THE STRONGHOLDS OF RUSSIAN COASTAL BORDERLANDS: ECONOMIC DYNAMICS AMID GEOPOLITICAL TURBULENCE

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Received 25.03.2020
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-3-6

In the 21st century, the World Ocean is becoming a key factor in global socio-economic dynamics and a geoeconomic and geopolitical priority of many countries. The Russian Federation, whose economy, infrastructure, and settlement system have been gravitating towards the sea since the late 1990s, is no exception. This article aims to identify and provide a conceptual framework for the phenomenon of Russia's coastal borderlands and their constituent 'strongholds'. It also explores the factors and features of the economic dynamics of the coastal borderlands amid the post-2014 geopolitical turbulence. Economic and statistical methods are used to highlight the irregularity of the economic and settlement patterns across Russia's coastal borderlands, in their water and land areas. It is shown that Russian economic and military activities have clustered there to create 14 'strongholds', including two emerging ones. The current confrontation between Russia and the West is accompanied by the country's growing maritime presence, particularly in its western borderlands, the revitalisation and expansion of its 'strongholds', and economic diversification. The economic systems of the country's leading coastal region have proven to be highly resistant to geopolitical turbulence; this is partly explained by government support.

Keywords:
economy, maritime economy, geopolitics, coastal borderlands, geopolitical turbulence, Russian Federation, Russian western borderlands

To cite this article: Druzhinin, A. G. 2020, The strongholds of Russian coastal borderlands: economic dynamics amid geopolitical turbulence. *Balt. Reg.* 2020. Vol. 12, no 3, p. 89—104. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-3-6.

Introduction

The sea is a highly significant factor in the socio-economic development of today's Russia. Over the past 20 years, maritime transport has carried over 60% of the country's growing imports and exports.[1] Forty-two of the RBC top 100 Russian companies are 'sea-dependent' [1]. Maritime economy, including the port industry, shipbuilding, marine resource harvesting, and other fields account for up to 5.5% of Russia's GDP [2]. Its main driver is port terminals, whose throughput increased 7.8-fold from 1994 to reach 840 million metric tons or 3.6% of the world total in 2019.[2] National shipbuilding industry is enjoying a revival [3]. This is especially true of the military side of the industry: Russia has been getting 20% of international military contracts.[3] Hydrocarbon deposits are developed on land and offshore on Sakhalin, Kamchatka, Yamal, and in the Caspian Sea. Gas transport infrastructure has been built since 2011. The movement of the economy towards the sea affects settlement patterns. The country's 74 coastal cities are home to over 14 m people, which is 12.7% of the national urban population. The proportion of 'coastal residents' has been steadily increasing over the past two decades [4; 5]. The multifaceted coastalisation of Russian society and its spatial structure is well in line with global trends [6-10]. This process is taking place against the background of growing geoeconomic competition and geopolitical confrontation, which have increasingly taken place in the World Ocean since the 1970s [11; 12]. The circumstances and reasons prompting powers to compete for a territory (which is the essence of geopolitics according to a leading international specialist in the field, the French geographer Yves Lacoste [13]) are becoming an important factor and leading motive for maritime activities. The latter acquire a geopolitical dimension as a result. This article aims to provide a conceptual framework for and identify the phenomenon of Russia's coastal borderlands and their strongholds as well as to examine the current geopolitical determinants of the economic dynamics with a focus on the land and water structure of Russia's western borderlands.

[1] *The Transport* Strategy of the Russian Federation 2030: approved by regulation No. 1734-r of the Government of the Russian Federation of November 22, 2008. URL: https://www.mintrans.ru/documents/3/1009 (accessed 02.02.2020).

[2] *Review* of Maritime Transport. 2018/ United Nations Conference On Trade And Development. N.Y. ; Geneva, 2018.

[3] *Shipbuilding* Sevelopment 2013-2030: A National Programme for the Russian Federation. URL: https://knastu.ru/media/files/page_files/science/unid/new_folder/__/Gosprogramma_RF_Razvitiye_sudostroyeniya_na_2013_-_2030_gody.pdf (accessed 11.02.2020).

