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## Science diplomacy as an instrument of Russia's influence in the Baltic Sea Region

**Science diplomacy, traditionally viewed as a tool for cooperation and confidence-building between states, is increasingly being treated by Russia as a means to an end. In the Baltic Sea Region, academic cooperation, scientific research, and expert activities are being utilised by the Russian Federation as part of a broader strategy of influence – aimed at rebuilding its geopolitical position, shaping the narrative, and influencing political elites and public opinion. Against the backdrop of Russia's growing international isolation since 2022, these activities form part of the logic of its hybrid operations, combining cognitive, diplomatic, and operational functions.**

**The nuances of Russian diplomacy.** The concept of science diplomacy refers to the use of scientific cooperation, research, and expert knowledge as a tool to support foreign policy and the pursuit of national interests. It encompasses both the building of international relations through joint research projects and academic exchanges, and the use of scientific expertise to inform political decision-making.

Activities within the framework of science diplomacy have long been an important element of Russia's influence in the Baltic Sea Region. Its aim is to rebuild and maintain political influence, despite its growing isolation following the aggression against Ukraine and NATO's enlargement to include Finland and Sweden. At the same time, Russia is seeking to undermine the cohesion of the region's states through hybrid activities, interference in domestic politics, influencing public debate, and highlighting issues relating to minority rights or historical narratives. The aim of these actions is not only to regain strategic standing but also to test the resilience of NATO and EU member states and to build long-term capacity to exert influence without the need for direct military confrontation.

**Instruments of Russia's science diplomacy in the Baltic Sea Region.** Russia is increasingly instrumentalising science and academic cooperation as part of its strategy to exert influence in the Baltic Sea Region. Research institutions and universities are being used as tools of diplomacy, serving to establish contacts with expert and political elites and to gather information. Special research centres established for this purpose, coordinated by the presidential administration and linked to the secret services, carry out scientific research, and their findings and academic contacts are utilised for operational (e.g., intelligence) purposes.

One example is the concept of a Baltic-Scandinavian macro-region, which was reported by the Estonian security services in early 2026<sup>1</sup>. The project was developed by Russia in response to the changing geopolitical conditions following 2022, in particular NATO's enlargement and the curtailment of Russia's participation in existing regional cooperation frameworks (IEŚ Commentaries', No. 561, 616). From an academic perspective, the concept provides a cognitive and analytical framework that allows Russia to view the region as a field of geopolitical rivalry, securitisation, and militarisation. Knowledge of the region's dynamics can serve to maintain minimal channels of contact in the event of the collapse of formal cooperation mechanisms. A key element of the concept is the use of academic and expert circles as a platform for rebuilding international contacts and influencing public debate. Researchers involved in the Baltic-Scandinavian macro-region project are to use their international contacts to rebuild relations with political decision-makers in the Baltic and Nordic states. Furthermore – as indicated in a report by the Estonian security services – both the research topics and the composition of the

<sup>1</sup> Estonian Foreign Security Intelligence, *International Security and Estonia 2026*, <https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2026/en/17.05.2026>.

research teams are approved by the presidential administration, and the findings are passed directly to government bodies and the security services.

A key element of this concept is the so-called Baltic Platform, a framework for cooperation and dialogue established in 2023, which is formally academic in nature but in reality serves to gradually shift the agenda away from neutral topics – such as cultural, humanitarian, and environmental cooperation, or climate issues – towards political and security matters. For example, events of this kind take place at St Petersburg State University and the Russian Academy of Sciences and are funded as part of national research projects<sup>2</sup>. As the organisers of conferences held under the auspices of the Baltic Platform point out: 'One of the aims of the Baltic Platform is to find common ground in the scientific, cultural, and educational spheres, which could form the basis for building a new system of interaction between East and West, South and North'<sup>3</sup>. Russia is attempting to lend it the appearance of international legitimacy by including participants from friendly states, such as Belarus, Turkey, India, China, and countries of the Global South. This kind of academic cooperation shapes narratives favourable to Russia in the international information sphere and facilitates the potential transfer of knowledge and technology, which has been significantly restricted due to the sanctions imposed on Russia. As a result, these activities go beyond the traditional understanding of academic freedom, becoming part of the Russian state's broader apparatus of influence.

