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# INTERNATIONAL POSITIONING OF THE REGION: THE IMAGE OF THE KALININGRAD REGION IN THE MEDIA SPACE OF THE BALTIC STATES

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*The issue of international positioning is crucial to all exclaves, and the Kaliningrad region surrounded by the Baltic region countries is no exception. This contribution aims to describe a general strategic path for positioning the Russian territory in question. To produce recommendations on a positioning concept, it looks at the ties between the Kaliningrad region and the neighbouring Baltic States and how the former is perceived by the latter. Publication monitoring and media content analysis were carried out to explore the image created in the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian media in recent years. Avenues for positioning are proposed in line with the principles of place branding, and the interests common to the region and the Baltic States are considered through the lens of international cooperation projects. The emphasis is on the prospects for trade relations development. The main advantages of the region are identified, and the risks to be reckoned with when forming a positioning concept are determined. The findings suggest that strategic positioning is feasible in the case of the Kaliningrad region; its focal points may be investment, logistics, tourism and infrastructure. The authors also stress the possibility of developing international cooperation platforms and indicate regional problems of international concern.*

**Keywords:**

image, positioning, strategy, cooperation, trade, Kaliningrad region, Baltic States

## **Problem Statement and Research Methodology**

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As of now, most Russian regions do not have an international positioning strategy. Suggestions by the expert and academic community mainly concern tourism, culture, economy, innovation and education. Although there have been some comprehensive proposals for Russian regions in recent years, strategic initiatives are rare. Thus, there is a need for new ‘research optics’ in Russian spatial imaging [1, p. 159].

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The development of the Kaliningrad region's international positioning strategy is a burning issue due to its special importance for the state, the interests of other countries concentrating around it, and the potential integration into the common economic space of the Baltic Sea region [2]. In implementing the strategy, it is essential to consolidate the strengths to develop cultural, trade and other types of international ties and to obtain benefits in terms of reputation, investment or tourist exchanges. A positive place image, in turn, can favour the standing of the country in general [3]. The strategy development is important not only because of the exclave position of the region but also because of some geopolitical factors [4, p. 79]. However, giving the priority exclusively to them, focusing on "hard power", is not sufficient for developing an efficient toolkit. For instance, it seems impossible to find mutual benefits with counterparties of the neighbouring Baltic countries, whose elites have been openly supporting confrontation with Russia for many years.

Creating a positioning strategy implies, amongst other things, an assessment of a region's development level and potential, as well as the prevailing perceptions on the part of foreign actors. Analysis of the latter helps determine the features of the image and the international political brand formation. It has been noted in the literature that the Russian media space presents the Kaliningrad region as an economically and touristically attractive region, a military outpost and a region of cooperation [5]. Media analysis shows a similar picture in some countries of the Baltic region. The Polish media, for instance, creates an ambiguous image of the Russian exclave, referring to it neutrally, in the context of cooperation or as a threat [6, p. 48–49].

Electronic media materials published in 2018–2020 were monitored<sup>1</sup> to identify what image of the Kaliningrad region is projected in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. The study applied the method of media content analysis to materials dedicated to the region or making a special mention thereof. The resources were sampled using the search query 'Kaliningrad region' and 'Kaliningrad'. Publications on incidents and episodic events were excluded. The result was a total of 202 resources categorised into thematic groups (see the tables below) to characterise the references. Single references indicate low interest in certain topics and are poorly representative, still, they allow for identifying potential areas of common interest.

To determine positioning areas, the authors apply the concept of place branding. Examples of international project implementation and the state of trade relations were studied based on data from the Government of the Kaliningrad region, the Kaliningrad Regional Customs and the Joint Technical Secretariat of the 2014–2020 Russia-Lithuania Cross-Border Cooperation Program.

<sup>1</sup> Latvia: Skaties.lv, Lsm.lv, Diena, Latvijas Avīze, Tvnet.lv, Jauns.lv, Rīgas Aprīņķa Avīze, Delfi, Bb.lv, nra.lv; Lithuania: Delfi, 15min.lt, diena.lt, LRT, Lrytas.lt; Verslo žinios, tv3.lt. Estonia: err.ee, delfi.ee, postimees.ee.

