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The Foreign Economic Relations of St. Petersburg and Finland During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract. *Russian-Finnish cooperation was largely determined by the level of cooperation between the border regions, in which St. Petersburg played a key role. With the aggravation of relations between the Russian Federation and the countries of the European Union, it is interregional ties that are becoming one of the unique opportunities for the development of bilateral cooperation, especially in the economic sphere. However, in addition to these factors, at the turn of 2010-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became a systemic challenge that both sides had to overcome. According to the authors' hypothesis, the COVID-19 pandemic may limit the cooperation system, but at the same time become an incentive for its improvement. In order to determine the specifics of the St. Petersburg-Finland economic cooperation in 2020-2021, the authors consider how the pandemic affected the level of trade and investment cooperation, as well as contacts of regions' representatives and the implementation of interregional projects. The sources of the study are statistical data from Federal State Statistics Service of Russia and Finnish Customs, materials of state authorities and mass media. The authors rely on the approaches of neoclassical realists to the study of international relations, applying the concept of interest in the external relations of regions in the federation, as well as the concepts of auxiliary and identity paradiplomacy, which from different angles show the role of regions in the country's foreign policy in the continuation of the studies of I. Duchacek and P. Soldatos. As a result of the study, the authors show that the pandemic initially led to a reduction in trade and investment flows between St. Petersburg and Finland, but its negative impact was overcome by the end of 2021, and the online format allowed maintaining interaction in the field of culture and education. Nevertheless, the epidemic highlighted the existing trends of reducing the role of the Finnish direction in the external relations of the city and its reorientation to partners from Asia and CIS countries in accordance with regional interests and systemic constraints.*

Keywords: Paradiplomacy; Russia; Regional Interest; Trade; Foreign direct investment; Cross-border cooperation programme “South-East Finland – Russia”; “Kotka Days”

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Внешнеэкономические связи Санкт-Петербурга и Финляндии в период пандемии COVID-19: вызовы и перспективы

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***Аннотация.** Российско-финляндское взаимодействие во многом определялось уровнем кооперации приграничных регионов, в котором ключевую роль играл Санкт-Петербург. В условиях обострения отношений между Российской Федерацией и странами Европейского Союза, межрегиональные связи становятся одной из немногих возможностей развития двусторонней кооперации, особенно в экономической сфере. Однако помимо этих факторов на рубеже 2010-2020 гг. пандемия COVID-19 стала системным вызовом, который обе стороны были вынуждены преодолевать. Согласно гипотезе авторов, пандемия COVID-19 может ограничивать систему кооперации, но в то же время стать стимулом для её совершенствования. С целью определения особенностей петербургско-финляндской экономической кооперации в 2020-2021 гг. авторы рассматривают, каким образом пандемия оказала влияние на уровень торгового и инвестиционного взаимодействия, а также контакты представителей регионов и реализацию межрегиональных проектов. Источниками исследования являются данные статистики, представленные Федеральной службой государственной статистики РФ и Таможней Финляндии, материалы органов государственной власти и периодической печати. Авторы опираются на подходы неоклассических реалистов к изучению международных отношений, применяя концепцию интереса к внешним связям регионов в федерации, а также концепции ауксилиарной и идентификационной парадипломатии, которые с разных углов показывают роль регионов во внешней политике страны в продолжение исследований И. Духачека и П. Солдатоса. В результате исследования авторы показывают, что пандемия изначально привела к сокращению торговли и инвестиционных потоков между Санкт-Петербургом и Финляндией, однако её негативное влияние удалось преодолеть уже к концу 2021 года, а онлайн-формат позволил сохранить взаимодействие в сфере культуры и образования. Тем не менее, эпидемия подчеркнула уже существовавшие тенденции уменьшения роли финского направления во внешних связях города и его переориентацию на партнёров из Азии и стран СНГ в соответствии с региональными интересами и системными ограничениями.*

Ключевые слова: Парадипломатия; Россия; региональный интерес; торговля; прямые иностранные инвестиции; программа приграничного сотрудничества «Юго-Восточная Финляндия – Россия»; «Дни Котки»