Russia's coastal borderlands and their strongholds: conceptualisation, delimitations, structuring, parametrisation

In recent years, public consciousness has become pronouncedly geopolitical. This placed the notions of border, which is often interpreted as the line between 'us' and 'them' [14], and borderlands at the centre of Russian human geographical discourse [15; 16]. Russian borderlands are 'amphibious'. The total length of the country's maritime border has been variously estimated at from 35.3 to 46 thousand km [17—19], which is almost twice the length of its land border. Thus, it is possible to identify and conceptualise the phenomenon of Russia's coastal borderlands by bringing elements of a maritime economy, region and border studies, and geopolitics into this category.

Some key segments of the country's coastal borderlands either are openly claimed by external forces (Crimea, the South Kurils) or experience constant pressure (the Kaliningrad exclave in the Baltic). This happens on an even greater scale in the Arctic, where Russia's principal geopolitical opponent is the US [21]. In terms of political geography, a specific feature of Russian borderlands is that only 3% of the country's maritime borders are bilateral [18]. In most cases, its coastal borderlands are multilateral, i.e. they bring Russia in contact with the world community and its global leaders, some of which excel in maritime industries. A new cold war is expected [10] to recreate the great confrontation between the land and the sea redolent of Alfred Mahan's and Halford Mackinder's ideologemes. In this light, keeping coastal borderlands and developing them as centres of economy, infrastructure, and community life is an economic necessity as well as a factor in and indicator of Russia's international standing, central to its image of a Eurasian and global power. As Vladimir Dergachyov put it, the coast is the geopolitical key to Eurasia [22].

Russia's coastal zone, which skirts its continental mass and accommodates most of the geostrategic maritime activities, is vast and multi-layered. It consists of the land and water components. The territorial waters account for 745 thousand km^2 of the country's coastal borderlands; the continental shelf, for 3.8 million km^2. The area of Russia's exclusive economic zone is estimated at 7.6 million km^2 [17]. If only a 50 km coastal zone is taken into account, the coastal borderlands comprise 10.5% of the country's territory. There are also basin-related and regional dimensions to the demarcation of coastal borderlands: Russia borders on 12 seas of three oceans and has access to the inland Caspian Sea[4]; 23 Russian regions are considered as coastal. Nature, climate, available resource, history, and other circumstances account for the gap between the socio-economic development of the land and water segments of national borderlands and their maritime significance (Tables 1 and 2). Moreover, there are prominent effects of specialisation, concentration, and agglomeration at play.

[4] *The Convention* on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. 12.08.2018. URL: http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5328 (accessed 18.03.2020).

Table 1

The demographic, economic, and military weight of the sectoral components of Russia's coastal borderlands

Coastal macrostructures	Proportion in Russia's coastal borderlands, %						
	Length of the sea border	Population of coastal cities	Throughput of coastal ports	Marine resource harvest	Proportion in offshore oil production	Proportion in offshore gas production	Proportion in the national naval force
Baltic	0.3	43.2	30.5	7.59	1.2	0.05	18.5
Black and Azov	2.9	25.6	30.7	1.97	0.3	2.8	18.8
Caspian	1.5	7.7	0.9	1.31	21.3	4.3	9.4
Pacific	44.1	14.4	25.4	67.73	68.9	49.5	45.5
Arctic	51.2	8.5	12.5	21.40	8.3	43.35	27.8

Source: prepared by the author based on 2019 data from Rosstat, the Russian Association of Marine Commercial Ports, and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

Table 2

The density of maritime activity localisation in the major segments of Russia's coastal borderlands

Coastal borderland macrostructure	Population of coastal cities, thousand people	Marine resource harvest, thousand metric tons	Seaport throughput, million metric tons	Offshore oil production, thousand metric tons	Offshore gas production, million m^3*
	per 100 km of Russia's maritime border				
Baltic	4800.0	268.25	203.17	247.6	27.0
Black-Azov	144.0	3.88	10.32	3.12	66.6
Caspian	237.6	11.21	1.38	954.8	445.5
Pacific	9.38	19.8	1.26	106.0	175.6
Arctic	5.87	5.37	0.53	10.95	133.2
Russian total	36.36	12.86	2.18	67.53	155.84

Source: prepared by the author based on 2019 data from Rosstat and the Russian Association of Marine Commercial Ports.

Comment: * LNG is taken into account.

