

## On a Spatial Development Strategy for Russia

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**Abstract**—The article offers meaningful innovations aimed at improving the Spatial Development Strategy for Russia. It is noted that the Strategy should be coordinated with other fields of federal socio-economic policy, including scientific, technological, and foreign economic areas. The paper substantiates the importance of multivector (aimed at the development of all macroregions of the country) federal spatial policy and its clearly articulated multiscale character (choosing as its objects territorial units of different scales – macroregions, regions, municipalities) with a significant increase in attention to municipalities (in particular, it is proposed to introduce in the Strategy the concepts of “geostrategic municipality” and “science city”). The paper emphasizes the need to move from the logic of identifying promising centers of economic growth to the consideration of a unified settlement system, mutual influence and interrelations between different types of territories, as well as to the analysis of the agglomeration processes at various scales (from rural agglomerations to the largest urban agglomerations and conurbations) as well as the formation of development axes.

**Keywords:** spatial development strategy, socio-economic policy, unified settlement system, macroregions, municipalities, agglomerations

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**Introduction.** One of the most significant events of the last decade in the field of establishing the Russian federal spatial development policy was the approval in February 2019 of the “Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025” (hereinafter referred to as the SDS or Strategy).<sup>1</sup> This is the first document of its kind in the entire modern Russian history dedicated specifically to the entire space, and not to the totality of the RF federal subjects. The emergence of SDS evoked a strong response in the scientific community and sparked a broad discussion, mostly critical [1–5].<sup>2</sup> Despite the significant number of already accumulated proposals on what SDS and federal spatial policy should be (including in the new geopolitical conditions, and especially in relation to Siberia [7–11]), this topic cannot be considered completely exhausted or one that has lost its relevance. Moreover, in the fall of 2023, the federal authorities started working on a new SDS concept (in

accordance with the instruction of the RF Prime Minister following the strategic session on infrastructure development).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the feasibility of the current approaches to the SDS development, as will be shown below, is questionable, to put it mildly. The changes that have taken place over the past five years in the conditions and processes of the Russian space transformation as well as possible innovations in the content of the Strategy also deserve discussion. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to discuss some issues related to the Strategy updating that we believe to be significant and to propose new approaches to its content.

**The place of SDS in strategic planning and federal policy.** The development of the SDS, as is well known, began as part of the implementation of the Federal Law of June 28, 2014 No. 172-FZ On Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation, in which the SDS was named as one of the mandatory strategic planning documents. According to this law, the SDS “is developed in accordance with the basics of the state policy for regional development of the Russian Federation in order to implement the main provisions of the strategy for socio-economic development of the Russian Federation and the national security strategy of the Russian Federation”; in turn, the state policy of regional

<sup>1</sup> Order of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 207-r as of February 13, 2019. After the SDS had been approved, it was amended and supplemented five times by the orders of the Government of the Russian Federation as of August 31, 2019 No. 1945-r, March 23, 2021 No. 719-r, December 16, 2021 No. 3633-r, June 25, 2022 No. 1704-r, September 30, 2022 No. 2877-r.

<sup>2</sup> In [6], a summarizing analysis of 160 Russian-language scientific articles published in 2015–2020 that had mentioned SDS is presented.

<sup>3</sup> <http://government.ru/news/50202/>.

development is “a system of priorities, goals, objectives, measures, and actions of the federal bodies of state power for the political and socio-economic development in the federal subjects of the Russian Federation and municipalities.”<sup>4</sup> It clearly follows from these norms that the Strategy is integrated into the general socio-economic policy of the federal authorities. Moreover, the same federal law states that the SDS is being developed by “the federal executive body exercising the functions of developing and implementing state policy and legal regulation in the field of socio-economic development of the RF federal subjects and municipalities,” and this is exactly the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation. The development of the approved SDS was, indeed, carried out by the Russian Ministry of Economic Development, although there was no strategy for the country’s socio-economic development as such at that time (and in this regard, the question arose as to how justified the emergence of the SDS was). However, national goals and strategic objectives for the country’s development were approved,<sup>5</sup> and in the “Fundamentals of State Policy in the Sphere of Strategic Planning”,<sup>6</sup> which appeared in 2021, the strategy for socio-economic development of the country is no longer mentioned, the provisions only refer to the need for strategic planning documents with national development goals, long-term priorities, and objectives of public administration.

