

BELOW THE STATE-LED RADAR: HANDLING THE SAINT PETERSBURG MICROREGION

Fedor Zolotarev

PhD student

University of Pécs, Interdisciplinary Doctoral School, International Politics Programme

ORCID 0000-0002-8789-0856

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Abstract

Despite the diversity of works in other disciplines, the study of microregions in International Relations (IR) remains underdeveloped. This paper seeks to reduce this gap by examining the case of Saint Petersburg microregion, providing a North Eurasian example and exploring the complex relationship between micro- and macrolevel regionalism in a global context. The aim is to develop an analytical model for understanding microregions within the broader framework of regionalism. Using a case study method and analysing the object as a changing entity over time, the paper approaches microregional dynamics from the perspective of structural transformations. Saint Petersburg is a good example of the application of this method: while historically engaged in partnerships with Western countries, it has undergone significant changes in response to recent geopolitical tensions, leading the city to seek closer cooperation with non-Western partners. By examining this strategic reorientation, the study provides insights into the linkages between microregions and broader regional dynamics, highlighting the importance of flexibility and resilience in the face of global challenges. Ultimately, this analysis highlights the crucial role of microregions in shaping regionalism and their ability to influence – and be influenced by – broader state-level forces.

Keywords: *Microregion, Microregionalism, Eurasia, Saint Petersburg, Paradiplomacy.*

Introduction

International Relations (IR) encompass extensive research on state and supranational policies, addressing questions of governance and territorial developments, even at the subnational level (Farrell et al., 2005). Traditionally referred to as "Old Regionalism," this field is characterized by state-led and top-down efforts to organize space (Mikhaylenko, 2014), including forms of integration and intergovernmental organizations. This perspective has been complemented by a new wave of theories

known as "New Regionalism," which focuses on endogenous characteristics and unconventional, transcontinental projects such as ASEAN and BRICS+. The emphasis remains on states, their practices, and how they manage to cooperate both within regional organizations and with other nations and collective partners. Recently, both approaches have become applicable theoretical frameworks for scholars in the broader scientific field of Comparative Regionalism.

Although the two theoretical camps of Old and New Regionalism have enriched academic debates, the main focus still predominantly targets interstate relations and their implications for larger-scale trends (de Lombaerde, 2010). This focus often overlooks microlevel trends such as microregionalism and microregions, which are also intertwined with regionalization and regional development. For instance, state decisions and subregional policies have a direct impact on ordinary citizens, businesses, industrial and academic sectors, and local and regional governments, who are directly and indirectly involved in these processes at the micro level. Consequently, the micro- or subnational level remains secondary in terms of primary research interest for IR scholars, despite some authors exploring the paradiplomacy of subnational actors (Aldecoa & Keating, 2013) and the minor role of such spatial units in integrational projects (Breslin & Hook, 2002).

Microregions have emerged as a transnational phenomenon, with their ubiquity evident in numerous cases across various continents worldwide. Despite the significance of examining each microregion as a distinct entity, the study of microregions and microregionalism remains underdeveloped. Scholars often treat microregions as fixed entities, with no alternative paths for development. This static approach primarily focuses on past transformations and outcomes and lacks a longitudinal perspective on the subject under investigation, which is inherently adaptable. Exploring the microlevel enables us to transcend the national perspective and comprehend the interplay between these two levels. By examining changes over extended periods, we can illuminate significant shifts in microregions and their positions within the global world.

The research aims were multifold: First, it conceptualizes a microregion within extensive investigations of territorial and administrative governance in order to link them to current government-led policies for organizing space, although they are predominantly developed as "bottom-up" initiatives within Comparative Regionalism. Second, it illuminates the interconnections between microregionalism and macroregionalism as relevant phenomena in IR Studies analytically. The author refers to a case study as the primary method for deriving critical insights and transforming them into generalizations (Dion, 1998; Levy, 2001; Gerring, 2009; van der Heijden, 2014), which will be valid after the accumulation of new evidence. This approach explains the diversity of the literature, which is now at a crossroads for several disciplines and studies on microregions and microregionalism.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses the terminological diversity of 'regions' and 'regionalisms,' which reflects the process at the subnational level. The second section applies an analytical approach to the understanding of microregions and microregionalism in relation to macroregions and macroregionalism. To do this, I present an analytical model that can bind microregions with state regionalism and serve as an illustrative representation of the research framework for plausible application by scholars. The third section examines the case of Saint Petersburg, showing the relationship between micro- and macroregions, and including the Russian narrative in the context of North Eurasian and global regionalism. Based on official reports, state and regional servants' statements, research papers, and news, this section contributes a new approach to a microregion that did an unordinary transformation from the Western-oriented economical 'chunk' to the multivectoral and transregional one over the last 35 years.