SWOT analysis allows one to comprehensively consider the strengths and opportunities of the region and fully describe its standing. It uses standard groups of internal or external factors: geographical and geopolitical situation (situation, conditions, resources, international climate), research and production factors (research potential, production potential, spatial organisation, areas of economic development, large infrastructure projects), financial system (budget, investment potential), social sphere (social infrastructure, labour and consumer resources), governance (efficiency of the region's administration, sustainability of the private sector). This paper presents the most significant factors in the context of international positioning.

This study raises, for the first time, the question of finding effective analytical tools for an international positioning strategy for a border region and tests specific methods. It is also the first research to conduct a qualitative content analysis of the Baltic States' media on the problem of international positioning of the Kaliningrad region and assess the risks and opportunities for forming an attractive image of the Russian exclave.

### **Perception of the Kaliningrad region in the Baltic states**

The analysis shows that, during the study period, the Latvian media most often addressed the issues of transport and transit, accounting for about 45 per cent of all the publications (Table 1). The interest in the topic increased in 2020 due to a freight container train from China to the Kaliningrad region crossing the country under a contract between the Latvian Railways (lat. Latvijas dzelzceņš) and the Russian Railways. This event received mainly positive coverage as the media welcomed the cooperation between the railway companies, and they saw the transit as a new (or well-forgotten former) area of cross-border relations. It is worth noting that the majority of publications on the event were official press releases of the Latvian Railways. Other materials on this topic published in Latvia include those on possible new air and rail routes, transit business and the Baltic Transport Forum.

*Table 1*

#### **Number of Latvian publications relating to the Kaliningrad region**

Topic	2018	2019	2020	Total
Geopolitical role of the region	10	7	7	24
Transport links and transit	6	4	22	32
Cultural events	1	1	2	4
Energy Industry	1	0	0	1

*The end of table 1*

Topic	2018	2019	2020	Total
E-visas	0	3	1	4
Tourism and tourist attractions	0	2	0	2
Amber industry	0	0	1	1
Attitude towards Immanuel Kant and the German heritage	1	0	1	2
Education in the region	0	1	0	1
<i>Total</i>	19	18	34	71

The Latvian media discuss the geopolitical role of the Kaliningrad region sometimes neutrally and more often critically (Table 2). Almost 34 per cent of all the publications devoted to this topic mainly cover the issues of troop buildup and weapon deployment. The comments of Latvian politicians, representatives of NATO or Western experts stating that the Kaliningrad region should be perceived only as a threat to European states give them a negative tone. For example, in the context of the events in Belarus following the presidential elections in 2020, the region was described as a ‘knife at the throat of NATO’ if Russia gains control of the so-called hypothetical Suwalki corridor along the border of Lithuania and Poland<sup>2</sup>.

*Table 2*

**References to the Kaliningrad region  
in the Latvian media**

Topic	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Geopolitical role of the region	14	10	0
Transport links and transit	2	10	20
Cultural events	0	2	2
Energy Industry	0	1	0
E-visas	2	1	1
Tourism and tourist attractions	0	1	1
Amber industry	0	1	0
Attitude towards Kant and the German heritage	1	1	0
Education in the region	1	0	0
<i>Total</i>	20	27	24

About 6 per cent of the publications focus on cultural events and the introduction of electronic visas for visiting the Kaliningrad region. Whilst materials on the former topic refer to the region positively, particularly due to the initiative

<sup>2</sup> Nazis pie NATO rīkles». Kāpēc Baltkrievija ir svarīga ASV, 2020, *LSM.lv — Uzticamas ziņas*, URL: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/zinu-analize/nazis-pie-nato-rikles-kapec-baltkrievija-ir-svariga-asv.a370931> (accessed 17.01.2021).

of Kaliningrad institutions to open exhibitions in Latvia, those on the latter include a negative assessment of the project on the simplified entry of foreigners to Russia.

According to the monitoring results, the Latvian media have not formed a stable image of and tone of reference to the Kaliningrad region. Approximately equal shares of the sampled publications show critical, neutral and positive attitudes towards the region (Table 2).

