

**THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF RUSSIAN SOCIAL  
GEOGRAPHY:  
CHALLENGES, TRENDS,  
PRIORITIES**

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*Promoting the development of social geography (one of the most important components of present-day social sciences) is especially important for contemporary Russia. In the last 25 years Russian social geography has seen dramatic disciplinary changes. On the one hand, it has widened its scope. On the other hand, it has suffered from a growing contradiction between the popularization of the social geographic knowledge, the need to have a clear understanding of the factors and results of a multi-scale territorial social and economic dynamics, and the limits of the field (with its organizational structure, possibilities and practitioners desperately falling behind the times). The aim of this article is to analyze the post-soviet period of the development of social geography to identify the strengths and weaknesses that the discipline has demonstrated, the challenges it still has to overcome and the priorities it has yet to formulate. It is shown how the traditional dimensions of social geography (with their focus on humanities, culture, economics, geography or environment, respectively) not only keep their value but acquire new meanings. The author concludes about the importance and the strategies of further integration within the community of social geography researchers, and points out the directions of future research: fundamental issues of Russian spatial planning, Russian positioning in both global and local (Eurasian) contexts.*

*Key words:* social geography, Russia, post-Soviet studies

**Introduction**

For a professional geographer, Russia is a complex and exciting research object boasting a vast space that is highly fragmented in socioeconomic and ethnocultural terms. It requires using a wide range of tools and approaches. In view of the ‘challenges’ of space and the need to consider the geographical factor in socioeconomic development, a strong and

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original economic geographical school of thought has been developing in Russia since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It reached its ‘zenith’ in the mid-second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — the decades when the country reached the most impressive economic and political results in its history [1]. Modern Russian **social geography** (today, this term is very popular in the professional community) functioning in the difficult conditions of radical economic, political, and sociocultural changes across the post-Soviet space uses the groundwork prepared at the time.<sup>1</sup>

The collapse of the USSR, the emergence of new borders, geopolitical agents, and hotspots, the deep economic crisis and social inequality, degradation of infrastructure, privatisation and disruption of economic ties, globalisation and the country’s changing position in the global division of labour, tertiarisation, de- and reindustrialisation, depopulation and local demographic increase, ethnocultural changes and migration flows — all these and many other accompanying processes have a geographic manifestation. They contribute to the transformation of the territorial organisation of Russian society, modify the sociogeographic agenda, initiate the evolution of Russian social geography, and require a clear idea about its trends, problems, and priorities.

### **Traditions and innovations in modern Russian social geography**

The analysis of the history of the science, which includes the complicated process of adaptation of its institutional organisational forms, research tools, and professional community to the political and economic transformations, sociocultural changes, and globalisation, shows that modern Russian social geography is a product of the general trend in the evolution of the national scientific school of thought (fig. 1) and the related achievements, problems, losses, and missed opportunities.

In the post-Soviet period, traditions were combined with the reformatting the whole system of research priorities of Russian social geography, the direction, and intensity of its research ties. The contacts with researchers and research teams from ex-Soviet republics (now, new independent states) survived in part. At the same time, contacts between Russian social geographers and their peers from ‘far abroad’ developed. Russian science made a transition from relying on local theoretical constructs and concepts (the 20<sup>th</sup> century left a rich intellectual legacy in the field of social geography — see table 1) to a more extensive use of international theoretical frameworks, following the current trends (sometimes with a time lag<sup>1</sup>) in modern Western geography boasting a diversity of methodological frameworks and research areas.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the 1980s-1990s saw an increased interest in cultural regionalism and regional identity studies within human geography (mid-2000s in Russia); the crucial paradigm change in the theory of economic growth (from the exogenous to endogenous one) took place in the late 1980s (the works of P. Romer and R. Lucas), in Russia it was observed only 15—20 years later [2].