In our opinion, the development of a new concept of the Strategy is even more problematic. Firstly, over the past years, many problems in the sphere of strategic planning in general [12–14], which inevitably affect the strategizing of spatial development, have not been solved. Secondly, the work on the new concept of the Strategy began before the updating of the federal strategic documents that form its base. Thus, the “Fundamentals of the State Policy of Regional Development of the Russian Federation” are adopted, as well as the first SDS, for the period up to 2025 and have not been updated. The national development goals of the country are approved for the period until 2030<sup>7</sup> but the corresponding presidential decree is very brief, contains only goals and target indicators, it does

not include strategic objectives. Thirdly, although this is perhaps the main thing, the policy of regional development began to be replaced by urban planning policy, the inadmissibility of which was also mentioned in relation to the activities of the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation [15]. According to official information related to the Prime Minister’s instruction to develop a new SDS concept, it is to coordinate measures for the support of housing and infrastructure construction and the responsibility for its development was suitably assigned to the RF Ministry of Construction, Ministry of Transport, and the Ministry of Economic Development. This decision does not appear accidental as the RF Ministry of Construction departmentally superordinates the Unified Research and Design Institute of Spatial Planning of the Russian Federation<sup>8</sup> transformed from the Institute for Urban Planning of Moscow.

Provision of housing and infrastructure construction is undoubtedly one of the most important tasks of the federal policy. However, it makes little sense to address this issue in isolation from the comprehension of the country’s the spatial development (where and how the economy will develop in the territorial context, what changes in settlement will occur), since investment in the development of housing and infrastructure is only feasible where those are strictly necessary. Since the risks of investing in objects that will not be fully in demand are recognized, we imply here, first of all, the development of the largest agglomerations as the most obvious points of growth, which, of course, does not allow solving the problems of the country’s balanced spatial development. Therefore, in our opinion, the new SDS should remain, primarily, a document of socio-economic, rather than urban planning policy.

Moreover, SDS should be coordinated not only with strategic planning documents of socio-economic development and the national security strategy of the Russian Federation but also with the strategy of Russia’s scientific and technological development. The approved SDS barely mentions this (although it is clear that the location of scientific and technological activities is highly unevenly distributed) but this task has now become particularly urgent in connection with the need to ensure the technological sovereignty of the country. At the same time, it is important to comprehend simultaneously both the contribution of individual territories to the S&T development of the country and the role of S&T activities in the development of different types of regions and municipalities. The situation is similar with foreign economic policy. The approved Strategy does not discuss issues related to the participation of regions in foreign economic relations and the influence of the latter on the spatial structure of the Russian economy. However, in the current conditions, the relevance of these issues has

<sup>4</sup> Decree of the President of the Russian Federation as of January 16, 2017 No. 13 On Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for Regional Development of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Decree of the President of the Russian Federation as of May 7, 2018 No. 204 On National Goals and Strategic Objectives of the Development of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Decree of the President of the Russian Federation as of November 8, 2021 No. 633 On Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy in the Sphere of Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation.

<sup>7</sup> Decree of the President of the Russian Federation as of July 21, 2020 No. 474 On the National Development Goals of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2030.

<sup>8</sup> <https://eipp.ru/office/about.html>.

increased even more and their severity has become more obvious. In other words, the preparation of a new Strategy, along with strengthening the socio-economic component, requires careful coordination with different areas of federal economic policy, primarily with the two mentioned above (scientific, technological, and foreign economic).

***Multivector and multiscale character of the SDS, extending “Municipalization” of the spatial policy.*** Federal policy in Russia is de facto multiscale, i.e., the objects of this policy are territories of different taxonomic levels in their broad sense (Far East, Arctic, North Caucasus), federal subjects (or regions), and municipalities. The multiscale approach can be traced in the current SDS but it is not clearly articulated (starting from the goals and objectives of spatial development) and is not fully elaborated.