Whilst in Latvia there were 71 publications on the Kaliningrad region, in Lithuania, there were 93. The main topic in the Lithuanian media was tourism, which accounted for 28 per cent of all the publications (Table 3). The results of the analysis clearly show that in 2019 the focus was on the simplified procedure for visiting the region using electronic visas. Within the framework of this topic, the experience of travel to the region is mainly discussed neutrally. New Year's holidays in Kaliningrad, visiting the Cathedral, the Museum of the World Ocean, the Curonian Spit, etc. are assessed positively. A negative attitude to the Kaliningrad region is observed in alternative travel reports concentrating on 'poor accessibility', 'border traffic jams', 'Soviet atmosphere', etc. However, negative references to the region in the context of tourism constitute a small proportion in comparison with neutral and positive ones (Table 4).

Table 3

**Number of publications related  
to the Kaliningrad region in Lithuania**

Topic	2018	2019	2020	Total
Geopolitical role of the region	4	7	4	15
Transport links and transit	3	0	5	8
Energy Industry	2	3	0	5
E-visas	0	25	0	25
Tourism and tourist attractions	5	20	1	26
Amber industry	1	1	0	2
Attitude towards Kant and the German heritage	5	0	0	5
Business projects and investment climate	2	0	1	3
Grocery trips	1	0	0	1
Lithuanian community in the Kaliningrad region	0	1	0	1
Water treatment facilities in the Kaliningrad region	0	1	0	1
Cross-border cooperation programme	0	1	0	1
<i>Total</i>	23	59	11	93

Table 4

**References to the Kaliningrad region  
in Lithuanian media**

Topic	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Geopolitical role of the region	4	11	0
Transport links and transit	1	7	0
Energy Industry	0	5	0
E-visas	9	13	3
Tourism and tourist attractions	5	12	9
Amber industry	0	2	0
Attitude towards Kant and the German heritage	5	0	0
Business projects and investment climate	2	1	0
Grocery trips	1	0	0
Lithuanian community in the Kaliningrad region	1	0	0
Water treatment facilities in the Kaliningrad region	1	0	0
Cross-border cooperation programme	0	0	1
<i>Total</i>	29	51	13

Another 27 per cent of the Lithuanian media coverage of the region concerns electronic visas. Most of the publications are neutral; however, the number of those with a critical tone exceeds the number of positive ones. The reason for this was the duplicated opinion of Lithuanian experts about the ‘danger’ of visiting the region because of the activities of the Russian special forces<sup>3</sup>. The positive coverage of the visa topic relates to the prospects of tourism development and cross-border cooperation in some sectors of the economy.

About 16 per cent of the Lithuanian publications discuss the Kaliningrad region in the context of geopolitics and military-political confrontation. Like in Latvia, there are no positive references to the region in this regard. Almost 9 per cent of the publications concern transport infrastructure (primarily maritime); 5 per cent, energy; 5 per cent, the attitude to the German period in the region’s history.

The Lithuanian media mostly refer to the Kaliningrad region neutrally. The second biggest group is negative publications. The reason for this is both complex Russian-Lithuanian relations and contradictions at the national level, as well as the biased position of some authors disregarding the norms of journalistic ethics.

Since 2018, there have been 38 publications on the Kaliningrad region in the Estonian media (Table 5). The majority of them are on geopolitics (about 42 per cent). But, unlike Latvian and Lithuanian resources, these publications

<sup>3</sup> Įspėja dėl Kaliningrado: nemokama viza — tarsi sūris pelėkautuose, 2021, *TV3 Play*, URL: <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/1004935/ispeja-del-kaliningrado-nemokama-viza-tarsi-suris-pelekautuose> (accessed 17.01.2021).

consider the region in a more restrained manner. Most of them are news related to the deployment of weapons, including the Iskander operational-tactical missile systems.

Table 5

**Number of publications related to the Kaliningrad region in Estonia**

Topic	2018	2019	2020	Total
Geopolitical role of the region	12	3	1	16
Transport links and transit	1	1	2	4
Cultural events	0	2	0	2
Energy industry	0	5	1	6
E-visas	0	1	1	2
Tourism and tourist attractions	0	1	1	2
Attitude towards Kant and the German heritage	3	0	0	3
Business projects and investment climate	3	0	0	3
<i>Total</i>	19	13	6	38

About 16 per cent of the publications mention the region in the context of projects to ensure its energy independence, transport and transit (10 per cent). The topics of business (particularly the creation of a special administrative district in Kaliningrad for the re-domiciliation of companies from offshore zones) and attitudes to the German heritage account for 8 per cent each. The topics of cultural events, electronic visas, and tourism comprise 5 per cent of the publications each.