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Introduction

In Russian-Finnish relations, the north-west of Russia played a special role in various epochs. At the individual level, for residents of St. Petersburg, Finnish cities and regions were the main direction of tourism in the Baltic region in the XXI century, and in such spheres as shopping, recreation, visiting historical cities and nature monuments, as well as a place for transferring to other countries via Helsinki airport or the ferry system to Sweden. At the same time the Russian metropolis attracted not only Finns interested in its culture and history, but also Finnish investors and entrepreneurs seeking to establish strong and mutually beneficial ties with partners from Russia. Such ties at the regional level are the closest for the citizens of the two countries, represent the very essence of bilateral relations between two states, in contrast with the general and vague statements that are typical for high-level negotiations, and therefore require special analysis.

At the end of the second decade of the XXI century, in addition to the general aggravation of relations between Russia and the EU countries caused by the Ukrainian crisis, the introduction of sanctions and counter-sanctions, the strengthening of Helsinki's cooperation with NATO [1], the COVID-19 epidemic became a new systemic limitation for St. Petersburg-Finnish cooperation. This challenge which are similar for each of the parties, should show whether the cooperation of St. Petersburg and Finland is predetermined by the system level or it is a self-sufficient cooperation with real content.

The degree of scientific development of St. Petersburg's economic relations with Finland is undoubtedly considered to be quite high. For example, there are many works on intergovernmental relations between Russia and Finland in various aspects (articles of E. Drobot [2] and S. Sutyurin [3]), and particularly on

the role of St. Petersburg in them (research of N. Mezhevich [4]). From Finnish side such topics are developed, for instance, by the authors of the journal «Baltic Rim Economies» of the University of Turku where not only Finnish but Russian researchers present the results of their works (E. Shlapeko [5], S. Stepanova [6] and S. Kontula-Webb, director of the Finnish Institute in St. Petersburg [7]), as well as by the scholars of the Aleksanteri Institute of the University of Helsinki (R. Kosonen, P. Heliste [8]). Nevertheless, it should be noted that most of the studies relate to the period of the late XX — early XXI centuries, so they dealt with other periods of cooperation and, for obvious reasons, did not consider the pandemic factor.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the features of St. Petersburg-Finland economic cooperation during the pandemic, which as a systemic factor may limit cooperation, but at the same time give opportunities to take it to a new level. To achieve it, it is necessary to determine how the epidemic restrictions affected trade and investment cooperation in quantitative and qualitative terms, as well as the implementation of interregional projects and direct contacts between representatives of interacting regions.

Materials and Methods

The sources of this article are primarily statistical data on Finland's trade relations with the whole of Russia and, in particular, St. Petersburg, provided by Russian and Finnish agencies (for instance, the Federal State Statistics Service [9], the Central Bank of the Russian Federation [10], Finnish Customs [11]), as well as materials of regional authorities and mass media of both states.

The framework of the research is the neoclassical realists' approach to the studying international relations [12]. It allows, on the one hand, to present the state not as a single actor on the world stage, but consisting of various relatively independent structures, including regions, State's foreign policy is influenced not only by strategic culture and perception of its position in the world, but also by the image of elites, interaction with society, and the system of internal institutions. In this context it is possible to see a “feedback” between the region and the center, as well as to talk about the influence of the regions on the country's foreign policy. On the other hand, in conditions of conflict in the system of international relations and the connection of economic processes with political ones we use the realists' concept of “interest” and applies it to the

external relations of the regions that have special interests related to national ones, but possibly different from them.

In addition, the study is based on the theories of paradiplomacy, proposed back in the 1980s by I. Duchacek [13] и P. Soldatos [14], on the basis of which two main approaches to the studying the international activities of regions and cities have been formed to date. The first is based on their complementary role, dependence on the state foreign policy, which is reflected in the idea of auxiliary paradiplomacy by Yu. Akimov [15]. The second approach is a continuation of the I. Duchacek's views. The focus of his attention is on the ability of subnational units to independently pursue their policies. This idea is based on the example of identification diplomacy of S. Paquin [16] according to which regions use opportunities of external relations to promote their identities in the international arena. Nevertheless, it seems important to take into account the system of relations and the balance of interests in the states. For Finland, where cities and regions have a high degree of autonomy, the leadership of which can be represented by various political forces, but connected with the central government, this is relevant, as well as for Russia, which is a federation with broad rights of subjects.