In particular, for a number of reasons, one of the “stillborn” subjects of the SDS turned out to be a grid of the country’s macroregions [5]. The development of a new economic zoning for the country that meets the current realities is certainly important for understanding the spatial structure of the Russian economy and designing its spatial policy [16] but such a task can hardly be solved in a short time (within the timeframe for the development of a new SDS). Therefore, at the current stage, it seems better to abandon the special grid of macroregions (which has very little to do with the real processes of economic region formation) and to consider macroregions within the established boundaries of federal districts, as well as the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation, already enshrined in the regulatory framework and federal spatial policy. At the same time, the SDS itself should contain provisions concerning the goals and objectives, development prospects, and the place in the spatial structure of the Russian economy for all Russian macroregions, and not only those classified as priority geostrategic territories (the Far East, the Arctic, the North Caucasus, and Crimea). The need for such an approach is due to a number of circumstances.

Firstly, until recently, in the federal spatial policy, for a number of reasons, insufficient attention was paid to the problems of the socio-economic development of Siberia [17]. At the beginning of 2023, the Strategy for the socio-economic development of the Siberian Federal District until 2035<sup>9</sup> was approved but the depth of elaboration of directions, prospects, and mechanisms for the development of Siberia in this document cannot be considered sufficient.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, the entry of new federal subjects into Russia and the restoration of their economies after a special military operation will inevitably strengthen

the importance of the South of Russia in federal spatial policy, and this direction requires independent in-depth study.

Thirdly, the drastic change in the geography of Russia’s foreign economic relations, their reversal in the eastern and southern directions, force us to take a fresh look at the participation of different country’s macroregions in Russian foreign trade and related economic processes. At the same time, the ongoing transformations cannot be reduced only to creating additional opportunities for the eastern regions of the country (Siberia and the Far East) in connection with strengthening cooperation with China. In order to take advantage of these opportunities, considerable efforts on the part of the state are needed (especially for infrastructure development), besides, relations with China will not necessarily be built specifically with the eastern regions of Russia. It is very likely that they will focus on the most populated areas and the already established infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Russian foreign economic ties that correspond to the new geopolitical situation can and should be adjusted in many directions (with a large number of countries, including those outside Eurasia proper). This means, among other things, maintaining the demand for seaports in different basins not only the Far East, but also the Arctic, the Azov-Black Sea (which in 2023 demonstrated a 10.4%<sup>12</sup> increase in cargo handling in seaports) and the Caspian Sea (where cargo turnover increased by 29.7% in 2023). Maritime logistics in the Baltic Sea remains important for Russia, and the network of port terminals established here has convincingly demonstrated both its ability to adapt to new geopolitical conditions and its development potential [19]. A sustainable “sea-oriented” nature of the Russian economy creates special conditions of functioning for seaside regions and municipalities [20], and these aspects of spatial (aqua-territorial) dynamics should be reflected in the new SDS as well.

Once again, we should mention the expanding role of the country’s South—its logistics, agricultural pro-

<sup>9</sup>As previous studies [18] show, in developing the geography of foreign economic relations with neighboring countries, including China, the neighborhood effect is manifested but still these relations (foreign trade, investment) are more tied to the established leading economic centers and the main settlement zone. For foreign investors, Russia has always been attractive, first of all, as a sales market, accordingly, investments (including Chinese ones) were located mainly in the European part of the country. And there is no reason to assume that the situation will change in the foreseeable future (one of the striking examples is the automotive industry: even before the sanctions of 2022, the Haval plant was built in the Tula oblast, and with the departure of Western brands from Russia, Chinese cars are supposed to be assembled at the vacated facilities). Imports are linked either to the main settlement area (if we are talking about consumer goods) or to established industries (if equipment or components are imported), and from this point of view, Baltic ports are more suitable for importing Chinese goods.

<sup>12</sup><https://morflot.gov.ru/novosti/lenta/gruzooborot-morskikh-por-tov-rossii-po-itogam-2023-goda-vyros-na-5-do-883-8-mln-t/>.

<sup>9</sup> Order of the Government of the Russian Federation as of January 26, 2023 No. 129-r.