The tone of publications on the Kaliningrad region in the Estonian media is mostly neutral (Table 6). Negative examples are materials on the scandal over attitudes towards Kant and the publication on the position of the Lithuanian special forces on the alleged danger of electronic visas.

Table 6

**References to the Kaliningrad region in Estonian media**

Topic	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Geopolitical role of the region	0	16	0
Transport links and transit	0	4	0
Cultural events	0	1	1
Energy industry	0	6	0
E-visas	1	1	0
Tourism and tourist attractions	0	2	0
Attitude towards Kant and the German heritage	1	2	0
Business projects and investment climate	0	3	0
<i>Total</i>	2	35	1



With no clear image of the Kaliningrad region and no unambiguous tone of references to it, the media of the Baltic States mention the territory within a wide range of topics. In the Latvian media, besides the issues of geopolitical rivalry, the questions of transport and transit come to the fore; in Lithuania, it is the prospects for the development of tourism. Against this background, Estonia shows low media interest in the region, which is due to the relative remoteness of Kaliningrad and a significantly lesser degree of coherence in the economic and social ties compared to those the Estonians have with St Petersburg, for example. In general, the three countries perceive the simplification of visits to the region and joint cultural, sports and tourism projects most positively (which provides opportunities for cooperation).

### **Positioning areas for the Kaliningrad region**

Whilst the brand implies a set of recognised unique qualities, perceptions and value characteristics, the image forms and reflects a superficial perception. Together with the reputation, the latter produces the brand [7, p. 20–21]. Originally, place branding, or geobranding, was used as a positioning tool in the development of tourism strategies. Today it is a multidisciplinary field of research with no strong theoretical and conceptual basis, on the one hand, and significant input from geography, political science, economics and urbanism, on the other [8, p. 282].

Referring to the Kaliningrad region, Berendeev notes that there have been many works on its image and promotion of its brand in the framework of various sciences, but geobranding stands out as it focuses on the search for unique ideas, their realisation in projects to increase the attractiveness of the region and the applied task of producing and disseminating positive content [9, p. 139]. At the same time, the geobrand may not have a strong historical, cultural or landscape foundation, as it may be formed around the folklore environment or local mythology. The comprehensive understanding of place branding first presented by Anholt can imply the formation of positive associations based on a competitive identity [10]. Significant contributors to the development of the theory of geobranding were Govers [11], Ashworth and Kavaratzis [12], Moilanen and Rainisto [13], Wheeler [14], Baker [15], Dinnie [16] and others.

Classically, the place brand parameters include politics and people, business and export brands, tourism and culture. Thus, the following positioning areas are proposed based on their strengths and capabilities.

1. *Politics, diplomacy and people.* The area involves forming the brand of an open territory of cooperation. As Fedorov notes, the Kaliningrad region has a

reasonable prospect of developing as a platform for international interaction [17, p. 14]. In this regard, the interregional level is particularly promising, as this is where the geopolitical contradictions between Russia and, for example, the Baltic States are currently not so acute.

In contrast to the partnership within the framework of the Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation or Euroregions, which lacks large resources, joint projects within the 'Russia-Lithuania 2014–2020' cross-border cooperation programme supported by the Russian Federation and the EU have a large budget<sup>4</sup> totalling over 27.2m euros, of which about 15.7m come from the EU funds and 8.5m from Russia. The main beneficiaries are the government authorities and institutions [18, p. 29]. In 2018, there were 12 projects approved within the programme; in 2019, there were another 12 agreed on; in 2020, the decision was made to support 14 more projects. The results of the three calls for proposals show the following distribution of the projects by the priorities of the Russia-Lithuania programme: the promotion of culture and preservation of historical heritage (18 projects); social integration, fight against poverty (12); support for local and regional governance (8)<sup>5</sup>. The most costly ones focus on the restoration of cultural heritage sites; repair of museum infrastructure; adaptation of buildings and premises for cultural and tourist purposes; international tourist routes and events; combating floods and forest fires; greater openness of municipal authorities in the decision-making process; modernisation of health facilities and better quality of medical services; provision of diagnostic and rehabilitation services. The programme has garnered considerable interest amongst Russian beneficiaries running projects in Sovetsk and on the Curonian Spit and those representing cultural, educational and medical institutions, including the Museum of the World Ocean, the IKBFU, hospitals in Kaliningrad, Baltiysk, Ozersk, etc.