Results

The economic sphere suffered the most from the consequences of COVID-19: the need to stop the work of enterprises, especially in the service sector, led to crisis phenomena in both the Russian and Finnish economies, especially since the latter had not shown the highest growth rates before [17, p. 69], and coronavirus restrictions were introduced here the most extensive. This also determined a reduction in trade turnover in 2020 by more than \$ 3.5 billion, or 26%, and according to Finland's data, the drop was even greater (36%) [11]. Although the results of 2021 are already approximately corresponded to 2019, but with an increase in the share of Finnish imports [9].

On the St. Petersburg-Finnish trade (see Table 1) had, however, a greater impact: the drop-in trade turnover was only 36%, but this generally corresponded to the previously noted data and caused by other factors of fluctuation trends, so 2020 in terms of the value of exports and imports exceeded the worst indicators of 2015–2016, and 2021 is already comparable to the pre-crisis 2018 with the trend of gradual growth, especially of imports [9].

Table 1

Finland's role in St. Petersburg's trade turnover in 2018-2021 (millions in USD)

| Year | | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Import | All | 20 709 | 23 140 | 21 584 | 26 624 |
| | Finland | 853 | 1 091 | 682 | 806 |
| | Finland's share | 4,12% | 4,71% | 3,16% | 3,03% |
| Export | All | 23 175 | 27 672 | 20 984 | 29 908 |
| | Finland | 313 | 476 | 317 | 442 |
| | Finland's share | 1,35% | 1,72% | 1,51% | 1,48% |
| Foreign Trade Turnover | All | 43 884 | 50 812 | 42 568 | 56 532 |
| | Finland | 1 166 | 1 567 | 999 | 1 248 |
| | Finland's share | 2,66% | 3,08% | 2,35% | 2,21% |
| | Finland's place | 10 | 7 | 10 | 12 |
| Trade Balance | All | 2 466 | 4 532 | -600 | 3 284 |
| | St. Petersburg – Finland | -540 | -615 | -365 | -364 |

Source: developed by the authors based on data from
the North-West Customs Administration [18].

At the same time, the trade between St. Petersburg and Finland in the period 2020–2021, if we take into account the statistics by month (see Figure 1), looks noticeably more stable, whereas in 2019 large volumes of exports and imports were determined by one-time purchases of certain categories of goods. Nevertheless, in comparison with other areas of St. Petersburg's trade, the drop in trade turnover with Finland turned out to be more noticeable, which led primarily to a reduction in its share from 4–5% to 3% in imports in 2018–2021 and the displacement of Finland from the top ten partners of the city.