Regionalism below nation state's level: a terminology variety

The examination of international politics from the perspective of multiple actors is not new. Since the 1950s, research on non-state actors has expanded to include various spatial and political issues that affect global transformation. For instance, regions, once seen as spaces in which states compete, have evolved into significant players in international politics. Scholars such as Fawcett (2004) and Mikhaylenko (2014) have identified regions as parts of the international system with self-sustaining activities, making them non-conventional actors. A prominent example is the European Union (EU), which provides its own policies and serves as a space for many medium-sized and small 'laboratories' of transformation.

Globalization and regionalization have expanded regional diversity and provided integration examples beyond Europe. The spillover effect explains internal effects and political decisions within regional development, and has led to non-Western models of space organization and governance. These models, often soft and informal, flourished in Eurasia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. However, IR Studies have traditionally been state-centric, as noted by scholars such as de Lombaerde (2010) and Lagutina and Mikhaylenko (2020). While meso- and macrolevels of regionalism are well-studied, the processes below them and their connection to state policy and regionalization need more attention.

Defining microregions is essential. There are no conventional definitions for regions below the national level, and the division between layers is artificial, created to establish order and develop a taxonomy for understanding international politics. Scholars have often used various categories to express plurality and achieve precise definitions. Some use the term 'subregion' to describe areas smaller than nation-states, whether within a nation's borders or in borderland regions (Hamanako, 2015; Nadalutti, 2019). A subregion can be a distinct cross-border zone shared by

several countries, shaped by discourse and practice and influenced by political dynamics involving spatial and territorial constructs (Riggiorizi, 2011; Hameiri, 2013; Paasi & Metzger, 2017).

The term 'microregion' can represent areas with limited physical presence and heightened virtual influence. This constructivist perspective emphasizes symbols and human interactions alongside state-led initiatives. Using 'microregion' instead of 'subregion' captures non-traditional zones and areas, particularly in non-Western spaces, and avoids excessive statism that centers explanations around state interests.

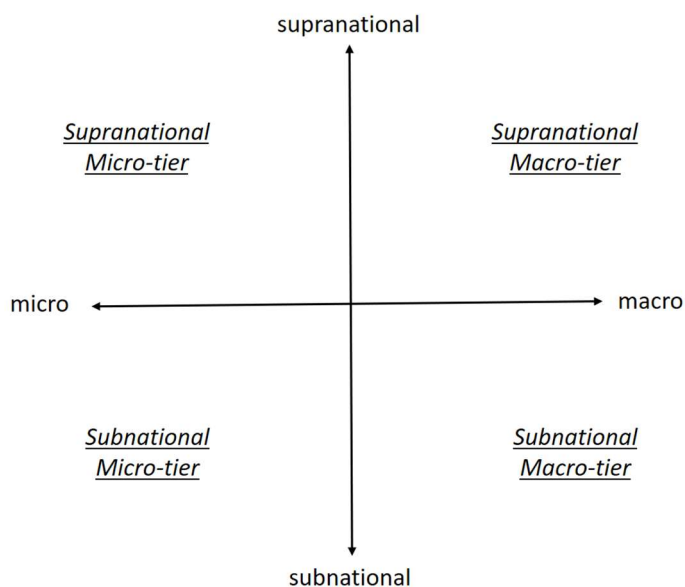
However, conceptual plurality remains challenging. Various mechanisms compete for dominance in Comparative Regionalism. Shadow regionalism and trans-state regionalism coexist, illustrating the 'Spaghetti Bowl' concept of overlapping regional organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa (Börzel & Risse, 2016). These phenomena can also manifest in microregions and in microregionalism. Therefore, it is crucial to define microregionalism alongside macroregionalism in order to understand their interconnections and mutual dependencies.

