topic of territorial conflicts got relevant in Russia during the collapse of the USSR, when a number of pioneering studies were published on the claims of various political forces and potential territorial claims of the union republics and territorial autonomies to each other and their causes. In the 1990s, this field, geoconflictology, was developed by O. Glezer, V. Kolosov, N. Mironenko, N. Petrov, A. Treivish, and R. Turovsky. Later, as a result of state building in the post-Soviet countries, the situation stabilized, and political scientists and ethnologists began to study in depth the remaining territorial conflicts. The number of geographical studies on geoconflictology has decreased. It is worth noting the studies by I. Suprunchuk on the geography of terrorism (Suprunchuk et al., 2017). Several studies on territorial conflicts in foreign countries were published in the 2010s (Brazhalovich et al., 2016; Skachkov, 2019; Zakharov et al., 2020).

One of the main topics of geoconflictology is the conflict between a secessionist movement operating in a certain territory and a mother state (Popov, 2012). Most political geographers (Krotov, 2016; Zayats, 2022) examine separatism in the conflictological paradigm. Related studies by political scientists can be divided into two groups. The first includes geographical and political research on individual countries and regions (Catalonia, Azavad, etc.). The second group focuses on separatism as a social phenomenon, either by explaining the reasons why the separatist movement arose, or by considering the factors of its success or failure. Since there are many research institutes in Russia dealing with the problems of certain regions (Europe, Latin America, etc.), most of the studies are devoted to global experience, especially the European (Prokhorenko, 2018; Semenenko, 2018).

Another characteristic feature of Russian research is the predominant emphasis on the ethnic genesis of separatism (Kuznetsov, 2015; Oskolkov, 2021). Thus, A. Wimmer et al. (2009) indicate that 57 of the 60 considered separatist conflicts in the world were of an ethnocultural nature. F. Popov (2012), like many Western researchers, calls them pseudo-ethnic, believing that the causes of separatism lie in the conflict of identities. Their markers are very different. In many Russian geographical studies on separatism, the center–periphery model is used to analyze conflicts between the dominant identity, the culture of the “center” and the periphery opposing it. (D. Zayats’ “separatism cen-

ters,” R. Turovsky’s “areas of conflicts,” and F. Popov’s “proliferation zones of separatism”).

Next hallmark of Russian studies of separatism (Popov, 2012; Turov, 2021) is attention to its diffusion, based on the hypothesis that the success of a separatist movement in one territory prompts that similar demands be made in another. Such a domino effect was observed during the collapse of the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia in the 1980s–1990s. Britain’s exit from the EU, which can be seen as a form of separatism, has intensified “Eurosceptic” sentiments in other EU countries, such as Hungary, France, and Poland.

Separatism is closely related to growth in the number, total area, and population of uncontrolled territories. Dozens of states in the world have not fully controlled their territory for many years. Power over vast regions is wielded by the leaders of partisan movements, warlords, drug lords, and local leaders. The de facto secession most affected vast areas of problematic statehood in Asia and Africa, which are home to about 45 mln and 138 mln people, respectively. An adequate assessment of this phenomenon, which has become an integral feature of the political map of the world, can only be given if a rigorous definition of the concept of “control over a territory” is worked out. Like state sovereignty, this concept is “divisible.” For various reasons, it is proposed to distinguish several kinds of control. They differ in type (power, political, ideological, economic), temporal (permanent, temporary, including seasonal, daily) and territorial pattern (solid, focal, network). The types of territories not controlled by legitimate governments have been identified. In stateless zones, the mother state is unwilling or unable to exercise control, and neither the state nor the rebels perform most state functions. Rebel states are territories over which opposition forces exercise continuous or patchy control and where rebel authorities perform some state functions. Lastly, unrecognized republics, or de facto states, possess all or most of the attributes of a state and rely on high internal sovereignty (Kolosov et al., 2021; Sebentsov and Kolosov 2012).

There is no generally accepted terminology in studies of uncontrolled territories (Popov, 2011), and there is no consensus on the number of unrecognized states. However, most authors include six states in the former USSR (Dembinska and Campana, 2017; Popov, 2015; Zayats, 2020): Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and in recent years, the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. Russia is deeply involved in the conflicts around these states; four of them are its immediate neighbors. Naturally, factors of their viability, correlation and dynamics of internal and external sovereignty attract considerable attention of Russian scholars, primarily political scientists and geographers.