Spatial concentration is highly characteristic of the port industry. In Russia, 75% of all cargo is handled by three port clusters. St Petersburg in the Baltic accounts for 29% of cargo handled in the country and 96% in the region; Krasnodar in the Black-Azov region, for 26% and 85% respectively; Vladivostok in the Pacific, for 19.4% and 77%. The situation is similar in Russian offshore oil drilling (Sakhalin accounts for 67% and the Caspian Sea area, for 21% thereof) and gas production including NLG projects (Sakhalin, 49.5%; Yamal, 43.7%). The data are as of 2019.

Spatial inequality is observed in the fishing industry as well. It is dominated by organisations situated in the Pacific region: fish caught in the Kamchatka area comprises 38% of the national total; that caught in the Sakhalin area, for 22%. The Murmansk region accounts for two-thirds of the national catch in the Arctic basin and the Kaliningrad region, for a similar proportion in the Russian Baltic. The Astrakhan region is the leader in the Caspian borderlands with 85%. Localisation and concentration apply to the navy too: 27% of the fleet is stationed in the Murmansk region; 16%, in the Kaliningrad region, and 15% in the Primorsky region.[5] Five regions — Murmansk, Kaliningrad, Sevastopol, Kamchatka, and Primorsky — account for 85% of the country's naval force.

Taking into account the specifics of Russia's borderlands, the national research tradition,[6] I deem it appropriate to discuss 'strongholds' of the coastal borderlands. This term applies to localities that are foci for the most important and propulsive fields of the maritime economy, centres for the land/water system formation, and the key components of the Russian 'coastalised' socioeconomic and military-strategic space. This interpretation draws on both the Russian methodology for spatial analysis of the economy and the international research traditions, primarily the maritime cluster concept, which has been actively developing in recent decades [24—28].

The strongholds of Russia's coastal borderlands were identified using a combination of parameters. These parameters are military-strategic (Russian Navy bases); geoeconomic (proximity to the main transboundary transport and logistics corridors); innovation and production-related (the localisation and potential of shipbuilders, ship design companies, and maritime research centres); maritime-economic (contribution to national and regional port throughput, marine fish harvest, offshore oil and gas production, coastal and maritime tourism); demographic (the concentration of 'coastal' population, agglomerations). Fourteen strongholds, including two emerging ones, were distinguished (Table 3).

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[5] *Warships* of the Russian Federation 2020. URL: http://russianships.info/today/ (accessed 18.03.2020).

[6] Veniamin Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky's idea about the 'cultural and economic footing for colonisation' as a 'territorial form of Russia's mighty dominion' [23], as well as the concepts of 'hotspots', 'nodes', and other 'foci' of spatially organised human activity, developed by Nikolay Kolosovsky, Yulian Saushkin, Isaak Maergoiz, Boris Rodoman, Mikhail Sharygin, Anatoly Chistobaev, Pyotr Baklanov, Aleksandr Pilyasov, and other prominent Russian human geographers.

Table 3

The strongholds of Russia's coastal borderlands

Cluster	Stronghold	Maritime specialisations
Baltic	St Petersburg	Port and logistics*, shipbuilding and ship repair, maritime production, comfortable settlement in coastal zones
	Kaliningrad	Navy infrastructure, shipbuilding and ship repair, maritime production, maritime recreation and tourism, offshore oil and gas production, comfortable settlement in coastal zones
Black-Azov	Novorossiysk	Port and logistics, comfortable settlement in coastal zones
	Rostov	Port and logistics, comfortable settlement in coastal zones
	Sevastopol-Crimea	Navy infrastructure, maritime recreation and tourism, offshore oil and gas production, shipbuilding and ship repair, comfortable settlement in coastal zones
	Sochi-Tuapse	maritime recreation and tourism, comfortable settlement in coastal zones, port and logistics
Caspian	Astrakhan	Offshore oil and gas production, navy infrastructure, shipbuilding and ship repair
	Makhachkala-Caspian**	Navy infrastructure, port and logistics
Arctic	Murmansk	Navy infrastructure, port and logistics, marine resource harvesting, offshore oil and gas production
	Arkhangelsk	Shipbuilding and ship repair, port and logistics
	Yamal**	Offshore oil and gas production
Pacific	Vladivostok	Port and logistics, navy infrastructure, shipbuilding and ship repair, marine resource harvesting
	Sakhalin	Offshore oil and gas production, marine resource harvesting
	Kamchatka	Marine resource harvesting, navy infrastructure, offshore oil and gas production

Comment: * — federal specialisation; ** — emerging strongholds.