Grasping the concept of microregionalism: object-subject debates

To define microregions and microregionalism in relation to macroregions, it is essential to approach the area of scholarly inquiry as a cohesive system. Therefore, an analytical perspective becomes crucial when scholars establish a set of parameters deemed valid for creating a system of distinction. In this study, I present an analytical framework that conceptualizes regionalism as a collection of diverse narratives that can be categorized within a two-dimensional matrix based on parameters such as 'level' and 'scope.'

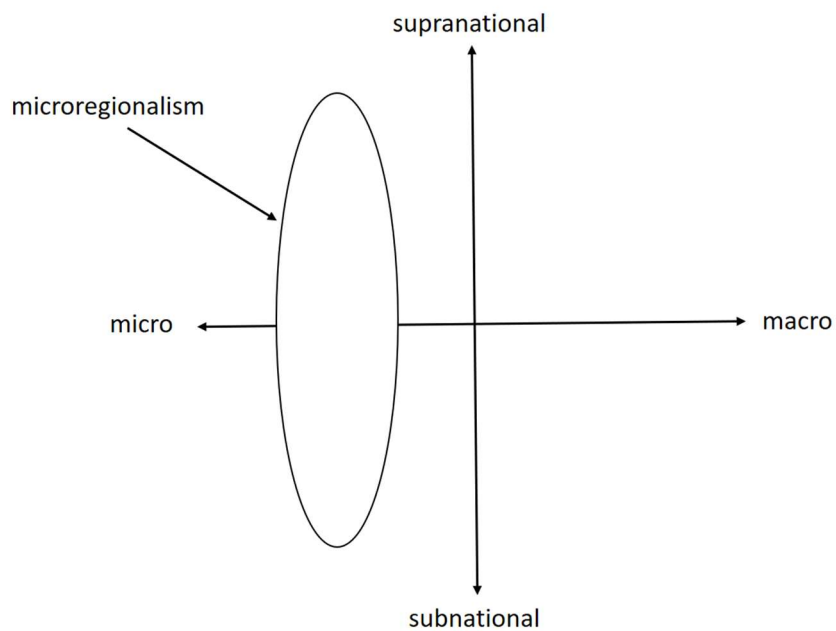
The parameter of 'level' serves to differentiate between micro and macro scales, while 'scope' distinguishes between tiers above and below the nation state level. By utilizing these two pairs of extremes, a comprehensive perspective can be obtained on numerous regionalism projects and cases that exist within the realm of ontology but remain unmapped. The incorporation of 'level' and 'scope' can help address methodological challenges and academic disagreements related to the level-of-analysis problem (Singer, 1961; Onuf, 1995), thus enhancing clarity and precision within the field. These parameters enable the identification of four clusters that organize studies on regions with a specific emphasis on microregions and microregionalism (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Two-dimension matrix for studying regions



Source: own editing based on the data compiled by author's literature review.

Figure 2. Disposition of microregionalism in IR Studies



Source: own editing based on the data compiled by author's literature review.

These two sets of parameters establish a framework that guides scholars' research interests in understanding regions as a phenomenon, with a specific focus on examining not only their individual characteristics, but also their position within the broader system. For instance, in Eurasia, a predominantly discursive concept (Libman & Vinokurov, 2021; Janchak, 2020), there is fertile ground aimed at exploring non-conventional forms of regionalism and their inherent characteristics. This analytical model provides a platform for categorizing and organizing various types of regions into four distinct groups (see Figure 1), each possessing unique attributes that warrant detailed exploration. These groups were as follows: Supranational Macro-tier (1), Subnational Macro-tier (2), Supranational Micro-tier (3), and Subnational Micro-tier (4).

The Supranational Macro-tier sector addresses large-scale regional processes, focusing on the political organization of entities. It examines interstate relations influenced by megaregional and integration projects, from formal unions to flexible government associations. Examples include transregional dialogues, such as the EU and ASEAN, and initiatives, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. This sector emphasizes tectonic shifts at the state level, thus impacting political borders and decisions with global implications. Geopolitics, geostrategy, and geoeconomics play a significant role in viewing large supranational entities as active participants in world politics.