Initially, cross-border cooperation was hampered by unequal economic and legal conditions, asymmetry in the functioning of political institutions, the state of customs facilities, and the strengthening barrier function of the border [19, p. 132–134]. The projects launched under the Russia-Lithuania programme indicate that even in the context of a general decrease in the intensity of cooperation and additional restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic [20, p. 57], the development and introduction of international initiatives in the Baltic Sea region is quite possible.

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<sup>4</sup> Joint Technical Secretariat of the Russia-Lithuania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme for the period 2014–2020, 2021, *European Neighbourhood Instrument 2014–2020*, URL: <http://eni-cbc.eu/lr/en> (accessed 17.01.2021).

<sup>5</sup> Within the framework of cross-border cooperation programs, 69 projects are implemented in the region, 2021, the *Government of the Kaliningrad Oregion*, URL: <https://gov39.ru/press/237758> (accessed 20.02.2021).

2. *Tourism, culture and education.* This positioning area is closely linked to the first one. Tourism can benefit from the first achievements of the place brand development [21]. The region has many cultural heritage sites and offers prospects for improving tourist infrastructure and stimulating recreational activities. The most intensive development is expected in recreational, cultural and historical areas, primarily in coastal towns. Not only does the region have the experience in internationalising research and education, but it also has the potential for establishing a research and educational cluster through the efforts of the IKBFU and the Baltic Valley Technology Centre project, sector-specific state universities and their branches, as well as the cultural cluster on the island of Oktyabrsky in Kaliningrad.

3. *Investment, trade and export brands.* This area is associated with consolidating product brands and branding the region as a business place attracting investment. The conditions for capital investments in the region currently include the regime of the Special Economic Zone and the Special Administrative Region on Oktyabrsky Island in Kaliningrad. The former provides for customs and other preferences, whilst the latter grants international holding companies exemption from income tax on dividends. Researchers believe these factors to enhance cross-border cooperation [22, p. 286]. The region's integration into international transport corridors can fulfil its transit potential [23]. The major problem of positioning in this area relates to a set of unresolved issues of offsetting the costs arising from the exclave position [24].

In addition, to discuss the prospects of international positioning of the Kaliningrad region in promoting economic interests in the Baltic States, it is necessary to pay attention to its role in trade relations. The literature shows that the level of economic development achieved by the region and its neighbours creates objective prerequisites for building equitable interregional relations [25, p. 151]. The overall structure of trade with the Baltic States does not look pessimistic.

The largest trade partner is Lithuania with a value of trade of 178.3m USD in 2018, 193.2m in 2019 and 263.2m in 2020. The trade with Latvia amounted to 51.8m, 38.8m and 44.2m USD; with Estonia to 12m, 7.9m and 12.6m USD, respectively. In the last three years, the share of Latvia in Kaliningrad exports (Fig. 1) was 0.8–0.9 per cent; Estonia, 0.2–0.3 per cent. The contribution of Lithuania was more substantial. It increased from 3.2 per cent in 2018 to 8.7 per cent in 2020. For comparison, the share of the Kaliningrad region in total imports of Latvia in the same period rose to 0.1 per cent; Lithuania, from 0.2 to 0.5 per cent; Estonia, 0.02 per cent.