<sup>10</sup>V. A. Kryukov, Not a strategy, but a declaration // Nauka v Sibiri. No. 7 (3368). February 16, 2023 <https://www.sbras.info/articles/mneniya/ne-strategiya-no-deklaraciya>.

duction, tourism and recreational potential, increasing share in the population of Russian Federation (and not only due to the new territories, as well as increased fertility in the regions of the North Caucasus, but also migration attractiveness due to favorable natural and climatic conditions) [21].

The current Strategy (even taking into account the amendments made to it) does not sufficiently address the issues of socio-economic development at the municipal level. This statement is confirmed primarily by the situation with geostrategic territories. The initial version of the Strategy identified “priority geostrategic territories” (in addition to those mentioned above, the Kaliningrad oblast was included in this category), as well as “geostrategic border territories” (all federal subjects of the Russian Federation with external borders, regardless of the real role of their border position in their socio-economic development). In 2022, the Strategy was supplemented with provisions related to “border municipalities” and their role in ensuring Russia’s national security. By and by, the SDS demonstrates the absence of any clear federal policy on border territories (which is actually the case). Moreover, most importantly, it clearly lacks such a concept as geostrategic municipalities, which should include not only border areas, but also at least CATOs (closed administrative-territorial entities), as well as municipalities with critical infrastructure facilities and industries.

Another issue, no less significant in modern conditions and significantly underdeveloped in the SDS, is S&T development, and the concentration of S&T activity is again associated not with the subjects of the Federation as a whole, but with individual municipalities, the so-called “science cities.” The Strategy, on the other hand, limited itself to identifying promising centers of economic growth, where conditions for the formation of world-class scientific and educational centers have developed. Moreover, while in the initial version of the SDS, in addition to Moscow and science cities of the Moscow oblast and St. Petersburg with Gatchina, at least 18 other cities were named, in the current version there are only six of them left. Thus, all other already established centers of scientific and technological activity were left out of the SDS field of view. Actually, this applies not only to SDS: it should be recalled that only 13 municipalities have the official status of a science city in Russia, whereas in reality there are at least 70 of them [22].

Further “municipalization” of spatial policy requires, of course, more attention to municipalities not only as objects, but also as subjects of spatial development. The need to increase the role of local government in the development of municipalities and to strengthen their financial base has been repeatedly voiced; there are many studies on this topic [23]. During the preparation of the current SDS, such institutional issues were removed from the subject of dis-

cussion, but their elaboration is necessary when adopting its new version.

***From separate growth centers to a unified settlement system.*** In-depth study of the municipal component in SDS is also necessary to implement a much more correct approach to understanding spatial development not only as a priority support (and outstripping socio-economic dynamics) of individual (considered as “promising growth centers”) settlements, municipalities, urban agglomerations, and regions but also as creating (in line with conceptual approaches developed by domestic economic geographers back in the 1970s) of a certain “unified settlement system” aimed at “coordinated development of all types of settlements within certain local and regional settlement systems” [24, p. 538]. Understanding the relationship and interdependence between different types and scales of territorial units, building relationships between them should, we believe, become the main leitmotif of the new SDS.

In order to implement this approach, the Strategy should first reflect the diversity in existing forms of territorial organization for the society and economy. The movement in this direction (connected with the amendments to the SDS 2021–2022) has already begun, but the innovations of recent years are clearly insufficient. The current version of the Strategy covers three types of urban agglomerations: the largest (with a population of more than one million people), large (from half a million to one million people) and “just” agglomerations (with a population of more than 250 000 people), anchor settlements, agro-industrial and mineral resource centers and rural areas. At the same time, the current legal framework already includes another type of agglomeration that is not taken into account in the SDS: rural agglomerations (rural areas adjacent to each other and urban-type settlements and/or small towns with a population of up to 30 000 people bordering rural areas).<sup>13</sup> However, even if this type is included in the Strategy, it will not reflect agglomeration processes in all their diversity [25]. Agglomerated forms of settlement with a population of 30 000 to 250 000 people are also missed out of the SDS although it is on this scale that ensuring the connectivity of settlements is essential due to the expansion of the consumer and labor market. It should also be added that studies of agglomeration processes based on small and medium-sized cities and rural areas are still very poorly represented in the scientific literature, there are few examples of such works [26–28]. With regard to the effective organization of public administration, in our opinion, a certain departmental disunity is also a problem. It is not surprising that rural

<sup>13</sup>Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation as of May 31, 2019 No. 696 On Approval of the State Program of the Russian Federation “Integrated Development of Rural Areas” and on Amendments to Certain Acts of the Government of the Russian Federation.

agglomerations were not included in the SDS, since it is not the Ministry of Economic Development of Russia that deals with them (as well as rural areas in general), but the Ministry of Agriculture of Russia, although today for the preservation of rural settlements it is essential to develop not only agriculture but also nonagricultural employment.