The Subnational Macro-tier sector encompasses the relationships between large entities or blocks united by common values and strategic interests. It explores how intergovernmental decisions influence domestic programs and advancements. Examples include countries outside a block engaging with organizational programs through mechanisms such as Free Trade Agreements and non-binding memoranda. This sector also examines the formalization of mechanisms for expanding organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). At the subnational level, cross-regionalism dynamics showcase competition, complementation, or symbiosis among models of interstate and supranational development. Notable examples include the Union State of Russia and Belarus (Union State) within the EAEU, and the Volga-Yangtze Program linking China, Russia, and Mongolia (Park, 2024).

The Supranational Micro-tier sector focuses on subregional processes spanning limited geographical areas with shared boundaries. It examines cross-border and transregional cooperation and highlights grassroots interactions that intensify relationships. National governments may respond by establishing regulatory frameworks along shared borders and evolving into institutionalized structures. Examples include the Commonwealth of Independent States's (CIS) intraregional regime to promote close transborder cooperation. This sector also explores non-geographical, virtual communities with 'glocal' attributes, such as state-led initiatives

in Euroregions beyond the EU's borders, like 'Donbass' and 'Dnepr' in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

The Subnational Micro-tier sector explores small-scale subnational units that can influence politics and engage with nation-states. These units, such as cities and regions, have emerged as novel actors on the global stage. They navigate a complex landscape in which supranational and state interests intersect, resembling nation-state diplomacy in methods and practices. These subnational actors grapple with global challenges at the regional and local levels, serving as supplementary or paradiplomatic efforts.

Each sector within this framework represents regions as 'ideal types,' offering valuable insights in IR Studies. The analytical model highlights state-led policies and projects, emphasizing the physical dimensions and strategic importance of large regions. This focus on expansive regions is common among scholars examining subregional systems, often exploring regions within the 'nation state umbrella' and linking them to broader macroregions and a planetary scale.

Therefore, it is crucial to focus on the left-hand portion of the model and shift focus to microregions when considering regionalization and region-building within Comparative Regionalism. Microregions and even subregions serve as vital intersections of various actors with diverse interests spanning the economic, cultural, and political spheres. These entities are characterized by intricate networks of flows that coalesce within local systems, involving both state and non-state actors.

While spatial factors and territorial considerations certainly play a role, they do not singularly determine the trajectory of the actors pursuing their objectives within these regions. The rich tapestry of cultures and political systems present in microregions fosters a dynamic mix of cases in non-Western contexts and shapes regionalism across Africa and Asia. Eurasia is the case that has emerged as a compelling research arena for the examination of microregions and their dual modalities, defined by unique research paradigms.

The first modality views a microregion as a subject devoid of agency. It is a delineated space characterized by attributes that influence external actors' actions. Positioned within a larger system, the focus is on interactions between state and non-state actors asserting their influence. This perspective examines regions as agents of transformation on regional and global scales. Attention to a microregion involves scrutinizing facts and occurrences involving diverse participants, such as governmental bodies, local authorities, business groups, NGOs, and civic organizations. This approach resonates with studies on global cities, which occupy a prominent position in global governance (Sassen, 2001, 2002; Taylor, 2001). Viewing globality in relation to microregions underscores collaborative efforts of multiple actors, establishing collective agency and positioning the microregion as a catalyst for change. Sassen's characterization of global cities as 'gateways' (Sassen, 2001) illustrates the symbiotic relationship between city administrations and transnational actors' headquarters and

corporations. Kangas (2017) describes globality as 'world fabrications' within a networked system of top-tier cities indexed by significance. This model applies to microregions as indicators of national and corporate strategies.