Similarly, the Lithuanian and Latvian security services have indicated that Russian academic institutions, foundations, and think tanks are conducting coordinated pseudo-research activities, the aim of which is to produce content that aligns with Russia's narrative. These activities are geared towards presenting narratives that delegitimise the statehood of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as credible and based on expert knowledge. Key actors involved in this area include – as identified in the report by the Lithuanian security services – the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, the Foundation for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad (linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and Rossotrudnichestvo), as well as the Historical Memory Fund operating under the auspices of the Administration of the President of Russia. The operational framework of these entities involves organising expert events (conferences, seminars, thematic exhibitions), during which content is generated and disseminated that aligns with the Russian interpretative framework concerning the Baltic states. Participants from the region (Latvia, Estonia, Germany, Poland) and from other parts of Europe (e.g., the Netherlands) are invited to take part in these events; they present views that align with the Russian narrative (such activities are also utilised in occupied Crimea; see 'IEŚ Commentaries', No. 1493).

**Conclusions.** From Russia's perspective, scientific activity and academic cooperation are systematically subordinated to state and security objectives, and their autonomy is constrained by strict control exercised by the presidential administration and the security services. This means that academic institutions serve as operational tools, providing knowledge about the region and channels of access to political and expert elites.

The example of the Baltic-Scandinavian macro-region shows that Russian academic diplomacy is instrumental and multi-layered: it begins with seemingly neutral topics of cooperation, which serve to build trust and develop networks, and then gradually moves on to political and security issues. In this process, the activities of researchers can be exploited instrumentally by the state – both to build a positive image and exert soft power, and to gather information, shape narratives or strengthen strategic advantages in the fields of technology and security, which fits within the logic of sharp power. In this sense, Russia's science diplomacy may serve to identify the weaknesses of states in the region and to formulate policy recommendations that could undermine

<sup>2</sup> One example is the international conference on the humanitarian dimension of the Baltic Sea Region in a changing world, organised by the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2024, Институт Европы РАН Федеральное Государственное Бюджетное Учреждение Науки Институт Европы Российской Академии Наук, «Балтийская Платформа» В Санкт-Петербурге, <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/nauchnaya-zhizn/novosti/item/17122024> [6.05.2026].

<sup>3</sup> Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Снижение геополитической напряженности в Европе обсудили на сессии «Балтийской платформы» в СПбГУ, <https://spbu.ru/news-events/novosti/snizhenie-geopoliticheskoy-napryazhennosti-v-evrope-obsudili-na-sessii> [5.05.2026].



their stability and cohesion, including through interference in domestic politics, the exacerbation of divisions, or the undermining of security and energy policies. It, therefore, forms part of a broad apparatus of hybrid operations and shadow diplomacy<sup>4</sup>. Russia is not the only country to use science diplomacy to advance its interests in the Baltic Sea Region. Warnings have previously been issued in Latvia<sup>5</sup> and Estonia<sup>6</sup> that Chinese institutions are actively seeking technological cooperation with Western universities and research centres, viewing this as a means of acquiring advanced knowledge and innovation. These partnerships – often presented as academic exchanges or joint research projects – may ultimately yield tangible benefits for Chinese intelligence services and the state administration (see 'IEŚ Commentaries', No. 197).

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'shadow diplomacy' refers to unofficial or informal diplomatic activities carried out by non-state actors or private individuals. These activities often complement or bypass formal government channels in order to achieve certain benefits. They may include behind-the-scenes negotiations or discussions conducted by private envoys, aimed at resolving a conflict or exerting a specific influence on policy.

<sup>5</sup> Latvian State Security Service (VDD), *Annual Report for 2020*, <https://vdd.gov.lv/uploads/materials/8/en/annual-report-2020.pdf> [5.05.2020].

<sup>6</sup> M. Läänemets, *Academic Co-operation with the People's Republic of China: Dangers and Temptations*, 27.04.2020, <https://icds.ee/en/academic-co-operation-with-the-peoples-republic-of-china-dangers-and-temptations/> [5.05.2026].