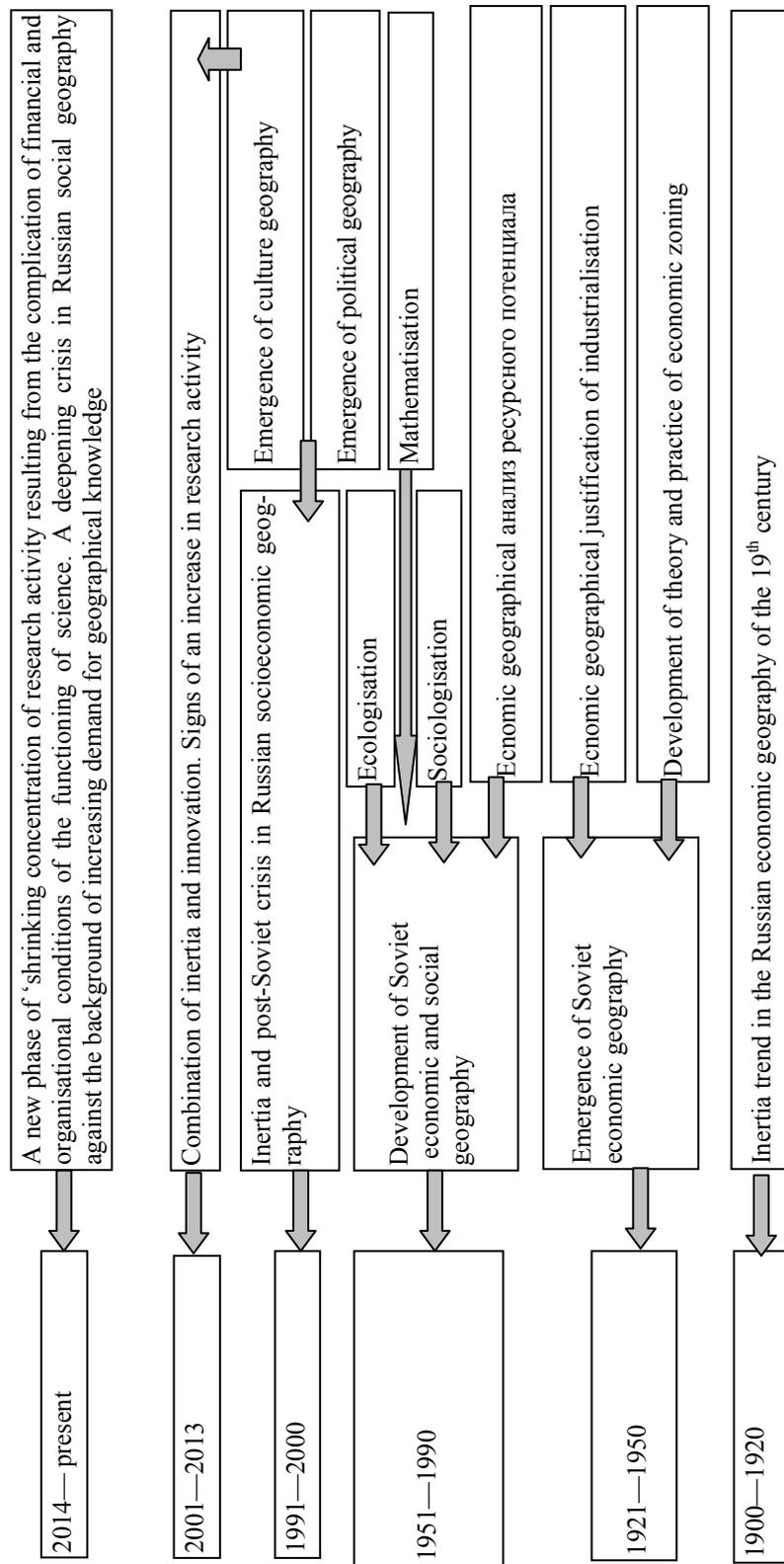


Fig. 1. Key trends in the evolution of Russian (Soviet) economic geography in the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century