Incorporated in the land-and-water socioeconomic and geopolitical context of coastal borderlands, each stronghold is a complex-forming cluster of maritime and, to a varying degree, defence industries. The core elements of a typical stronghold (port infrastructure, logistics, and concomitant industries) are located within a seaport and its settlement system. The only exception is Yamal. Ten out of twelve established strongholds are situated in cities with a population of over 250 thousand people; thirteen strongholds are found in coastal agglomerations. These strongholds are important components in the economic and settlement structures of their regions. Home to the key elements of the national coastal zone and coastal borderlands, strongholds have a pivotal role in Russia's maritime economy. They account for 92% of national port throughput, 85% of marine resource harvesting, 91% of offshore oil and 99% of gas production, 96% of Russian navy ships. The economic position of these foci of maritime power and their dynamics in the light of the geopolitical situation correspond to the country's geostrategic opportunities and prospects.

Current geopolitical turbulence as a factor in the economic dynamics of the strongholds of Russia's coastal borderlands

The geoeconomic and geopolitical context is more and more often labelled as turbulent [29; 30, etc.]. This is both easy to explain and indicative of undivided attention to constant changes in the global political world order as well as to the standings of countries and individual spatial components. Difficult both to predict and to control, these changes affect society and its structures that are reflected in the public consciousness and research discourse. Turbulence is an immediate product and indicator of a multi-polar world, the process in which are multidirectional, seemingly chaotic, and hard to predict. It is also a consequence of explicit and implicit competition between centres of power. Turbulence manifests itself in the confrontation plaguing many aspects of relations between countries and blocs. It spreads to geopolitics, geoeconomics, and various aspects of ecopolitics; it affects both material and mental processes, including territorial identity, which is central to geopolitics.

Post-Soviet Russia entered the period of intensive geopolitical turbulence after the now-apparent bitter strife with the West, which was chronologically linked to the Crimea referendum and the beginning of the armed conflict in the Donbas region. Both happened in 2014 when Russia was also faced with adverse changes in the global energy market. The situation deteriorated in March 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Turbulence brought to the fore the problem of borders and border areas [32], highlighting the specifics and significance of Russian borderlands, including coastal ones. Analytics shows that it also sped up Russia' maritime activities with resources being redistributed towards the Black Sea, Far East, and Arctic [33] as well as accelerated the development of the strongholds. Remarkably, during the recession of 2015—2016 and the following recovery, the number and maritime potential of the strongholds increased (Table 4).

Table 4

Dynamics of key maritime activities in Russia in 2017, compared to 2013 baseline, %

Macroregion	Marine resource harvest	Offshore oil production	Offshore gas production*	Port throughput
Baltic	133	64	86	114
Black-Azov	53	-	102	155
Caspian	127	401	215	51
Pacific	113	128	108	132
Arctic	106	100	102	157
National total	115	164	112	134

Source: prepared by the author based on data from Rosstat and the Russian Association of Marine Commercial Ports[7].

** The Yamal LNG production reached its full capacity in 2019.

New motives, geopolitical and not, to explore the Arctic have expedited the rise of the Yamal stronghold, which is expected to grow into a bipolar Yamal-Taimyr base. Among other things, there are plans to develop the Northern Sea Route, which has been associated with the Greater Eurasia project [34]. Today, Yamal is a major growth point for offshore gas production. The geostrategic significance of Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, and particularly Murmansk and Severmorsk along with other naval bases is increasing. Geostrategic interests account for the creation of the Makhachkala-Caspian stronghold, which supplements and duplicates the maritime potential of Astrakhan — an emerging centre for gas production. The Sevastopol-Crimea base has been

[7] *Russian* regions. Socioeconomic performance. 2013. Moscow : Rosstat, 2014; *Russian* regions. Socioeconomic performance. 2019. Moscow : Rosstat, 2020 (https://www.gks.ru/folder/210/document/13204); *Port* throughput by basins 2013 and 2018. Russian Association of Marine Commercial Ports statistics. URL: https://www.morport.com (accessed 18.03.2020).

actively developing during integration into the Russian political and economic space. Kamchatka is becoming an ever more important centre for fishery. Since 2014, the catch has grown almost 1.5-fold, which comprises 65% of the total national increase over the study period. St Petersburg has confirmed its standing as a major centre of shipbuilding, maritime technology, human resources certification, and innovation. The city is home to 40% of people employed in shipbuilding in Russia [3].