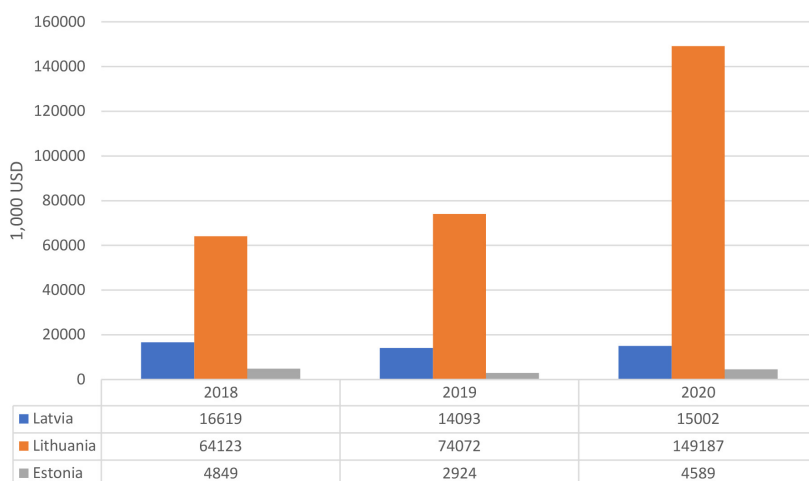


Fig. 1. The total value of exports to the Baltic states in 2018—2020, 1,000 USD

*Source:* prepared by the author from data on the international trade of the Kaliningrad region, 2021, Kaliningrad Regional Customs, URL: <https://koblt.customs.gov.ru/folder/146787> (accessed 18.01.2021).

In 2018—2020, the Kaliningrad region exported to Lithuania 33 per cent of the total timber from the commodity position, including sawn or split timber. During this period, Lithuania accounted for 22 per cent of the exports of electrical machinery, equipment and multimedia devices. Lithuania's share in the exports of petrol and petroleum products was 15 per cent, ferrous metals 15 per cent and cereals 13 per cent. The customs statistics on the region's export to its principal partner countries do not include data on the value of traded amber, which is also in demand in the Baltic states. Latvia received 11 per cent of the region's total exports of wood and wood products in this period, 3 per cent of the total volume of petroleum products and only 1 per cent of cereals, ferrous metals, and mechanical equipment. Estonia accounts for 2 per cent in the commodity groups of oil products and timber and 1 per cent in the groups of electrical machines and equipment and floating structures.

The value of trade in recent years indicates that the Baltic states are not amongst the region's major international trade partners. Yet, whilst the indicators of trade with Latvia and Estonia vary within the traditional limits, in the case of Lithuania there is a trend toward an increase in imports from the region. We can identify major goods traded between Kaliningrad and the Baltic States. The main export items are cereals, petroleum products, ferrous metals, timber and electrical and mechanical equipment. Sometimes, the countries show interest in purchasing floating structures. The export composition can influence the image of the region.

Thus, the positioning of the Kaliningrad region in the Baltic States as a participant in trade relations can be realised by factoring in the goods that are in stable demand in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. The territorial proximity of the Russian exclave ensures their prompt export. Official support for trade expansion and long-term agreements between foreign trade entities seems a promising way of development.

**Results and findings**

Having identified promising areas for positioning, we shall now identify the weakness and risks using a simple SWOT analysis (Table 7).

Table 7

**SWOT-analysis of international positioning areas  
of the Kaliningrad region**

Strengths	Weaknesses
Proximity to European development centres Cross-border cooperation Amber as a brand The presence of large private companies Industrial parks, SEZ and SAR Construction of an offshore terminal Historical and cultural heritage Sports facilities Major goods	Limited financial resources Politicisation of international interactions Administrative barriers Import-oriented economy Lack of competitive trade offers Small domestic market Unsatisfactory state of historical sites
Opportunities	Threats
Interaction and events platform Easy access Inclusion in transport corridors and the Baltic logistics hub Development of tourism and tourism infrastructure Research and education cluster Cultural cluster	Geopolitical contradictions Closure of cooperation programmes Better economic and investment conditions in the neighbouring countries Competition for tourists in the Baltic region

The development of the positioning strategy for the Kaliningrad region will not do without the classical stages clarifying the purpose of creating a place brand, its main idea, identification of target audiences, visualisation, selection of marketing tools, support resources, approval of the promotion program, etc. The first — analytical — stage in the analysis of geographical conditions, historical heritage and conditions for economic and political development requires the identification of the distinctive features and critical factors in place attractiveness,

as well as a better understanding of its emerging image. The primary tool here is the exploration of media images of the region both domestically and abroad. In addition, there is a need to consider archetypal images and symbols.

The results of the study into the perception of the Kaliningrad region in the Baltic States and the identification of its positioning areas, strengths and weaknesses indicate that the general trajectory for the region's promotion can form and consolidate its image as a part of the international transport and logistics system, investment promotion, trade and tourism development — a territory with the potential for creating significant innovative clusters.

Geopolitical contradictions and their impact on international interactions pose certain risks. But these challenges can be addressed by strengthening business linkages and supporting mutually beneficial cross-border projects in various areas. It remains important that regional actors demonstrate an interest in the partnership in culture and tourism, healthcare and environmental safety of border areas.

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