Table 1

**Russian (Soviet) school of thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:  
leading scholars and key ideas**

Leading researchers	Ideas, theories, concepts
N.T. Agafonov; E.B. Alaev; P.M. Alampiev; I.G. Aleksandrov; V.A. Anuchin; N.N. Baransky; I.V. Belousov; S.V. Bernstein-Kogan; N.I. Blazhko; I.A. Vitver; V.V. Volsky; A.M. Gadzhi-Zade; V.M. Gokhman; L.N. Gumilyov; V.E. Den; V. Sh. Dzhaoshvili; Yu. D. Dmitrevsky; B.N. Zimin; R.M. Kabo; S.A. Kovalyov; N.N. Kolosovsky; A.M. Kolotievsky; I.V. Komar; O.A. Konstantinov; V.G. Kryuchkov; S.B. Lavrov; G.M. Lappo; O.P. Litovka; I.M. Maergoiz; V.P. Maksakovsky; Ya. G. Mashbits; A.A. Mints; I.V. Nikolsky; S. Ya. Nymmik; M.M. Palamarchuk; E.N. Pertsik; N.D. Pistun; V.V. Pokshishevsky; A.E. Probst; A.N. Rakitnikov; B.B. Rodoman; S.S. Salnikov; Yu. G. Saushkin; G.V. Sdasyuk; B.N. Semevsky; S.B. Slevich; A.E. Sluka; I.T. Tverdokhlebov; A.G. Topchiev; A.M. Trofimov; B.S. Khorev; A.T. Khrushchev; V.M. Chetrykin; A.I. Chistobaev; M.D. Sharygin, etc.	Theory of economic zoning; concept of territorial industrial complex; concept of energy generation cycles; concept of economic and geographical position; constructive geography concept; concept of territorial combination of natural resources; concept of territorial organisation of society; theory of regional planning; theory of unified settlement system; theory of polarised landscape; theory of territorial socioeconomic system, etc.

In particular, borrowings made it possible to develop the research tools necessary for studying spatial phenomena (in the context of the emerging market economy in Russia and global capitalism) through incorporating the theories of ‘growth poles’, ‘core-periphery structure’, ‘clusters’, ‘global cities’, competitiveness and positioning models, approaches developed within geographic conflict studies and geomarketing, etc. A better knowledge of international approaches and schools of thought, awareness of the social geographic phenomena and processes observed in the other countries facilitated the development of new subdisciplines in Russian social geography. They also made it possible to better understand the dialectics of the universal and the local in the territorial organisation of society and to identify its current features in Russia. At the same time, there emerged risks associated with replacing the national (Russian interests geopolitically, geoeconomically, and geoculturally focused on Russia) geographical picture of the world with its exogenous invariants (looking at ourselves and the global reality with through the ‘eyes of the West’). Russia faced the possibility of ‘eternal apprenticeship’ and thus almost inevitable intellectual (first of all, theoretical and methodological) apathy and feebleness.

Under the influence of the globalisation trend, the theoretical and methodological framework of Russian social geography has become increasingly *eclectic* and *pluralistic*. Against the background of the prevalence of the *sci-*



**entism paradigm** (based on the objectivist and rational, value-neutral methodology of studying cause-effect and functional connections between the properties of geographical space and economic and cultural phenomena), **phenomenological** approaches **have** also gained adherents [3]. However, in the post-Soviet period, the earlier prevalent Marxism-based methodological frameworks [4] did not lose their significance. They include an emphasis on studying the duality of nature and society, acknowledging human geography as a social science, interpreting territoriality as a major property of geographical studies, a focus on the ‘mode of production’ as the basis of social, political, and spiritual processes, seeing territorial systems as an objective reality; acknowledging the need for geography to take part in socioeconomic transformations (in zoning, spatial planning, etc.).

Following the methodological traditions and adopting intellectual innovations (and trends), post-Soviet social geography (within the **differentiation** trend) continued to affect the internal structure in the process of emergence of new subdisciplines and research areas.

### **Post-Soviet transformation of Russian social geography: key trends**

The past quarter a century has seen the development of the theoretical framework of Russian **political geography and geopolitics** (S. Lavrov, N. Mironenko, N. Kaledin, V. Kolosov, L. Smirnyagin, N. Bagrov, etc.). An important and rapidly developing component of these disciplines is the **geographical identification and conceptualisation of Eurasia and Eurasian integration** (L. Gumilyov, S. Lavrov, V. Kagansky, D. Zamyatin, A. Druzhinin, V. Shuper).

The 1990s transformations gave rise to **geopolitical limology** (V. Kolosov, L. Popkova, R. Turovsky, etc.). Researchers have addressed the issue of **transboundary geographical structure** (P. Baklanov, S. Ganzey, T. Gerasimenko, L. Korytny, V. Kolosov, N. Mezhevich, G. Fedorov, etc.), primarily in the metaregion of the Baltic, Black Sea, and Asian-Pacific regions and the Russian-Ukrainian and the Russian-Kazakhstani border areas, etc.