The development of strongholds in Russia's coastal borderlands amid geopolitical turbulence is concurrent with the economic standing of the corresponding regions (Table 5).

Table 5

Changes in the economic position of Russia's coastal regions, including coastal borderlands strongholds, 2013—2018, -fold

Region	GRP per capita to the national average		Fixed investment per capita to the national average		Regional consolidate budget revenue to the national average	
	2013	2018	2013	2018	2013	2018
St Petersburg	1.30	1.35	1.00	1.31	1.44	1.30
Leningrad region	1.02	1.04	1.54	2.31	0.94	1.09
Kaliningrad region	0.76	0.80	0.76	1.32	0.88	1.50
Krasnodar region	0.82	0.72	1.90	0.76	0.72	0.67
Rostov region	0.57	0.59	0.64	0.52	0.64	0.61
Republic of Crimea*	0.24	0.35	0.33	1.28	0.89	1.09
Sevastopol*	0.30	0.31	0.26	0.80	1.26	1.07
Astrakhan region	0.72	0.94	1.29	0.90	0.69	0.65
Murmansk region	1.05	1.11	0.97	1.71	1.27	1.29
Arkhangelsk region	1.11	1.23	1.40	1.42	1.12	1.00
Primorsky region	0.79	0.76	0.68	0.63	0.87	0.88
Kamchatka region	1.10	1.30	1.09	1.06	3.21	3.30
Sakhalin region	3.62	4.16	3.81	3.87	3.40	3.79

Source: prepared based on data from Rosstat[8].

Comment: * data as of 2014.

[8] *Russian* regions. Socioeconomic performance. 2013. Moscow : Rosstat, 2014; *Russian* regions. Socioeconomic performance. 2018. Moscow : Rosstat, 2019 (https://www.gks.ru/folder/210/document/132040).

In 2013—2018, eleven out of 13 Russian regions that are home to old strongholds dating back to previous centuries witnessed an increase in GRP per capita as compared to the national average. The only outsiders were the Krasnodar and Primorsky regions. The most impressive growth was observed in the Murmansk region, Sakhalin, Kamchatka, and Russian coastal regions in the Baltics. A more moderate increase was registered in Crimea, partly because of the local geopolitics-related business conditions. The changing economic standing of the coastal borderland regions testifies to their high resistance to turbulence. This resistance is ensured by Russia's maritime industry as well as national budget and investment priorities. Further development of the strongholds, changes in their functions, and their contribution to national maritime activities will be determined by the persistent raw materials specialisation of the country and centripetal socio-geographical processes focused on Moscow and St Petersburg. Equally important factors will be the need for Russia to establish diversified communications within a Eurasian space [5] and the growing convergence between geoeconomic and geopolitical processes and interests. Despite the country's increasing presence in the Arctic and the impending turn to the East, its interests remain Europocentric. This explains the priority given to the western borderlands, which are home to eight (!) maritime strongholds of the Russian Federation.

The determinants and strategic priorities of maritime stronghold development in Russia's western borderlands

Russia's western borderlands fringe maritime transnational macroregions (Baltic, Black, and Barents) interspersed with 'intermaria'. The latter are not only spaces where integration and confrontation with the West take place but also national settlement and economic centres. The most important maritime strongholds are concentrated in these areas. Some of them dating back centuries,[9] together they account for 70% of the national port throughput and 65% of the country's navy ships. These bases are located near the still significant Western target markets[10] and the most populated and developed areas of European Russia — 22% of the country's population live within 500km from the eight strongholds of the coastal borderlands. Current geopolitical turbulence

[9] Arkhangelsk was established in the 16th, St Petersburg in the early 18th, and Sevastopol in the 18th century.