There has been growing foreign interest also in the fate of the unrecognized (partially recognized) states

in the post-Soviet space. Interesting reviews of their studies are contained in papers by S. Pegg (2017) and M. Dembinska and A. Campana (2017). In the 2010s, foreign publications have increasingly gone beyond long-established topics: the role of unrecognized republics in international relations, the negotiation process, and possible ways to resolve conflicts. The problems and features of state building, the consequences and benefits of the lack of international legitimacy, the state of the economy, and political life are highlighted. The unrecognized states are no longer regarded as Russian puppets, but as independent polities. Russian authors have focused on these topics from the very beginning, considering conflicts between the unrecognized republics and their mother states as multidimensional phenomena associated with events not only during the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also in the much more distant past: internal differences, complex composition, the formation and identity of the population, and influence on the neighboring regions of Russia and other countries. In the foreground, therefore, are the factors of internal sovereignty: the ability of the state to retain population, providing it with jobs, a decent income level, and public services as the most important criterion for the legitimacy of political regimes in power and the success of claims for independence (Bratersky et al., 2021; Kazantsev et al., 2020; Markedonov 2015; Tokarev et al., 2020; Kolosov and Crivenco, 2021 Yagya and Antonova, 2020).

John O'Loughlin (2018) bitterly pointed that, unlike most other branches of geography, fieldwork is not used as much in political geography. Studies of post-Soviet unrecognized states compare favorably with this. Polls in breakaway regions, in most cases the first after declaration of de facto independence, analyzed jointly with "objective" indicators (population and its composition dynamics, the state of the economy, etc.), made it possible to determine the degree of their internal sovereignty in accordance with modern ideas about its "divisibility." The trust of various ethnic and social groups in political regimes, their assessment of the prospects of their republic, their attitudes towards Russia and other leading world political actors, and their opinions on ways to resolve conflicts have been explained. According to statistical models, in the multinational republics of Transnistria and Abkhazia, ethnicity was the main predictor of citizens' sentiments (see, for instance, O'Loughlin et al., 2015).

The role of iconography (J. Gottmann's concept) in strengthening or building a common identity of the unrecognized post-Soviet republics and their mother states was studied through the example of symbolic figures: outstanding political leaders and figures of culture and art from different countries and eras, whom the respondents admired. It turned out that the set of such figures among Russians and Ukrainians of Transnistria and Moldova have almost nothing in common, which reflects both the influence of the

media on mass consciousness and differences in socialization (O'Loughlin and Kolosov, 2017). The functions and regimes of the borders of unrecognized states, including during the pandemic (Brazhalovich et al., 2017; Galkina and Popov, 2016; Golunov, 2021; Kolosov and Zotova, 2021a), as well as the tourism industry, which occupies a prominent place in the economy of some of them, have also been examined (Golunov and Zotova, 2021), etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

Russian political geography and geopolitics preserved the pluralism of approaches inherited from the 1990s. Using the typology of A. Elatskov, we can say that all three "levels" of geopolitical thought are represented in Russian literature: "ordinary," stereotyped and highly ideological, "applied," and "conceptual." Neoclassical concepts still occupy a central place, but critical geopolitics has also gained prominence, and there have been relatively more "conceptual" studies. In publications on geopolitics, studies carried out by geographers occupy a modest place due to the comparatively small size of the geographical community, but at the same time, they are very visible and cited frequently.

Geopolitical and political-geographical research is characterized by a high ability to respond quickly to sometimes kaleidoscopically changing challenges, new urgent problems, and the demands of political practice. An example is the response of the geographical community to the coronavirus pandemic and analysis of measures taken to combat it in Russia and abroad, the emergence of the Greater Eurasia concept, or shifts in border studies to studying security issues and reflecting the desire to preserve the positive experience of cross-border cooperation between Russian, European, and other partners in a deteriorating environment.

Russian political geography and, to a much lesser extent, geopolitics are developing on the basis of a wide range of concepts known in the world literature, and sometimes creatively reworking these concepts in accordance with Russian specifics and national interests understood differently by supporters of distinct ideological trends. It is often impossible to distinguish between the studies on geopolitics and political geography carried out by scholars from different countries and disciplines: geography, political science, sociology, etc. Deeper integration into the global process of accumulating scientific knowledge has become possible due to the sharp increase in the mobility of researchers (at least before the pandemic), their participation in the activities of the International Geographical Union and other associations, and involvement in joint projects.

## FUNDING

The study was carried out within the state task of the Institute of Geography RAS no. AAAA-A19-119022190170-1 (FMGE-2019-0008).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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