Alongside geopolitics, over the past quarter a century, Russian social geographers have focused on understanding the transformations of the post-Soviet socioeconomic space (A. Alekseev, S. Artobolevsky, Yu. Gladky, N. Zubarevich, etc.), including providing a rationale for new Russian regionalisation (L. Smirnyagin, A. Treivish) and the country’s environmental geographical position (N. Klyuev, V. Razumovsky, etc.). The rapid post-Soviet transformation of urban space gave a new impetus to **geographical urban studies** (K. Aksyonov, V. Bitjukova, O. Vendina, N. Vlasova, V. Glushkova, A. Druzhinin, V. Kolosov, G. Lappo, O. Litovka, A. Makhrova, A. Obedkov, E. Pertsik, N. Sluka, etc.).

The tertiarisation of the largest cities and the contingent areas — caused partially by deindustrialisation and the economic growth of the 2000s, which

increased demand for financial, educational, tourist, recreational, and other services — has encouraged geographical studies in the fields of **tourism and recreation** (A. Zyryanov, L. Mazhar, N. Mironenko, etc.), **infrastructure** (V. Dronov), **banking** (A. Luzanov), and **higher education** (A. Katrovsky). Studies in the field of **transport geography** (launched by I. Nikolsky) have rapidly developed (V. Bugromenko, B. Radnaev, etc.); a relevant theoretical framework has been devised (S. Tarkhov). **Spatial planning** tools have been developed (V. Lazhentsev, A. Chistobaev). At the same time, new research areas have been outlined — **institutional modernisation** of the Russian economy (N. Zubarevich, A. Pilyasov, V. Shuvalov, etc.), geography of **innovations** and innovation cycles (V. Baburin), geography of Russian **large businesses** (N. Zubarevich).

An important position in the structure of Russian human geography has been secured by **cultural geographical studies** (A. Druzhinin, D. Zamyatin, V. Kagansky, V. Kalutskov, M. Krylov, A. Manakov, U. Nabieva, D. Nikolaenko, V. Streletsky, etc.). The terms ‘territory perception’, ‘geographical image’, ‘historical and cultural heritage’, ‘cultural landscape’, and ‘identity’ have entered the vocabulary of Russian social geographers.

The size and structure of Russia’s geographical space, its administrative, economic, ethnocultural, and environmental fragmentation initiate polyscale **regional studies** dominating the social geographical research. Up to 85—90% of all national social geographical studies use regional or local data. It is worth noting that, in the past years, the priority of ‘regional’ studies was explained not only by the federative structure of post-Soviet Russia, but also by the significant ‘shifts’ in socioeconomic regionalisation. The economic structure, settlement and infrastructure systems, external ties, identity, and even the image of Russian regions and settlements have become non-static, which calls for close expert attention. Russian geography and its regional organisation has to be ‘rediscovered’. This problem is being successfully solved, which is substantiated by the large number of monographs on the socioeconomic geography of Russia’s central regions (A. Makhrova, T. Nefyodova, B. Rodoman, M. Sigalov, A. Treivish, etc.), South (V. Belozyorov, A. Druzhinin, N. Shchitova, etc.), Baltic region (G. Fedorov), North or Arctic (V. Lazhentsev, A. Obedkov, A. Pilyasov, etc.), Ural (E. Animitsa, N. Vlasova, M. Sharygin, etc.), Siberia (L. Bezrukov, B. Ishmuratov, Yu. Mikhailov, N. Sysoeva, etc.), and Pacific area (P. Baklanov, A. Moshkov, M. Romanov, etc.).

After a difficult period of adaptation and transformations, Russian social geography did not only achieve positive results (fig. 2), but also expanded its scope. These structural changes, bringing it closer to the model of global human geography [2], largely correspond to the trend towards the extensive development of Soviet economic geography — i. e. a focus on the search for the new aspects of the studies object. This approach was developed in the 1960s-70s by Yu. G. Saushkin.