[10] As of January 2020, the EU accounted for 41.2% and other countries of the Atlantic and Mediterranean for 15% of Russia's bilateral trade.

and its economic dimension as well as the volatility and spatial fragmentation of global markets create a new reality for Russia's western borderlands and their strongholds. This new reality emerged when the country's western economic centres started to lose their position as exclusive foci for maritime activity as the North-East was becoming a national economic priority. Thus, western borderlands were increasingly becoming a periphery as compared to the major centres and axes of interaction in the maritime economy of Greater Eurasia. Note that 11 out of 27 largest Eurasian ports are Chinese. The situation is aggravated by slowing growth in cargoes handled by Russian ports. The throughput was increasing by 15% in 2002—2007 and by 7% in 2014—2018. Probably, the growth rate will stabilise in the export-import segment, which accounts for 80% of the total throughput. This imposes limitations on the earlier dominant development model for coastal territories. Extensive and multifaceted, it was overly focused on port facilities and investment in them. Ensuing instability creates demand for innovations in the functions of the strongholds, their economic structure, spatial ties, etc.

Another important feature of maritime activities in the west of Russia is the multitude of unique conditions and local determinants. In the Arctic zone, where the Murmansk and Arkhangelsk strongholds are located, these are persistent post-Soviet depopulation, high aggregate costs [35], and economic risks arising from the precarious global situation. The other segments of Russia's western coastal borderlands are attractive to migrants. In 2018, the ratio between total net migration to the Russian Baltic and Black Sea areas and that to the Moscow agglomeration was 1 to 1.5. Migration translates into both economic opportunities and additional socio-political risks. The current dialogue between Russia and the West places the Kaliningrad and Sevastopol-Crimea strongholds in a difficult situation. Crimea's level of economic development is still half the national median. Turbulence in maritime industries — port services, fishery, and recreation — plays an important role as well. The Kaliningrad region was adversely affected by the new economic reality brought about by the geopolitical changes of 2015, particularly the severance of transboundary ties. Remarkably, in the post-Crimea period, both the Russian Baltic exclave and Crimea[11] have been principal recipients of federal subsidies. Home to 2.3% of the country's population, these three regions accounted for 11.1% of the subsidies in 2015—2017. Half of the federal moneys (565 billion roubles) were allocated to the Kaliningrad region.

[11] The Republic of Crimea and the federal city of Sevastopol.

A new phase of the global economic crisis, which began in March 2020, has reduced opportunities for public support for maritime strongholds. The geostrategic significance of its western borderlands has increased for Russia. It is of critical importance for the economies of the strongholds that the positive trend observed in transport, logistics [36], and other maritime industries continues. It is equally important, however, to restructure and diversify the economy. The idea of an industrial port complex, which was produced as early as the 1970s, may be of use here [37]. Special attention should be paid to the production, service, research and technological segments of the maritime economy. Although maritime activities of Russia, its western borderlands, and coastal territories within the integration frameworks established over the past three years in the Baltic [38] and other areas should be maintained and supported, the most urgent problem is integration into trans-Eurasian marine communication corridors. This problem is especially acute in Russia's North-West. At the same time, quite in line with the strategic goal of promoting the economic cohesion of the Russian Federation,[12] there is a need to encourage interaction between Russian coastal centres and create a flexible, turbulence-resistant network that will serve as a framework for a unified national maritime system, which is apparently lacking today. Such a network may benefit from existing corporate links and the resources of the United Shipbuilding Corporation, which has production facilities in five maritime strongholds of the western borderlands.

Conclusion

The current coastalisation of the Russian Federation is a major, stable, and multifarious trend. It is especially pronounced in the country's coastal borderlands and its major maritime centres. Global changes and growing turbulence necessitate stronger Russian presence in border-area waters and the World Ocean. The increasing instability of the present and uncertainty of the future point up geopolitical factors and considerations. Since spring 2020, Russian centres for maritime activities have been tested again by the intensifying struggle for leadership in the energy market and the contestation of global order. Factors in the resistance of Russian strongholds are the market situation, raw materials resources, technological innovations, government support, and an

[12] *Strategy* for the spatial development of the Russian Federation 2025. URL: http://static.government.ru/media/files/UVAlqUtT08o60RktoOXl22JjAe7irNxc.pdf (accessed 24.03.2020).

increase in the efficiency of the national maritime economy. The latter is a result of the adaptation of approaches, structures, and strategic decisions to coastal conditions.

The study was supported by grants 18-17-00112 Ensuring the Economic Security of Russia's Western Borderland Regions During Geopolitical Turbulence and 19-18-00005 Russia's Eurasian Maritime Activities: Regional Economic Forecasting from the Russian Science Foundation.

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