The second modality views microregions as semi-autonomous entities actively engaged in international politics alongside diverse actors. When microregions demonstrate agency through transnational and transborder interactions, they can be elevated to a level akin to nation-states. However, discussions often overlook spatial considerations, territorial disputes, or boundaries inhabited by microregions. By resembling nation-states and mirroring administrative structures, microregions operate on regional and global stages across economic, cultural, humanitarian, and other domains. This trend is driven by globalization and states' efforts to streamline governance structures for subsequent benefits. Consequently, subnational actors, particularly elected local governments and mayors (Aldecoa & Keating, 2013), bolster their influence by collaborating with international organizations, global financial institutions, and transregional associations to address local and global challenges. Scholars describe this growing prominence using the concepts of 'actorness' and 'actorhood,' emphasizing how non-state actors replicate actions, behaviors, and modes of operation typically associated with nation-states. Microregions function like nation-states by entering agreements, engaging in negotiations, proposing development initiatives, and participating in international forums. However, domains such as war, security, and defense remain exclusive to nation-states, limiting microregion engagement in these areas.

Microregions often combine both modalities, creating a symbiotic relationship. As a microregion acquires resources and capabilities for self-development, it attracts both domestic and external investments. This leads to the launch of projects and organization of global events within the microregion. Successful hosting of international events requires sustainable infrastructure and seamless coordination between governing bodies and agencies, demanding high managerial acumen. This transition may challenge the identity of a microregion as it integrates into the macroregional and global realm. Consequently, microregions evolve into hubs of multilayered interests, influencing local administrative decisions, national policies, and global trends. This convergence underscores the significance of microregions as focal points for regionalization at the grassroots level of international politics (Farrell, 2005; Unruh, 2015), signaling broader shifts in the geopolitical landscape. However, distinguishing between macro- and microlevels of regionalization remains crucial in identifying the 'high' and 'low' dimensions within regionalism.

From another perspective, a microregion, as a product of global regionalization, is hardly independent from global changes. State-led macroregionalism, whether through supranational integration projects or development initiatives, cannot bypass the subnational political layout tied to the national dimension. States and their territorial entities adapt to current agendas and trends, which may involve legislative

improvements or ad-hoc activities. This adaptation can range from integration into blocs, as seen with Eastern European states during Euro-integration in the 1990s and 2000s, to reactive counteractions at national and supranational levels. For instance, the creation of the Union State and the CIS with deeper institutional integration was driven by the success of the Union's multilevel governance system and Russia's concern about being outmaneuvered in its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area. As a result, the Russian federal government tightened control over its federation units, enforcing strict compliance with federal laws, close coordination with the National Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and establishing ministry offices in major cities. However, this dynamic can work in the opposite direction, where some microregions' activities may contradict or violate national and supranational strategies. In such cases, a state's macroregionalism might be undermined as it diverts resources and attention to managing inconsistencies. An example is Chisinau's mayor, who engaged in international cooperation with mostly Western counterparts, lacking similar engagement with Russian city halls and mayors, even during Dodon's presidency in Moldova.

Delineating regionalism by level is challenging due to its intricate and interconnected nature. While state interests and nation-state influences are often dominant, non-state initiatives and actions also play a significant role in regionalization. Establishing cross-border collaboration frameworks requires clear indications of shared cooperation and anticipated benefits for all parties. Prioritizing the well-being and prosperity of people should be the ultimate objective, benefiting governments and national economies while fostering new development clusters across various sectors. Conversely, grassroots initiatives seeking closer ties among businesses, entrepreneurs, and civil society groups often face obstacles that can only be overcome with regulatory support at different levels. This dynamic is exemplified by emergent situations like the devastating floods in the Russian-Kazakhstan borderlands in spring 2024, impacting thousands of households (RBC, 2024). The intricate interplay between micro and macro levels significantly influences regionalism, regardless of whether initiatives originate from top-down or bottom-up.

Another important aspect is the challenge of identifying microregions and highlighting their characteristics. Previous studies on regional boundaries (Breslin & Hook, 2002; Paasi & Metzger, 2017) have not provided clear solutions for determining separation lines within the analytical model (Figure 1). Microregionalism is fluid and constantly evolving, leading to complex and interconnected regions across different sectors. In the following section, we provide analysis of a microregion in North Eurasia, focusing on Saint Petersburg.