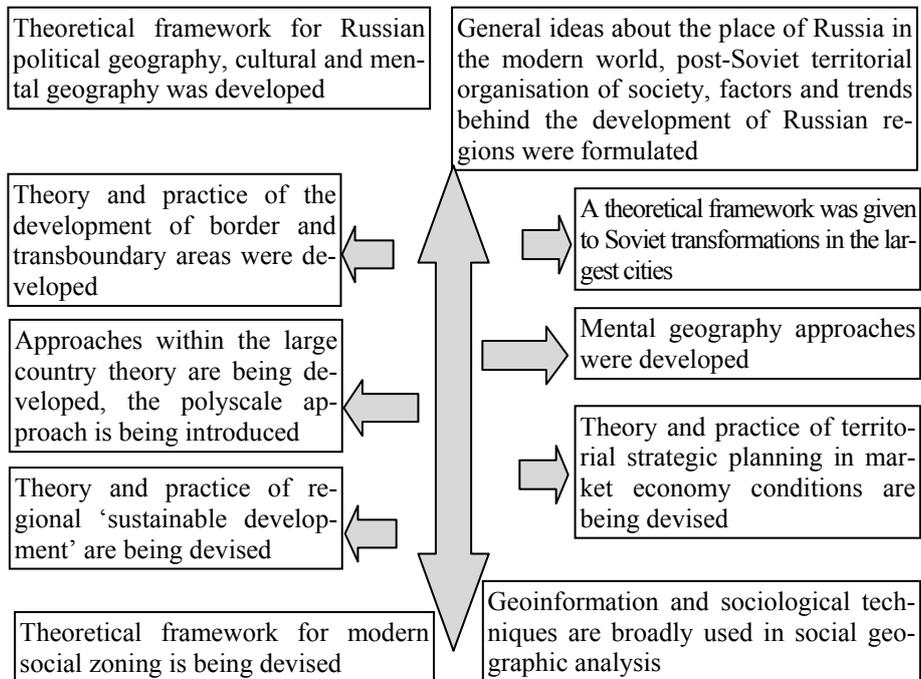


Fig. 2. Major achievements of post-Soviet Russian social geography

### Problems in the development of Russian social geography

At the same time, there emerged numerous obstacles to the development of modern Russian social geography (fig. 3).

Against the background of diversification of research over the past quarter a century, there have been a lack of basic social geographic studies — i. e. those into economic processes. Few authors (L. Smirnyagin, A. Pilyasov, V. Shuvalov) focus on the **theory and methodology of economic zoning**. Few serious works (P. Baklanova, T. Pototsky, R. Safiullina, etc.) have been published in the field of **territorial and industrial system building**. There are few publications on the urgent problem of the **rural and agricultural geography** (F. Michurina, T. Nefyodova, A. Nosonov, V. Tyurin, etc. specialise in the field); the same holds true for the studies into the seasonal counter-urbanisation observed in the uniquely widespread dacha phenomenon (T. Nefyodova, A. Treivish).