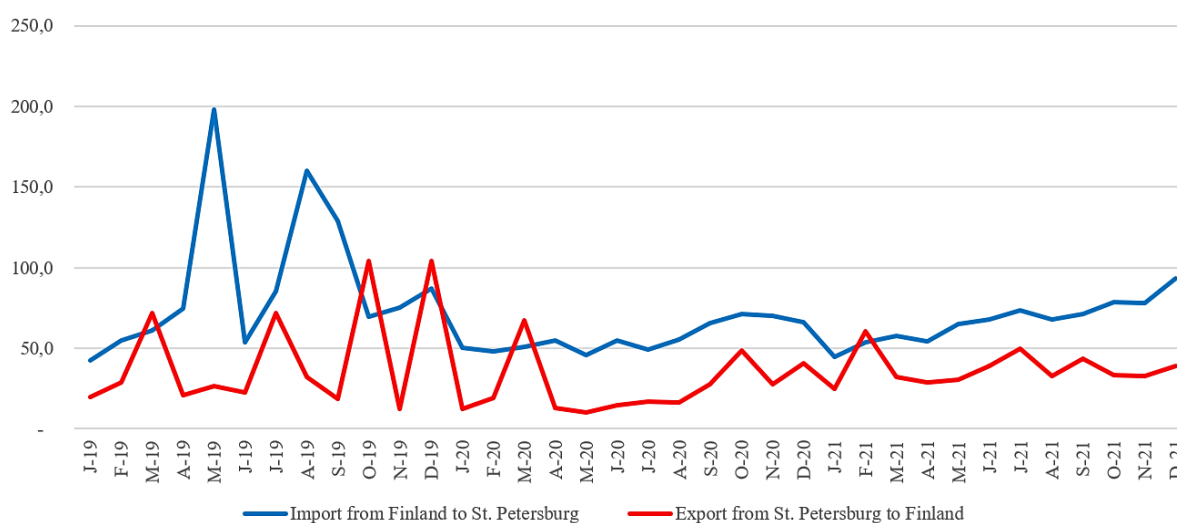


Figure 1. Import and export of St. Petersburg with Finland by month (millions in USD)

Source: developed by the authors based on data from
the North-West Customs Administration [18]

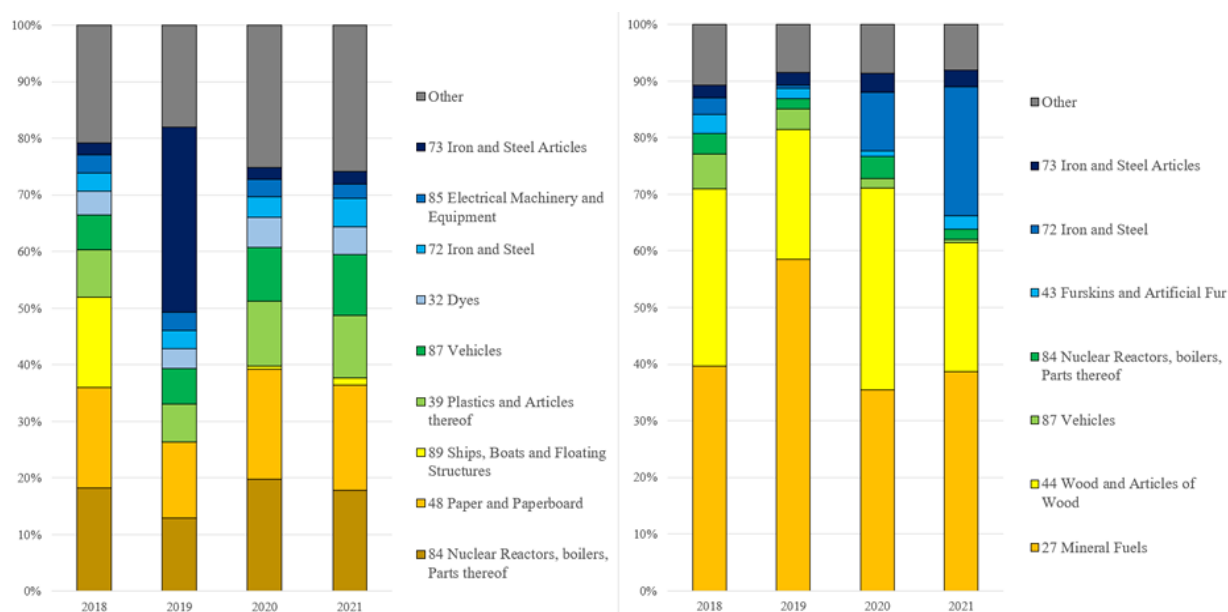


Figure. 2. Commodity structure of imports and exports of Finland and St. Petersburg
Source: developed by the authors based on data from
the North-West Customs Administration [18]

There were no fundamental changes in the commodity structure of trade turnover (see Figure 2): imports from Finland to St. Petersburg remained sufficiently diversified, including equipment for nuclear reactors, paper and paperboard, plastics, and vehicles. The share of these goods in 2020 and 2021 will be approximately the same, whereas in 2018 and 2019 there was a noticeable increase in the share of ships and iron and steel articles, the value of which then became minimal. Similar trends can be seen in St. Petersburg exports, which determined primarily by mineral fuel and wood, but during the epidemic, there was a gradual increase in the share of iron and steel, which made exports even slightly more diversified (in 2021, the two main export categories account for more than 70%, as in 2018 it was about 60%). This was determined, among other things, by a decrease in energy prices, which reduced the role of fuel supplies.