Emphasizing a microregion: a case of reoriented Saint Petersburg

Eurasia is defined not only by its physical features but also by discursive attributes (Janchak, 2020) that impact political dynamics. Politicians and national leaders have highlighted its strategic significance. For instance, during the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum in 2016, Putin emphasized the need for agile and flexible actions for integration projects in Eurasia (TASS 2016), leaving options open for European parties to join. The presence of diverse nation-states, each with regional and global ambitions, shapes their attitudes towards regionalism, particularly in governance strategies and integration projects. Studying microregions, whether through a small-N approach (Dion, 1998) or detailed case analysis, enhances our understanding of regionalization processes at different levels. Case studies are instrumental, as scholars meticulously investigate characteristics and contextual factors (Gerring, 2009; van der Heijden, 2014) to develop realistic explanatory models. By laying the groundwork for generalizations (Levy, 2001), the case study approach bridges IR Studies with other disciplines leaning towards scientific neo-positivism.

Eurasia's diverse nature is exemplified by numerous microregions systematically analyzed, incorporating international trends, national policies, and geopolitical developments. One such microregion is Saint Petersburg in Russia. First, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of Saint Petersburg as a microregion. The area, along with its surrounding agglomeration, can be classified as both a city and a region due to its unique positioning within Russia's landscape and administrative structure. Saint Petersburg is the second-largest city and the fourth-largest region within the federation (Federal State Statistics Service, 2024). Its rich historical legacy, having served as imperial capital and briefly as a republic before the Soviet era, has influenced its place within Russia's federal structure. Today, Saint Petersburg holds the status of a federal city alongside Moscow and Sevastopol, enhancing its capabilities to operate at both domestic and global levels within legal and constitutional frameworks.

Second, Saint Petersburg, as a microregion, embodies both object and subject modalities, prompting scholars to examine it from various perspectives. Its strategic access to sea routes connecting the Baltic Sea Region and Northern Europe has positioned the city as a crucial hub within the regional and global landscape post-Cold War (Sergunin, 2003; Khudoley & Lanko, 2009). This influence is evident in Saint Petersburg's inclusion in the "Beta-" group of world cities according to the GAWC Index 2020, highlighting its role as an interconnector between Russia and neighbouring Western nations (Lachninsky & Semenova, 2015). The city's role as a global economic gateway was further underscored by its prominence in facilitating global chains and intangible flows, even amid Covid-19 restrictions, where it emerged as a focal point for contagion in Russia due to its extensive traffic routes

(Libman & Vinokurov, 2021). This strategic positioning benefited Saint Petersburg and extended its reach to connect hinterland territories lacking ideal coastal geography and infrastructure. An example of this synergy is the close partnership between Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast, significantly enhancing development through this interconnected relationship (Novikova & Popov, 2020, 2021).

Regional and federal authorities have periodically highlighted the global significance of territories, especially in the context of Russian development and international relationships. During a conversation between Vladimir Putin and the gubernator of Saint Petersburg, Alexander Beglov, in June 2024, both mentioned the strategic vision and political decisions of the city's first mayor, Anatoly Sobchak, to launch Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum (President of Russia, 2024). The federal government recognizes the city's value and its surroundings, including the industrial capacities of neighbouring Leningrad Oblast, as prospective nodes for national development. To advance this potential, the Ministry of Economic Development, Ministry of Finance, Presidential Administration, and Saint Petersburg regional government closely cooperate (President of Russia, 2024a), focusing on boosting the microregion's capacity with a diversified economy and integration into additional value chains.

The microregion's stature was significantly elevated during the period of intimate West-Russia relations since 1990, influencing Saint Petersburg's advancement. The restructuring of administrative entities and establishment of specialized committees responded to challenges in commerce, food distribution, healthcare, investments, and growth (Davtyan & Markov, 2021). The city's modernization was propelled through trilateral collaboration involving civic organizations, business entities, and governmental bodies engaging with international partners, initiating global initiatives, and intensifying personnel exchanges. Saint Petersburg's role as a federated entity is notable for its harmonious potential and strong collaboration with the central government. The city's authorities bolstered and complemented Russia's diplomatic endeavours by providing support at the subnational level.