It is also important to take into account that agglomeration forms of settlement are by no means the only format in which the interrelationships between settlements and municipalities are significant. The actual zones of influence of the largest cities extend far beyond their agglomerations. And this interconnection between centers and their periphery has many manifestations: more complex than commuting, return migration of the population; setting up remote offices of companies operating in the city; the formation of recreational zones distanced from large cities (but focused specifically on their inhabitants); finally, the production of consumer products focused on city residents. Accordingly, the development of local territories is determined not only by their entry (or nonentry) into the urban agglomeration but also by getting into the wider zone of socio-economic influence extended by the largest cities and this cannot be ignored when determining the prospects for spatial development.

Urban settlements of more complex forms are gradually emerging. In Russia, it is hardly appropriate to talk about the presence of full-fledged conurbations; nevertheless, territorial formations close to them are appearing [29], which creates prerequisites for synergistic development of urban agglomerations. It is also important to take into account not only the presence of established centers of economic growth but also the presence of emerging axes of growth/development (this concept is quite well known from center-periphery concepts of regional development, but it has not yet entered into practice of Russian public administration). Such axes can be territories along transport corridors, new expressways under construction, which noticeably change the geographical location and, accordingly, the prospects for the economic and residential dynamics in the development of adjacent territories.

Scientific support for the spatial development of the Russian Federation also initiates the need for typologization of all its municipalities with primary attention to the peculiarities and factors of their socio-economic dynamics. Unfortunately, over the years since the approval of the SDS, no comprehensive system of analytical monitoring of municipal development has been established, and the assessments carried out are fragmentary (for example, the Ministry of Construction of Russia compiles an index of the quality of the urban environment; monocities are monitored etc.).

The need for a special emphasis on interdependence and interaction of territories (primarily municipalities) implies not only a new analytical approach to the development of SDS, but also the adoption of quite specific practical solutions. First, it is necessary to reconsider approaches to understanding and registering the place of residence of citizens. To date, even within the framework of population censuses, not to mention government data, citizens are not supposed to have two (or even three) permanent (!) places of residence, although in real life this is already a very common phenomenon [30]. And it is not just about dachas, although it is about them too. In the context of declining Russian population (according to Rosstat's forecast, excluding new regions, the Russian population will decrease from 146.45 million people on January 1, 2023, to 138.77 million people on January 1, 2046<sup>14</sup>), the simultaneous presence of people in two or three regions is one of the possible ways to preserve the developed space. Recognition of several permanent places of residence for citizens will make it possible to plan infrastructure development more correctly, and solve the issue of forming the revenue base of local budgets. In practice, it is possible to allow citizens to notify the authorities of more than one place of their residence and to declare the desired distribution of their personal income tax payments between the budgets of different territories.

**Conclusions.** Thus, the strategy should be revamped in several aspects, i.e., by

- Increasing its interconnectedness with other areas of federal socio-economic policy, especially scientific and technological as well as foreign economic policy, organization of interdepartmental cooperation (in addition to the Ministry of Construction, Ministry of Transport, and Ministry of Economic Development, at least the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and the Arctic, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation should be involved in the development of SDS).

- Ensuring the multivector nature of the federal spatial policy, defining its goals, objectives, and directions in relation to all macroregions of the country, and not only priority geostrategic regions. Siberia, the South, and the Northwest require special attention.

- Ensuring the multiscale federal spatial policy with mandatory strengthening of its municipalization.

- The transition from identifying promising centers of economic growth to analyzing a unified settlement system and shifting the main focus in spatial development to creating conditions for interaction of territories of different types and scales.

<sup>14</sup><https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/313/document/220709>. (15.10.2023).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this work declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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