If we compare the St. Petersburg-Finland trade with the turnover of Russia and Finland (see Table. 2), St. Petersburg's share even increased compared to 2018, although there was a slight decrease in imports. The Finnish direction in St. Petersburg exports turned out to be more significant, in comparison with the exports of the whole of Russia.

Table 2

St. Petersburg's role in Russian-Finnish trade turnover in 2018–2021 (millions in USD)

| Year | | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Import | Russia – Finland | 3 383 | 3 484 | 2 897 | 3 566 |
| | St. Petersburg – Finland | 853 | 1 091 | 682 | 806 |
| | St. Petersburg's share | 25,22% | 31,31% | 23,54% | 22,60% |
| Export | Russia – Finland | 11 371 | 10 081 | 7 106 | 9 655 |
| | St. Petersburg – Finland | 313 | 476 | 317 | 442 |
| | St. Petersburg's share | 2,75% | 4,72% | 4,46% | 4,58% |
| Foreign Trade Turnover | Russia – Finland | 14 753 | 13 564 | 10 003 | 13 221 |
| | St. Petersburg – Finland | 1 166 | 1 567 | 999 | 1 248 |
| | St. Petersburg's share | 7,90% | 11,55% | 9,99% | 9,44% |
| Trade Balance | Russia – Finland | 7 988 | 6 597 | 4 209 | 6 089 |
| | St. Petersburg – Finland | -540 | 6597 | -365 | -364 |

Source: developed by the authors based on data from
the Federal State Statistics Service [9] and *the North-West Customs Administration* [18]

Similar trends were observed in investment flows (see Figures 3 and 4) but there were also some features. With a reduction as a whole from the very beginning of 2020, the drop in Finnish investments in St. Petersburg was noticeably less than the general one, which increased the role of Finland in St. Petersburg investment flows, but only to the average level for the period of the 2010s [10]. However, then the gradual growth of investments from Finland was no longer comparable to the sharp increase in the flow at the end of 2021 (although it was caused by increased investments from offshore countries) and the country's share decreased again. Investments from St. Petersburg to Finland decreased by almost three times since the beginning of the pandemic, but by the end of 2021 they reached approximately the level of 2019 and again increased their role in the investment flows of the city. At the same time, despite a slight increase in the role of Finland for St. Petersburg investments, the role of St. Petersburg in the Russian-Finnish ones has not changed significantly, since there the Finnish direction has turned out to be more stable than relations with other countries.

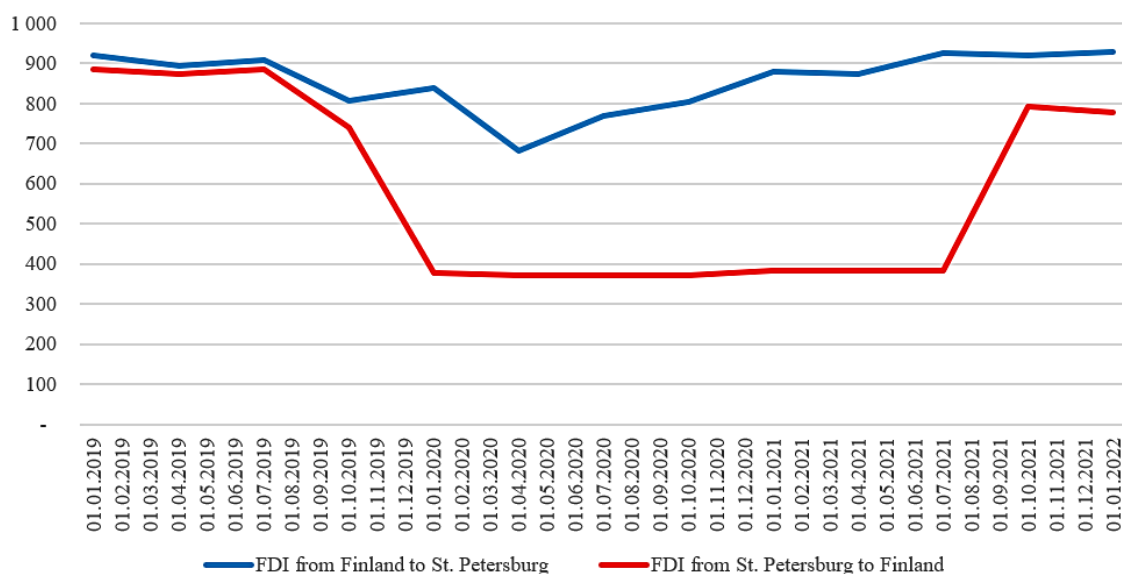


Figure 3. Investment flows between Finland and St. Petersburg (millions in USD)
Source: developed by the authors based on data from
the Central Bank of the Russian Federation [10]