Saint Petersburg's integration into the European region and alignment with the Liberal Order through collective efforts laid the groundwork for its enduring global significance as a coastal city. The city hosted an EU-Russia Summit in May 2003, symbolizing an elevated partnership (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2003), and the 32nd G8 Summit in July 2006, cementing Russia's collaboration with the USA and its allies (President of Russia, 2006). The EU-Russia Summit in June 2012 aimed to confirm the importance of the Partnership for Modernization (European Commission Press Release, 2012). These dialogues catalysed business interests from international stakeholders, leading to substantial investments across diverse sectors, as evidenced in the Investment Strategy of Saint Petersburg 2035 report (Strategy of City's Development 2035, 2013). This

prominence appears remarkable in light of the precipitous decline in relations between the West and Russia after 2022.

Federal city status grants Saint Petersburg the opportunity to engage in international relations as a subnational actor alongside nation-state. The city can act as paradiplomacy actor, pursuing its interests while contributing to the federal center's benefits. Saint Petersburg operates within its national state's foreign policy and regulations, addressing economic, cultural, and infrastructural issues (Savkin, 2009). As a corporate body, the federal city engages in various domains, establishing contacts and conducting negotiations with governments of other states, as well as regional and municipal administrations. This engagement includes interactions with non-state actors, collaborative initiatives with other cities through twin-cities and partner-cities formats, and joint civic projects with international organizations such as the European Cities Against Drugs in the 2000s (European Cities Against Drugs, 2019) and the Union of the Baltic Cities up to 2022.

Saint Petersburg has gained international recognition through global forums and events in various fields such as economy, business, sports, and industry. The city's infrastructure and facilities make it a preferred location for both state and non-state actors to host meetings, supported by the regional government and its institutions. As a result, Saint Petersburg became a hub for negotiations, contract agreements, and signing international agreements and memoranda. Events like the Saint Petersburg International Forum and the International Municipal Forum BRICS+ attract delegates worldwide, showcasing the city's global influence. Additionally, Saint Petersburg's involvement in subregional projects, such as the South-East Finland–Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020, highlights its role in promoting entrepreneurial activities, research, technological collaborations, border control advancements, and civic prosperity in the North European region.

However, this trajectory was disrupted following the new phase of the Russian-Ukraine conflict after February 2022, marked by halted communications, severed unions, and abandoned joint ventures. These repercussions significantly affected Saint Petersburg, leading to the dissolution of international forums like the Petersburg-Dialog between Russia and Germany, expulsion from the Union of the Baltic Cities, and the collapse of agreements with foreign cities and regions. The collaborative efforts of non-state actors experienced setbacks, impacting local initiatives led by global corporations. For example, Maersk Line suspended its operations in Russia, prompting the Russian branch in Saint Petersburg to cease all activities (The Maritime Executive, 2024), including collaborative educational endeavours with institutions like the Makarov Training Center, and severing ties with Russian universities while excluding them from partnership programs.

The tightened sanction regime also impacted Saint Petersburg's position in international finance. Since 2014, the city has been second only to Moscow in trading foreign bonds. This allowed investors to conduct transactions with shares of foreign

companies within Russian jurisdiction, enhancing global financial connectivity. In March 2022, after the assets of the National Settlement Depository of Russia were frozen in Euroclear and Clearstream, the Saint Petersburg Stock Exchange became almost the only way to access foreign bonds in the country. This led to a 10.3-fold increase in net profit, amounting to RUB 1.9 billion (Kommersant, 2023). However, this connectivity was disrupted by an OFAC resolution that listed the Stock Exchange and required American citizens to close all deals by February 2024. In some sense, the microregion and its local financial institutions became bargaining chips during the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West.

Despite setbacks, Saint Petersburg has maintained a diverse portfolio of international relations, extending beyond its Western counterparts to include partners from Asia, Africa, and Latin America long before 2022. The city's pivot to the east at the subnational level has strengthened its ties with Arab states, Iran, China, and Vietnam. For example, Saint Petersburg has been fostering multifaceted collaboration with Iranian business groups and regional administrations to enhance mutual cooperation (Administration of Saint Petersburg, 2023). This strategic engagement has yielded promising prospects for 2023. The city's proactive approach to external relations reflects a responsive reorientation mirrored at both national and subnational levels. Additionally, Saint Petersburg continues to foster cooperation with nation-states and people from the Union State, CIS, and EAEU, both bilaterally and multilaterally. The microregion hosts The Interparliamentary Assembly, an institutional body of the CIS, further solidifying its role in regional cooperation.