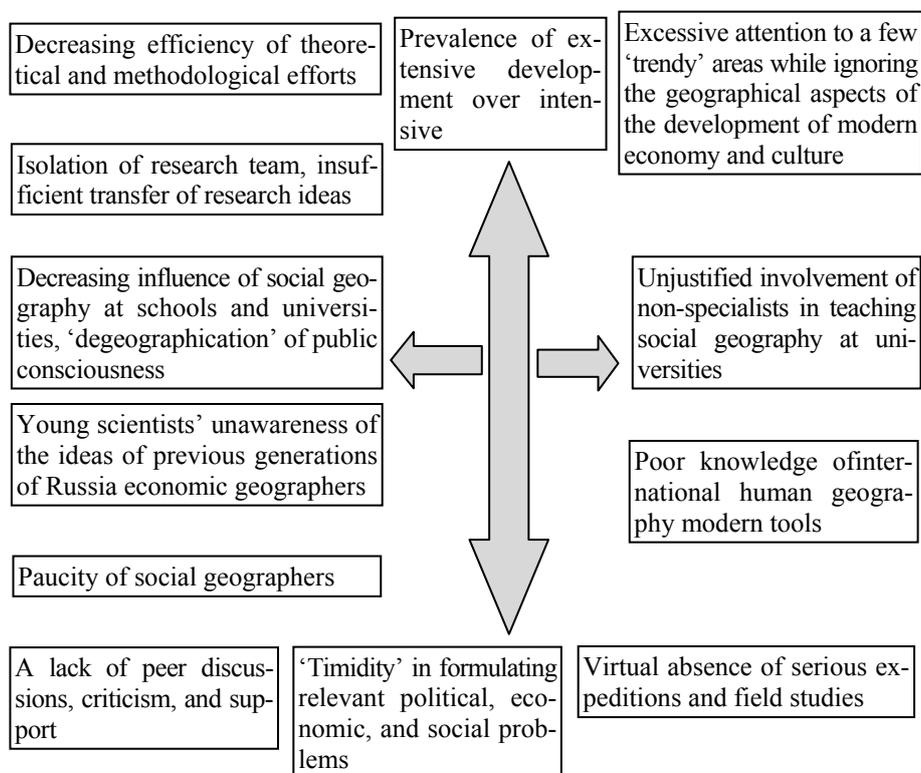


Fig. 3. Major obstacles to the development of modern Russian social geography

Despite the publication of works on **social geography** (A. Anokhin, V. Bugaev, N. Zubarevich, N. Shchitova, A. Yakobson, etc.), the spatial social inequality, poverty, insufficient development of social infrastructure, social pathologies (alcohol and drug abuse) observed in the post-Soviet space have not received a proper economic geographical interpretation. There is a lack of studies on military geography, gender issues, and risk geography. There are few microlevel studies, including those focusing on individual cities or districts, as well as rural districts and settlements (a breakthrough was the monograph by N. Yu. Zamyatina and A. N. Pilyasov [5]). Usually poor level of official socioeconomic statistics and insufficient public financing of science have resulted in the discontinuation of expeditions and field studies (the grants from the Russian Geographical Society, which made it possible to organise a few field studies [6; 7] are an exception from the rule).

There are few basic theoretical works usually authored by a small research community (P. Baklanov, V. Kagansky, V. Lazhentsev, B. Rodoman, A. Tkachenko, A. Trofimov, M. Sharygin, V. Shuper, E. Faibusovich, and others). Most publications of Russian social geographers show little interest in **theory**, which has been stressed by the leading specialists in the methodology of science over the recent years [8—14]. An influential international

conference held in Rostov-on-Don and dedicated to different aspects of the theory of socioeconomic geography [15] drew attention to the problem. However, it was not enough to reverse the trend.

### Priorities of Russian social geography

Following brief revitalisation (supported by the inflow of intellectual borrowing of 2002—2007 and an upsurge in the number of defended theses), Russian social geography entered the phase of ‘shrinking concentration’. The situation in science is still complicated, the prospects are diverse.

What can reverse the negative trend? First, it is the focus of professional community on the large-scale and basic problems of Russian society, the crucial one relating to overcoming the ‘periphery’ factors related to the socioeconomic position of the Russian Federation and its vast territory. Therefore, it is extremely important to substantiate the social geographical conditions for ensuring a significant increase in the economic, sociocultural, and environmental efficiency of the country’s territorial organisation. Of equal importance is the social geographical monitoring of the emerging ethnocultural transformation of Russia and its positioning in the rapidly changing ‘Eurasian space’. Finally, there is a need for a comprehensive professional explication of the loudly declared (and slowly implemented) geostrategic ‘turn’ of the Russian Federation. It is worth stressing that Russia’s characteristics require a poly-vector turn not only to the East (see [15]), but also to the South and ‘inside’ Russia itself, to its territorial commonalities, cultural landscapes, natural resource and environmental potential.

These cross-disciplinary problems require increased cohesion of the Russian social geographical community, including the networking of research teams. An important first step was the establishment of the **Association of Russian Social Geographers** in 2010 — a research association with 32 regional offices designed to forge and coordinate ‘horizontal’ professional ties and develop interregional contacts [16]. It is also important to encourage the ‘universalism’ of social geographers supplemented with the high level of research culture and professional competence. There is a need to resurrect the successful Soviet project of ‘faculty of advanced training’ (it can be launched at Moscow and Saint Petersburg State Universities with the participation of leading national specialists).

### Conclusions

Based on a more than two centuries national research tradition, positioning itself as an independent social science and being an integral part of the system of geographical sciences, Russian social geography did not only survive the political and economic transformations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> — early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but also achieved certain positive results and expanded its scope of activities. Despite numerous problems and deficiencies hindering the development of modern Russian social geography, it retains the leading position in developing the problem of territorial organisation of society — one of the most basic and complex issues both in Russia and across the world.

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