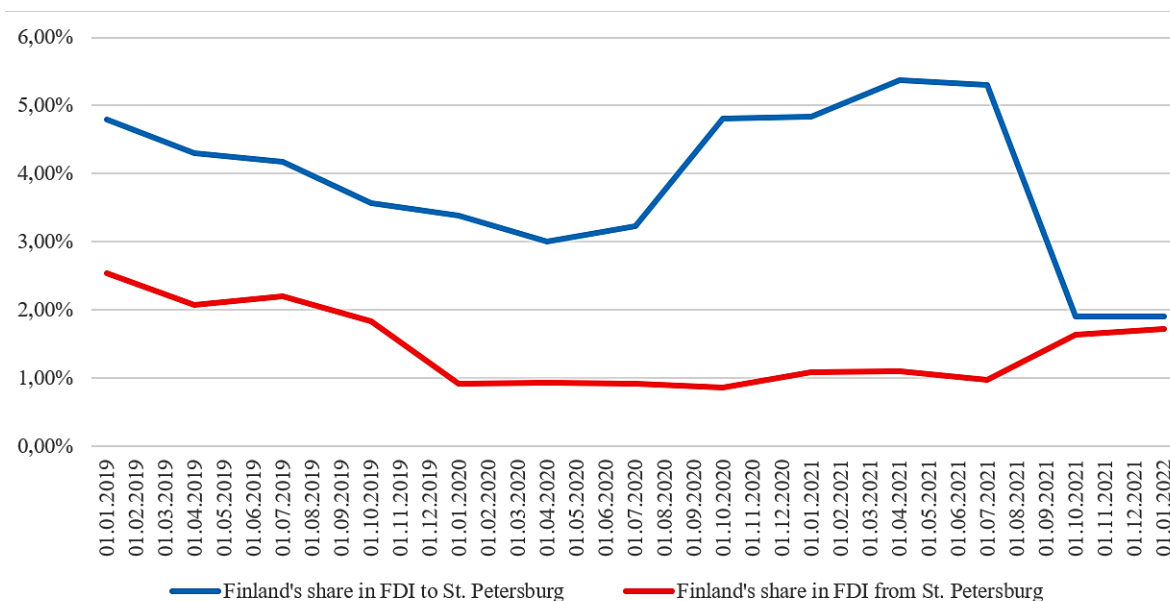


Figure 4. Finland's share in investment flows of St. Petersburg
Source: developed by the authors based on data from
the Central Bank of the Russian Federation [10]

In addition to maintaining trade and investment cooperation during the pandemic, joint projects were also continued. In particular, the transport infrastructure, the Scandinavia highway connecting St. Petersburg with Finland was further developed. For instance, electric vehicle charging stations were installed [19]. Projects on high-speed Internet access in trains on a similar railway track were also being introducing [20], that again showed the attitude of

the leadership of St. Petersburg and Finland to restore cooperation after the systemic restrictions of the pandemic would allow it.

In general, during the epidemic, the authorities of St. Petersburg were able to adapt to the restriction of trips abroad and quarantine measures, actively used online platforms for negotiations with their Finnish partners and, thus, maintained contacts. An example was the videoconference of the Chairman of the Committee on External Relations, E. Grigoriev, with the leadership of South Karelia in February 2021, when they discussed the Cross-border cooperation programme “South-East Finland – Russia”, its results for 2014–2020 and plans for 2021–2027, which primarily included environmental protection and medicine that were relevant at that time [21]. Then in March 2021, St. Petersburg held online Baltic Sea Days within the framework of the INTERREG program, dedicated to environmental issues, with the discussion of specific projects [22], i. e. in those areas that determined the bilateral and multilateral interaction of St. Petersburg with Finnish partners, it was possible to maintain contacts and even develop cooperation, which emphasizes the importance of these connections.