Saint Petersburg has shown a profound interest in the Arctic macroregion despite lacking direct access and not being officially designated as an Arctic region. The Arctic offers promising prospects for industrial, scientific, economic, and transportation advancements for the city and its environs (Zolotarev, 2023, 2023a). Saint Petersburg's strategic emphasis on the Arctic underscores its commitment to long-term progress, despite geographical challenges. These hurdles are overcome through close collaboration of the Saint Petersburg Committee for Arctic Affairs with governmental, scientific, cultural, and religious institutions (Saint Petersburg Committee for Arctic Affairs, 2024), supported by legal frameworks and agreements. The microregion benefits from indirect engagements and a network of partner organizations participating in national initiatives to enhance Russia's transportation and infrastructural capabilities along the Northern Sea Route.

The global position of the microregion evolved rather than diminished. Previously halted interactions, abandoned projects, and severed ties with Western partners were offset by strengthened relationships with countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. This shift reflects the changing dynamics of Russian foreign affairs, now heavily reliant on collaboration with non-Western partners through bilateral agreements or international organizations. Saint Petersburg adeptly adjusted by adopting a multifaceted approach from the outset. Current

partnerships with China, Vietnam, and Serbia, as well as their regional and local authorities, are the direct outcome of extensive negotiations and shared pragmatic interests in cooperation.

Several technical and geopolitical barriers hinder the long-term development and prosperity of microregions. First, reorientation costs for the regional budget and the need for cultural flexibility among personnel and authorities pose significant challenges. Proximity to Europe and the European mentality have facilitated interactions among businesses, tourists, and NGOs, creating a strong bond between Russia and Europe since the 1990s. This bond is reinforced by the transgenerational experience of coexistence and cooperation. Achieving similar results with Asian and African regions requires considerable time and effort, which is resource-intensive for non-state actors with limited budgets who are far from these destinations and face significant cultural differences. Second, intensified sanctions against Russia and the severance of economic, cultural, and societal contacts have created new barriers to robust cooperation with non-Western partners. Reciprocal actions in response to Russian intervention in Ukraine were expected, but they have affected all social groups in the country, disconnecting Russia from global financial and transactional systems essential for cooperation with Asian and African partners.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to shed light on the underexplored topic of microregions within IR and Comparative Regionalism, which has traditionally focused on state-led initiatives and larger geopolitical entities. By introducing a four-sector analytical model, I seek to highlight the importance of studying regionalism at the subnational level and distinguish between microregions and macroregions based on level and scope. This framework provides a foundation for exploring diverse research fields and understanding the nuances of subnational dynamics, which are often overlooked in scholarly discourse.

Utilizing the model allows for a critical analysis of research trends in the discipline, with a focus on regions, particularly in the context of Eurasia, a complex and highly discursive space. Regionalism in Eurasia is characterized by a scarcity of sources that shape narratives and projects for the region, leading to the proliferation of microregions that are closely linked to regionalization efforts. The intertwined nature of micro- and macroregional dynamics makes it challenging to pinpoint the starting point of regionalization in the region.

In the globalized world, a microregion is not a static entity but rather a flexible and adaptive unit capable of responding to changes and shifts on multiple levels. This flexibility is evident in the case of Saint Petersburg, which has maintained a dual role as both an object and a subject of ongoing regionalization efforts in world politics, even three decades after the end of the Cold War. The city and its

surrounding areas have historically benefited close partnerships with the west, leading to advancements in development. However, recent tensions between Russia and the West have had a negative impact on the microregion's ties and their position in macroregional architecture.

In response, the Saint Petersburg administration adjusted to the new political landscape by enhancing collaboration with non-Western partners. This transformation has not alienated the microregion from the international arena, but has instead spurred enhancements and reassessment of objectives. Shifting directions and concentrating on various macroregions, such as Eurasia and the Arctic region, showcased the microregion's ability to rely less on geographical factors and more on collaborative connections that intricately link the microregion in sophisticated networks.

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