At the same time, tourism, which determines not only the individual level of economic interaction, but also the economic development of the Finnish border regions [6], that are largely dependent on Russian tourists, has certainly become the most affected by the pandemic. In March 2020, the railway connection between St. Petersburg and Helsinki was suspended [23], which with restrictions on entry to Finland predetermined a complete reduction in the tourist flow. However, the positive impact of the closure of borders was a reduction in the smuggling of Finnish goods included in the Russian sanctions list, and therefore their prices on the black market have increased dramatically [24]. Nevertheless, when the first signs of the end of the pandemic appeared, it was the Finnish direction that opened for St. Petersburg residents one of the first. At the end of January 2021, air traffic between St. Petersburg and Helsinki was restored, although this was done primarily for the return of Finnish citizens [25], but this fact testified to the prospects for the future restoration of ties between the cities.

In the context of the reorientation of events to the online format, interaction in the field of culture continued, the development of which was observed during the sanctions period [7]. One of the successful projects was the

“Kotka Days”, held in September 2020, which generally strengthened the ties of sister cities and, therefore, are potentially important for economic contacts. The use of the Zoom platform made it possible to ensure the participation of representatives of the Finnish city – the mayor and the director of city administration development – and Finnish entrepreneurs, as well as the Consul General of Finland in St. Petersburg and the head of the administration of the Kronstadt district, that is also sister city for Kotka (the participation of municipal authorities turns the event into a multi-level one). It is important to emphasize that during the event, several round tables were held, affecting the fields of education, tourism and entrepreneurship with discussing infrastructure projects, i. e. the parties looked to the future [26]. Even earlier in June, the online Kotka Day was held, with the participation of E. Grigoriev, musical performances and virtual exhibitions [27] interested for citizens. But the events were not widely distributed: about 250 direct participants, only dozens of people in its social networks, and there was no large public discussion [28].

Discussion and Conclusion

Economic cooperation between St. Petersburg and Finland has withstood the challenges of the pandemic. Initially, it had a negative impact on the trade turnover between the countries, but already in 2021 there was a tendency to restore both exports and imports to the values of the period preceding the epidemic. On the other hand, even earlier, due to the policy of sanctions and the reorientation of St. Petersburg's ties to other partners, Finland's role in the city's foreign trade was declining, and COVID-19 only exacerbated this trend, since whole city's trade turnover was recovering faster. At the same time, the place of the St. Petersburg in Russian-Finnish trade relations continues to be pivotal. In 2020-2021 it collected up to 10% of the total trade turnover between the states. Similar processes can be observed in the context of investment interaction: reduction of investment flows after the pandemic, their quantitative recovery by the end of 2021, but with a decrease in the value of the Finnish direction.

The pandemic has not stopped the implementation of various projects aimed at long-term cooperation between the parties. The active use of online platforms allowed to maintain interaction between partners, but the emphasis was placed on the field of culture. The pandemic has nevertheless provided

some opportunities for further development of cross-border cooperation in the field of political contacts and humanitarian interaction. Although cultural and educational ties cannot be replaced by an online form, but it helps to maintain them and provides an opportunity for participation for a wider audience. The only exception is undoubtedly tourism, which cannot be replaced with an online version, so the most important task of the regions was to maintain their attractiveness for tourists from partner cities, at least using online events.

Nevertheless, the study showed that in the conditions of the pandemic, which then became especially acute in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, it turned out to be a possible solution for St. Petersburg to reorient external relations from the European direction to the CIS countries and the Asia-Pacific region, primarily China and Vietnam. The city has its own regional interests and can choose priority areas of international relations based on pragmatism and mutually beneficial cooperation to emphasize its image in the international arena but from Finland like from other Nordic countries there was another approach based on moral diplomacy and human rights principles [29]. We would like to hope that Helsinki will eventually have new Paasikivi and Kekkonen, who will return pragmatism, rationalism and mutually beneficial cooperation to relations with their eastern neighbor.

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